



Elijah: America's Wonder-Working Prophet

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“The Power of Our New Pop Myths”

Marvel, Star Wars and other franchises have become central to our culture by returning to a primal form of storytelling.

Adam Kirsch, *Wall Street Journal*,
July 22, 2022

...while narrative universes seem like a new development, having taken over the world in the 21st century, they actually represent a much older and more primal mode of storytelling. Like ancient myths and folk tales, they offer not a single story but a set of materials that can be used and reused by different storytellers for different purposes. Such tales combine the appeal of novelty and familiarity: We come to them knowing the basics of what we are going to hear but ready to be surprised by new details and techniques.



“Today’s narrative universes also resemble myths in bringing us face to face with fundamental mysteries of human life. Was I born for a purpose, and if so, how do I discover what it is? Why does evil exist? What am I willing to give my life for? Traditionally, people looked to religious and patriotic stories to answer such questions. In 21st-century America, those kinds of narratives no longer have the power to unite us; they are more likely to ignite suspicion and division. Popular culture has stepped into the gap, offering new myths that are less fraught and easier to share.”

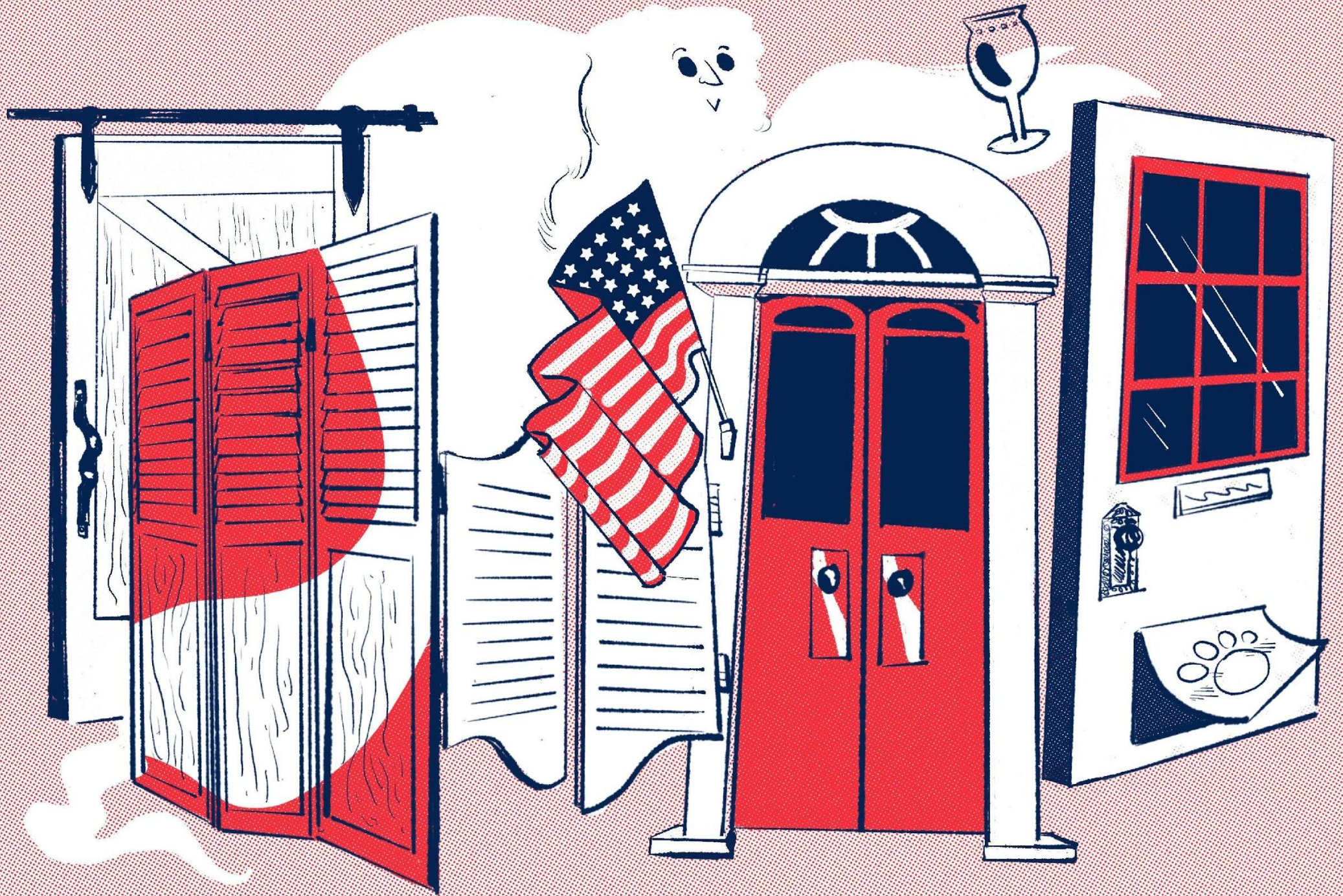


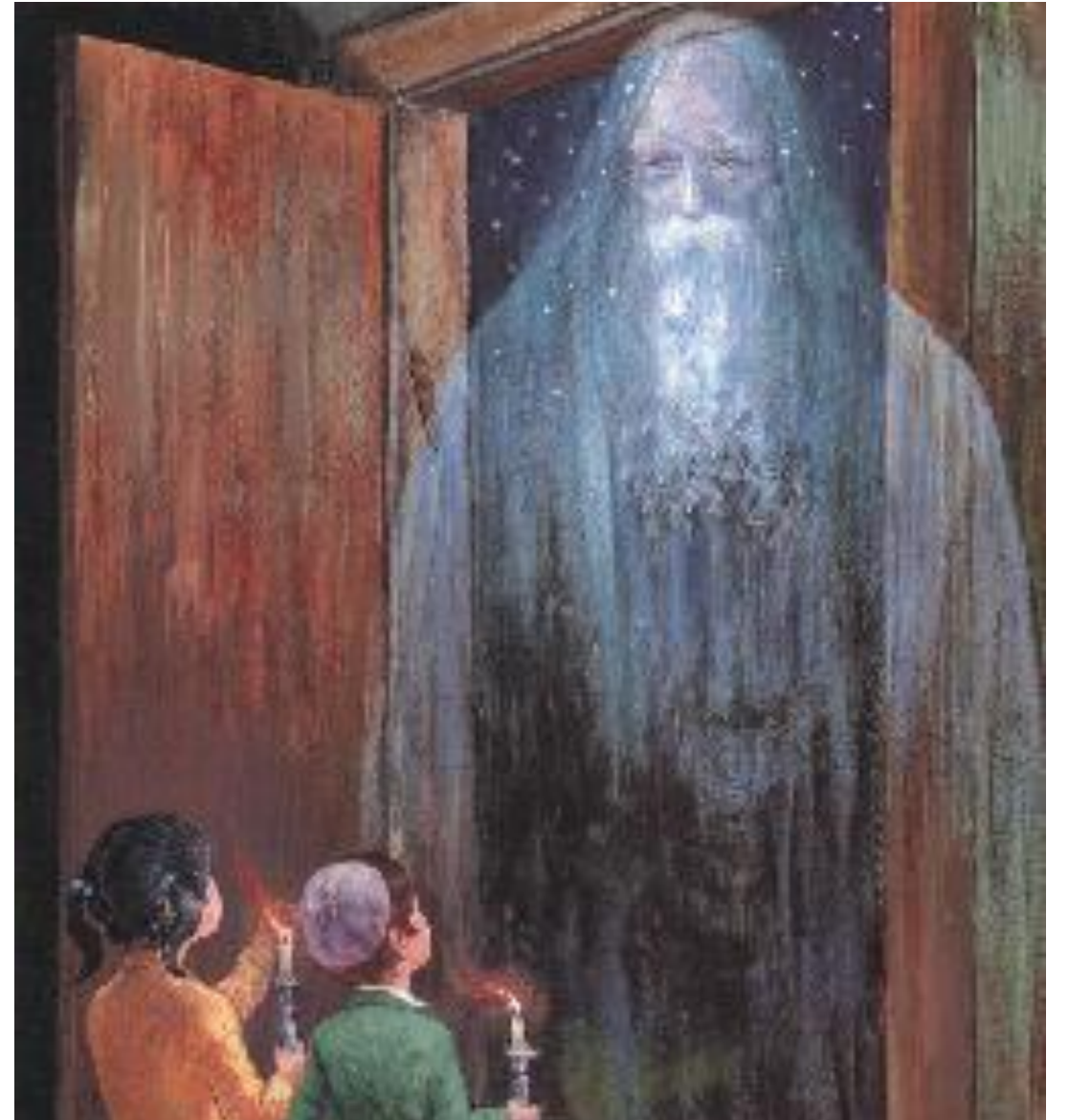


Moon Knight, the X-Men's Kitty Pryde and the Fantastic Four's The Thing have a *lechayim*



The Book of Kings describes how this native of Gilead, circa 900 BCE, had the ability to declare famine, resuscitate dead children, outshine and then slaughter 450 prophets of Ba'al in a game of "who worships the real true God?," rebuke the wicked King Ahab for stealing the vineyard of the innocent Naboth, hear God's "still small voice" (per the King James Version rendering of 1 Kings 19:12) on a mountain after despairing of his ability to inspire his fellow Israelites to repent, and mentor his successor Elisha before ascending to heaven in a chariot amid a whirlwind. His eventual return, the tradition goes, will come when the world is to be redeemed.

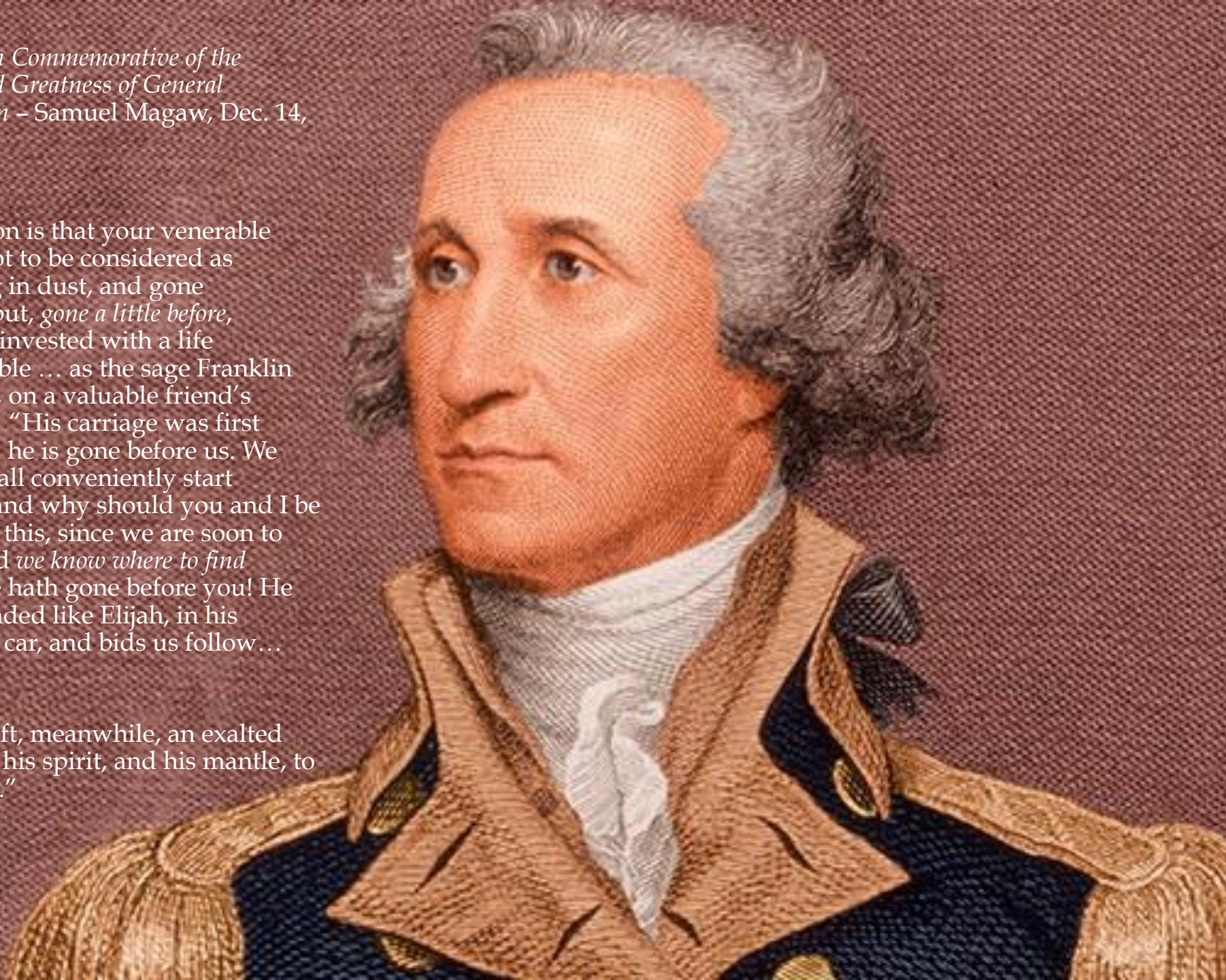


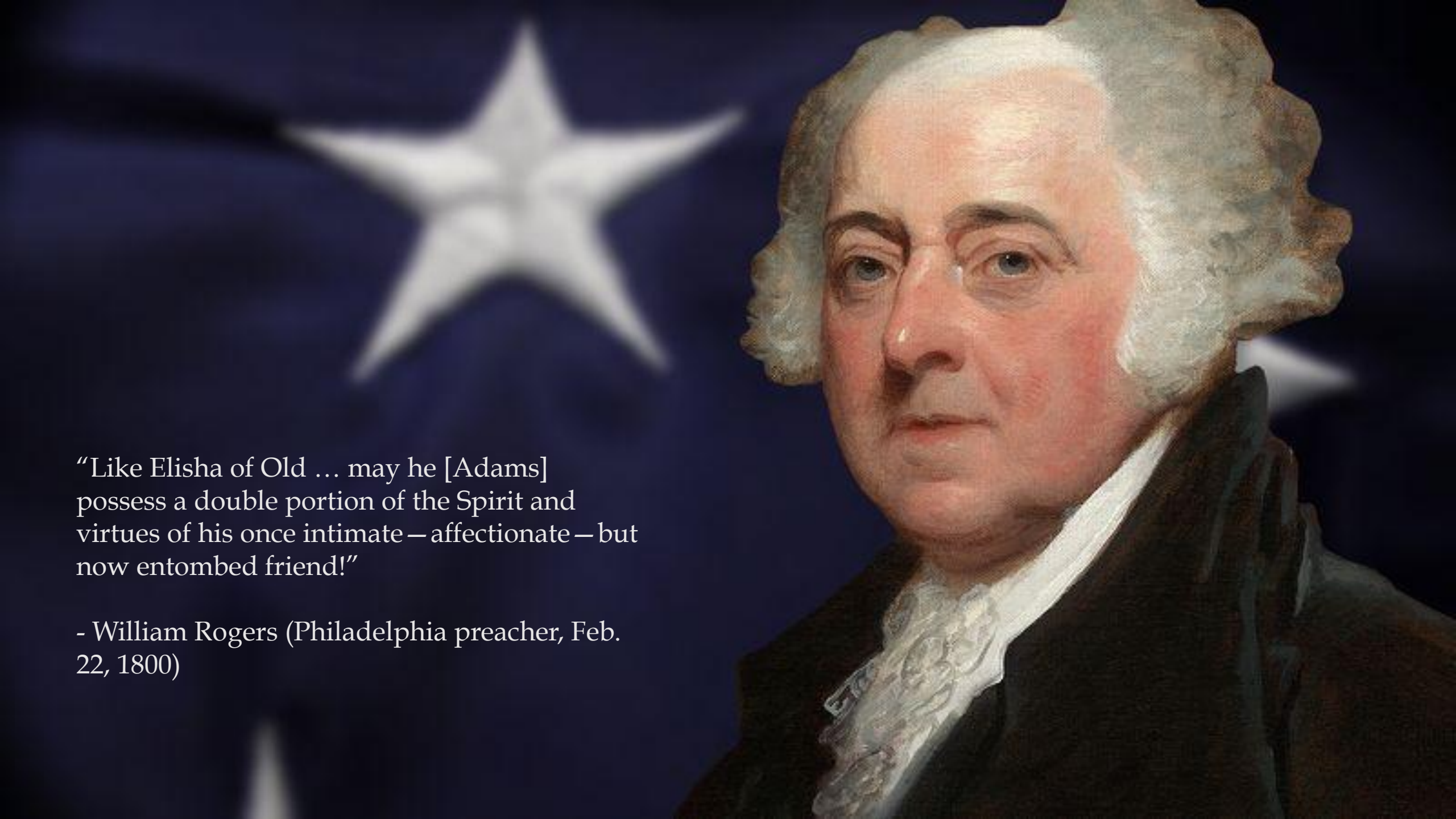


*An Oration Commemorative of the
Virtues and Greatness of General
Washington* – Samuel Magaw, Dec. 14,
1799

Consolation is that your venerable
Chief is not to be considered as
moldering in dust, and gone
forever – but, *gone a little before*,
assuredly invested with a life
unperishable ... as the sage Franklin
expressed, on a valuable friend's
decease ... "His carriage was first
ready, and he is gone before us. We
could not all conveniently start
together; and why should you and I be
grieved at this, since we are soon to
follow, and *we know where to find
him.*" – He hath gone before you! He
hath ascended like Elijah, in his
triumphal car, and bids us follow...

He hath left, meanwhile, an exalted
portion of his spirit, and his mantle, to
an Adams."



A portrait of John Adams, an older man with white powdered hair, wearing a dark coat and a white cravat. He is looking slightly to the left. The background is dark blue with a large, bright white star. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

“Like Elisha of Old ... may he [Adams]
possess a double portion of the Spirit and
virtues of his once intimate – affectionate – but
now entombed friend!”

- William Rogers (Philadelphia preacher, Feb.
22, 1800)

“A Whirlwind raised him and a Whirlwind blowed him a Way to St Helena. He is very confident that the Age of Reason is not past [Napoleon had told Austrian foreign minister Klemens Von Metternich, “When I was young, I was revolutionary from ignorance and ambition. At the age of reason, I have followed its counsels and my own instinct, and I have crushed the Revolution”]; and So am I; but I hope that Reason will never again rashly and hastily create Such Creatures as him.”

(Letter from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson about Emperor Napoleon, 1817)





Charleston's John Lewis delivered a sermon titled "Naboth's Vineyard" in 1777

Lewis argued that the British crown was unjustly stealing colonists' property for personal gain. It was up to General Washington to offer George III's army an Elijah-style rebuke in the manner of 21:19's "hast thou killed and also taken possession?"

“The Apotheosis of Washington”

Constantino
Brumidi,
1865
United States
Capitol

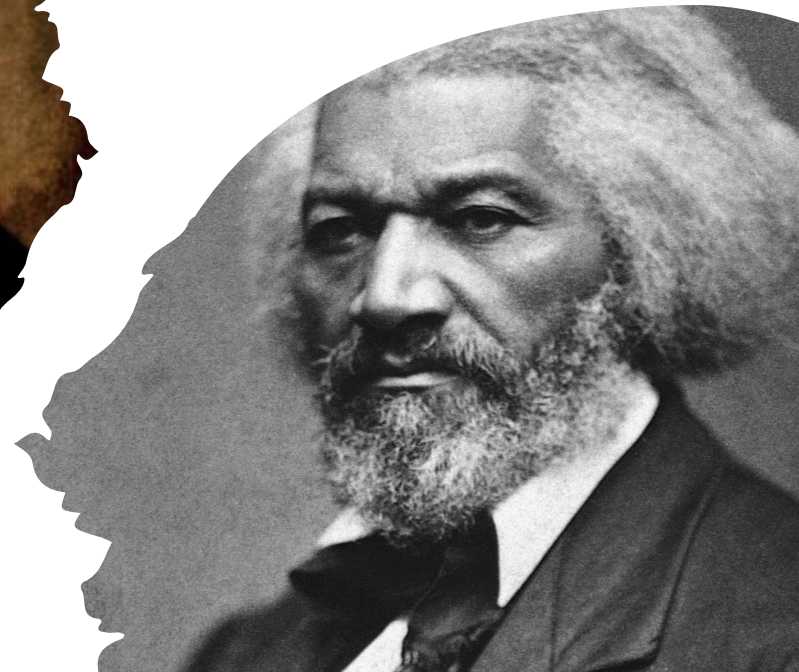


In 1854, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, allowing for popular sovereignty to determine whether a state could possess slaves, thus repealing the Missouri Compromise, through which Missouri had entered the Union as a slave state and Maine entered as a free state. President Franklin Pierce, who supported the South on this issue, was criticized as a "latter day Ahab, deaf to the warnings of his Elijahs, the anti-Nebraska clergy."

"Your Inaugural address ... pointed out with prophetic vision ... that after a bloody and terrible struggle 'the still small voice of reason' would intervene and settle the controversy."

(Letter from the former mayor of New York, Fernando Wood, to President Lincoln, urging him to make peace with the South)

Frederick Douglass had earlier praised the British emancipation of West Indies as having come "not by the sword, but by the word; not by the brute force of numbers, but by the still small voice of truth."





“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”

- **Swing low, sweet chariot**
Coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry he home x 2
- **I looked over Jordan and what did I see**
Coming for to carry he home
A band of angels coming after me
Coming for to carry me home
- **Swing low, sweet chariot**
Coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home
- **If you get there before I do**
Coming for to carry me home
Tell all my friends I'm coming too
Coming for to carry me home
- **Swing low, sweet chariot**
Coming for to carry me home
Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home

(former slave Wallace Willis, approx. 1865)

“For years he [Elijah] had labored hard for the reformation of his countrymen. He saw the people rushing headlong into idolatry and every form of wickedness and under the direction and inspiration of the Almighty, he threw himself with all the energy and impetuosity of his nature into the work of reforming them.” (Francis James Grimke, leading African American clergy and equal rights advocate, in a sermon in 1900)



“We need more Elijahs in the pulpit today—more men who will dare to upbraid an Ahab and defy a Jezebel.” (William Jennings Bryan, future Secretary of State, to Northwestern Law School banquet, 1909)

ELIJAH CUMMINGS

1951 - 2019

In 2019, Hillary Clinton eulogized Congressman and civil rights advocate Elijah Cummings as having, like his biblical namesake, “weathered storms and earthquakes but never lost his faith” as he “raised the next generation of leaders” and “even worked a few miracles.”



“If you’re willing to listen to, be guided by, that still small voice that is the GPS within yourself – to find out what makes you come alive – you will be more than OK. You will be happy.”
(Oprah Winfrey, 2013 Harvard Commencement Address)

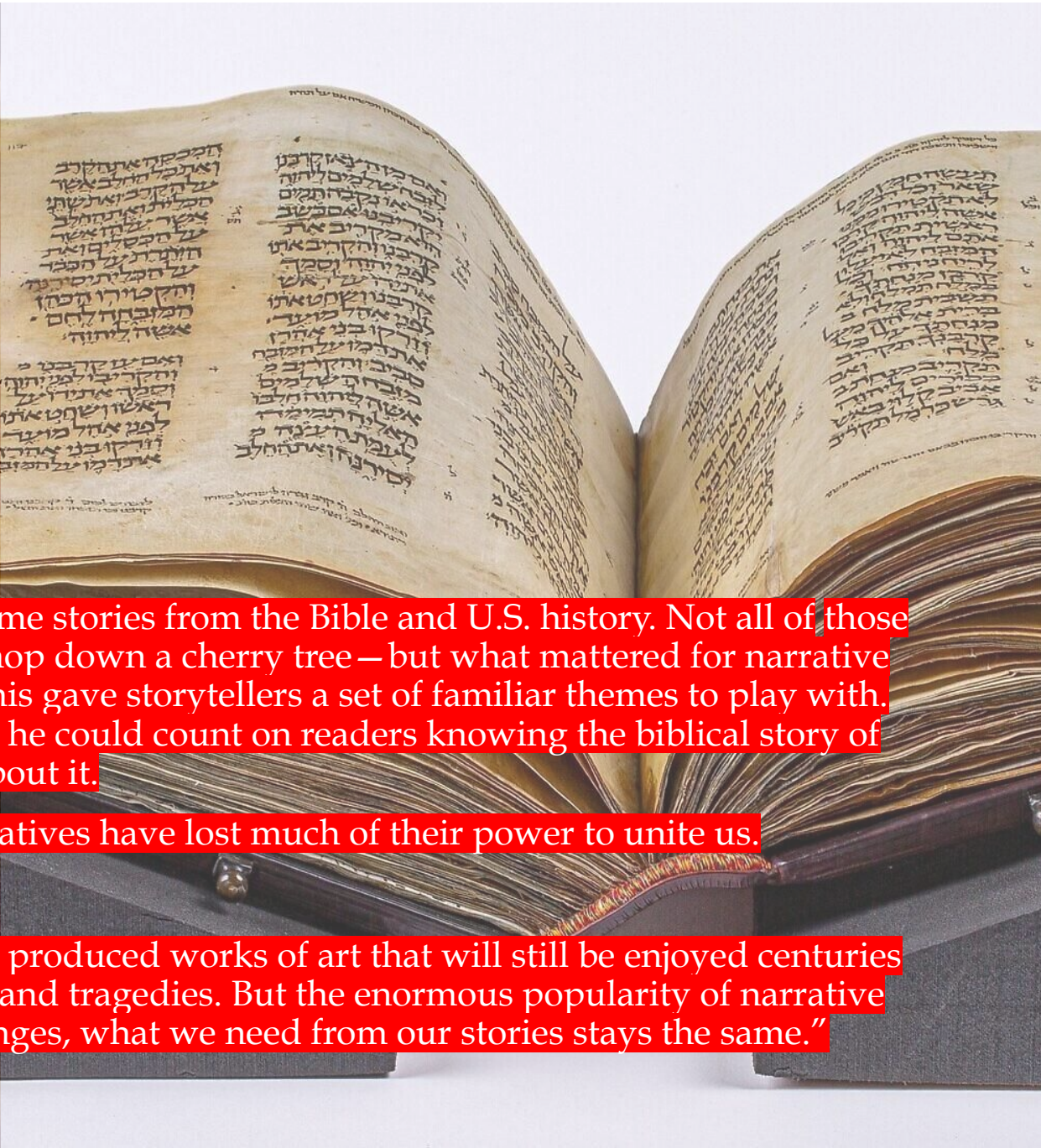
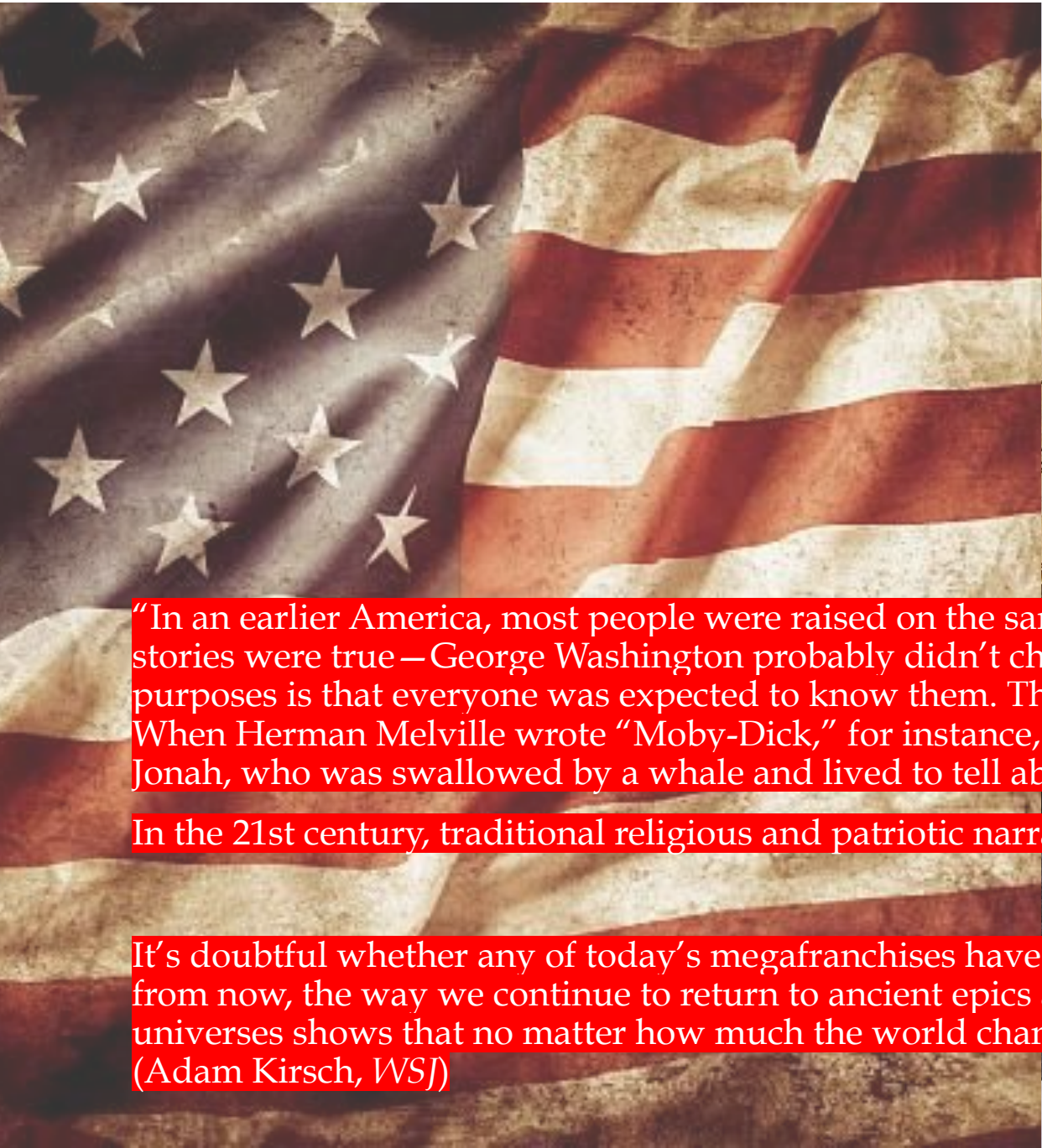


NEXT YEAR IN THE WHITE HOUSE



In 2008, 22-year-old national advance staffer for candidate Barack Obama Herbie Ziskend, 23-year-old ground logistics coordinator Eric Lesser, and 31-year-old new media director and videographer Arun Chaudhary realized that they wouldn't be able to make it home from the campaign for Passover, and instead decided to hold a Seder for themselves in Harrisburg, PA.

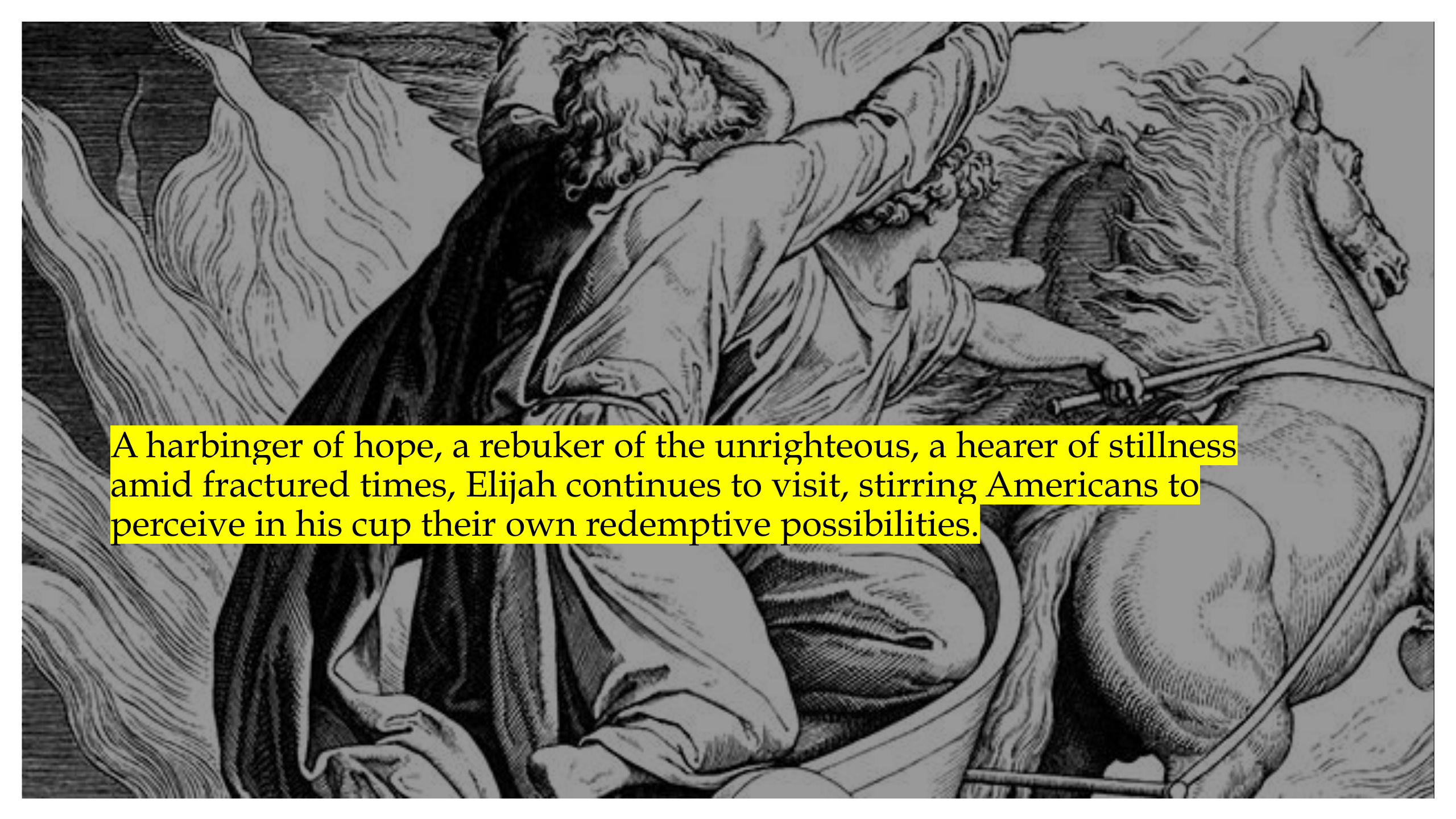
In the White House, the Seder is more formal – it takes place in the ornate family dining room, and celebrants eat off the Truman dishware, to celebrate the president who first recognized the state of Israel. One year they used a Seder plate donated by Sarah Netanyahu. “Politics is always there,” Ziskend told the UK’s *The Guardian*, “but no more than around the table with all of our families.” Though, Ziskend joked: “The difference is, you know Elijah isn’t coming because he wouldn’t get through the secret service!”



"In an earlier America, most people were raised on the same stories from the Bible and U.S. history. Not all of those stories were true – George Washington probably didn't chop down a cherry tree – but what mattered for narrative purposes is that everyone was expected to know them. This gave storytellers a set of familiar themes to play with. When Herman Melville wrote "Moby-Dick," for instance, he could count on readers knowing the biblical story of Jonah, who was swallowed by a whale and lived to tell about it.

In the 21st century, traditional religious and patriotic narratives have lost much of their power to unite us.

It's doubtful whether any of today's megafanchises have produced works of art that will still be enjoyed centuries from now, the way we continue to return to ancient epics and tragedies. But the enormous popularity of narrative universes shows that no matter how much the world changes, what we need from our stories stays the same."
(Adam Kirsch, *WSJ*)

A black and white engraving depicting the prophet Elijah. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a long, flowing robe and a dark cloak. He has a beard and curly hair, and his right arm is raised in a gesture of blessing or warning. He is seated in a chariot, which is being pulled by a horse. The horse is shown in profile, facing right, with its mane and tail flowing. The background features stylized, wavy lines representing a storm or a turbulent sea. The overall style is that of a classic engraving, with fine lines and cross-hatching for shading.

A harbinger of hope, a rebuker of the unrighteous, a hearer of stillness amid fractured times, Elijah continues to visit, stirring Americans to perceive in his cup their own redemptive possibilities.