OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN RISES IN MYTH: OP-ED

Last week, my vacation travel took me through Franconia Notch, N.H. This smooth-sided glacial valley struck me as more beautiful than ever, now that the "Old Man of the Mountain" is gone and the scar left from where he fell has been healed by the tarnish of time.

Ten years. That's how long it's been since the ridge-top stone formation that created a 40-foot-high profile of a man's head collapsed into rubble on the dark and cloudy night of May 3, 2003. There were no witnesses. Daylight showed a white wound on the mountainside that brought shock, lamentations and a national media frenzy. New Hampshire lost its state icon, official emblem and a steady source of tourist revenue. Mourning began that morning.

Nine years ago, a younger, more strident version of myself celebrated his death in a column: "The 'Old Man' has met his maker: Nature," dated July 2, 2004. In it I used the word "arrogant" to describe the human self-worship of a natural stone face on a mountain whose backside is defaced by ski trails.

Since then, I've changed my tune about what took place in Franconia. Mainly, I'm nearly a decade older and wiser. Specifically, I've recently re-read an old hardcover book I've owned for a quarter century: "American Myth, American Reality" by James O. Robertson. It helped explain something that has rankled me ever since my pre-teen years, when my ability to reason abstractly kicked in and pushed me toward a career in science.

Robertson writes: "Logical reason is conscious, dialectical, experimental, investigative; it is openly and actively contradictory to myths. Because of the pervasiveness of myths in human experience, the advocates of rationality are in a constant battle posture." His last phrase defines the old me, the scientific knight on his high horse lancing the illogical.

"Myths are by their nature vague," Robertson continues, "the mechanism by which people believe contradictory things simultaneously," the means by which "those contradictions are (as people believe) resolved" and "the means by which visions and ideals are combined with reality." His bottom line? The "truth about America and Americans, resides both in American myths and in American realities." They are equal partners in our search for meaning.

The story of the "Old Man" bears this out. In reality, it was never anything more than a nested stack of granite blocks with a random profile against the sky when seen from one direction. This it remained until 1805, when its likeness to President Thomas Jefferson was recognized and named accordingly. At the time, the myth of national unity was ascendant. At the same time, New Hampshire was more interested in extending its maritime commerce and cutting down trees: Its initial state emblem showed a half-built ship under construction and a pine forest being cleared. The granite face of Jefferson remained a local curiosity until 1831 when Daniel Webster -- famed orator and native son -- claimed that God favored the men of New Hampshire over others. In 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a story "The Great Stone Face" that converted Webster's myth into a legend overflowing with religious language, prophecy and allegory. It claimed the likeness to be that of all common pioneers of New England.

Reality returned in 1916 when the nested stack began to un-stack. Local residents saw their salient tourist attraction being heaved and slid apart, inaugurating 87 years worth of chronic, dangerous and loving maintenance. With full knowledge of the Old Man's precariousness, the New Hampshire government made it the state emblem in 1945. Inevitably, after 58 years of escalating maintenance and government intervention, the Great Stone Face crumbled in 2003.
In the aftermath, serious consideration was given to rebuilding the profile with fake rock or changing the state emblem to something still real. Thankfully, the governor's task force realized what I've come to realize, that American myth doesn't need American reality at all. Thankfully, the icon of the great stone face will remain on state license plates, road signs, official websites and tourist traps for a long time to come.