



# Identity and the Failure of America: From Thomas Jefferson to the War on Terror

*John Michael*

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From Thomas Jefferson to John Rawls, justice has been at the center of America's self-image and national creed. At the same time, for many of its peoples-from African slaves and European immigrants to women and the poor-the American experience has been defined by injustice: oppression, disenfranchisement, violence, and prejudice.

In *Identity and the Failure of America*, John Michael explores the contradictions between a mythic national identity promising justice to all and the realities of a divided, hierarchical, and frequently iniquitous history and social order. Through a series of insightful readings, Michael analyzes such cultural moments as the epic dramatization of the tension between individual ambition and communal complicity in *Moby-Dick*, attempts to effect social change through sympathy in the novels of Lydia Marie Child and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ralph Waldo Emerson's antislavery activism and Frederick Douglass's long fight for racial equity, and the divisive figures of John Brown and Nat Turner in American letters and memory.

Focusing on exemplary instances when the nature of the United States as an essentially conflicted nation turned to force, Michael ultimately posits the development of a more cosmopolitan American identity, one that is more fully and justly imagined in response to the nation's ethical failings at home and abroad.

John Michael is professor of English and of visual and cultural studies at the University of Rochester. He is the author of *Anxious Intellectuals: Academic Professionals, Public Intellectuals, and Enlightenment Values* and *Emerson and Skepticism: The Cipher of the World*.



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