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Introduction

Paul Levine

In February 1941, Henry Luce, the publisher of *Life* Magazine, wrote an editorial with the prophetic title 'The American Century'. Luce was one of those innovative entrepreneurs who shaped American life in the twentieth century. Like John D. Rockefeller, he combined the Protestant ethic and the spirit of Capitalism in his business magazine *Fortune*. Like William Randolph Hearst, he shaped modern journalism by inventing the weekly news magazine *Time*. And like Walt Disney he altered the way we see the world with *Life,* the famous magazine of photojournalism. Today, 40 years after Luce's death, his magazine empire is a global 'infotainment' colossus that includes *Time* magazine, Warner Brothers movies, and CNN television.[1]

Like his legendary contemporaries, Henry Luce was an American patriot. But he was more of an internationalist than they were. Born in 1898 in China, Luce grew up with a strong sense of America's global mission. His parents were Protestant missionaries and he became the journalistic apostle of the American century. 'To him America was not just a country, it was an idea and an ideal,' wrote David Halberstam in *The Powers That Be* (1979). 'His magazines would celebrate this.' Beginning in the 1920s, Luce sought to promote American values in his increasingly influential magazines. By midcentury, he had become the major media spokesman for the American Dream. 'He sought to make America what it should be and thus, of course, in the pages of *Time,* America *became* what it should be. The dream realized.'

In his 1941 editorial, 'The American Century', Luce urged his fellow countrymen to break with their traditional isolationism and lead the global fight against fascism. In World War I, the United States became a reluctant combatant after German submarines sank three American vessels. In 1919 a triumphant President Woodrow Wilson attended the Versailles Peace Conference with a sweeping plan to create a new world order; but he was thwarted by his French and British allies. After Wilson's failure, the US Congress rejected the peace treaty and refused to join the newly formed League of Nations that Wilson had proposed. After the outbreak of World War II in 1939, skeptical Americans were once again asked to come to the aid of their European allies. With France defeated and Britain beleaguered, the United States had become the last bulwark of Western democracy against Nazi Germany. Now, as citizens of the world's most powerful nation, Luce argued, Americans had an obligation to promote democratic principles throughout the world. Nine months later, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States embarked on a course of action that ultimately transformed modern times into what he called 'the American century'.

Luce's editorial proved to be prophetic; but with some important reservations, as we shall see. Though the United States entered the conflict reluctantly only after the Japanese attack, Americans pursued the war enthusiastically. 'World War II was the most popular in American history,' notes the historian John Patrick Diggins in *The Proud Decade* (1988). 'It was truly a people's war.' While Europe exhausted itself in a brutal conflict, the United States set out to create the most awesomely productive economic and military machine the world had ever seen. Moreover, American losses, though considerable, were slight in comparison to the devastation in Europe and Asia. The Americans suffered 400,000 deaths in battle whereas 35,000,000 Europeans – soldiers and civilians alike – died in just five years. 'In the years since Pearl Harbor the United States had overcome the greatest crisis facing the country since the Civil War,' says Diggins. 'A war that most Americans originally did not want to fight turned into one of the proudest triumphs in the history of the Republic.'

Thus at the end of World War II, the United States emerged as an economic, political and military superpower, a position it has held for more than half a century. As we entered a new millennium, Luce's idea of 'the American Century' took on a new currency. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, economic turmoil in Asia and political disunity in Europe, the United States remained by default the only global superpower. In the realm of culture, too, we have all experienced the long arm of American hyperpower. The world sees American films, hears American music, reads American books, copies American television programs and grumbles about the dangers of American cultural hegemony. The cultivation of efficient techniques of global distribution has created mass culture and spread American values all over the world. Today critics speak anxiously of Globalization and Americanization as if they were the same thing.

We all recognize forms of 'American cultural imperialism', but what is American culture? For many skeptics, it is only McDonald's, Levi's and Hollywood. But a culture is more than a hamburger. When the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Saul Bellow was growing up in Chicago in the 1920s, the city was famous for its stockyards, steel mills, railroads and gangsters. 'What Chicago gave to the world was goods – a standard of living sufficient for millions. Bread, bacon, overalls, gas ranges, radio sets, telephone directories, false teeth, light bulbs, tractors, steel rails, gasoline,' Bellow wrote. 'If you looked here for the sort of natural beauty described by Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Yeats, you would never find it.'

Yet, as the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, Bellow found something else in Chicago. As he recalled 60 years later in *It All Adds Up* (1994):

> The children of Chicago bakers, tailors, peddlers, insurance agents, pressers, cutters, grocers, the sons of families on relief, were reading buckram-bound books from the public library and were in a state of enthusiasm, having found themselves on the shore of a novelistic land to which they really belonged, discovering their birthright, hearing incredible news from the great world of culture, talking to one another about the mind, society, art, religion, epistemology, and doing this in Chicago, of all places.

PROOF

But critics of American material culture are partly right. In *Land of Desire* (1993) William Leach describes how Americans created the modern world by combining corporate capitalism and consumer culture. 'In the decades following the Civil War, American capitalism began to produce a distinct culture, unconnected to traditional family or community values, to religion in any conventional sense, or to political democracy,' he says. 'The cardinal features of this culture were acquisition and consumption as a means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society.'

Leach traces the evolution of the consumer society from its humble beginnings in retailing through its institutionalization in the consumer and service sectors, to its total acceptance as the American Way of Life. The flamboyant entrepreneurs of the late nineteenth century were transformed into anonymous corporations in the early twentieth century, comprising a network of department stores, investment bankers, advertising agencies, hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, model agencies, fashion groups and public relations firms. In creating a new culture of consumption, the modern captains of industry found unlikely partners in new institutions of higher learning like the Harvard Business School (founded in 1908) and high culture like the Metropolitan Museum of Art (its division of industrial design began in 1914). 'A new society has come to life in America,' noted a French observer in 1928. 'From a *moral point of view*, it is obvious that Americans have come to consider their standard of living as a somewhat sacred acquisition, which they will defend at any price.'

In redefining modern democracy as a mass consumer society, Americans followed a different path from the Europeans. In *Why the American Century?* (1993) Olivier Zunz writes, 'As its size increased and its standard of living improved, the middle class became the hallmark of the "American century." In the "America-as-model" paradigm, the middle class, not the working class, is the revolutionary ideal. Promoting its values became the American alternative to Marxism.' Instead of the Marxist ideology of class conflict, Americans pointed to an expanding middle-class society as the material expression of 'the American dream'. In the postwar years, this celebration of affluence became the hallmark of 'the American Way of Life' and the cornerstone of the ideology of 'the American Century'. Zunz concludes, 'In contrast to the situation in Europe, consumption, not welfare, was the American means of social cohesion.'

Of course, these achievements have had their costs, especially among those groups who were excluded from the American mainstream. But, despite its failures, the United States continues to pursue the prophesy of Henry Luce's 'American Century'. We know how American ideas about the organization of knowledge, the consumer society and multiculturalism have become part of the global cultural landscape as well. After the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989, the French historian Francois Furet argued that while the Soviet Union had been a superpower, it had never been a civilization. The proof was that it could vanish without leaving any substantial legacy behind. But the opposite is true of the United States. The idea of 'the American Century' became the basis for the establishment of the 'Pax Americana'. Unlike the Soviet Union, says Zunz, 'The United States became a superpower precisely because of its civilization.'

This book is an exploration of American civilization in the period between World War II and the present. If this does not constitute an American Century, it can be seen as the American Moment: the time when, for good or ill, the United States became the predominant political, military, economic and cultural power in the world. In this book, we wish to examine the American Moment in a global context. Our approach is both interdisciplinary and dialogic. By using elements of political science and international relations, media and cultural studies, and social, intellectual and literary history, we try to present a multidimensional picture of the United States in its relation to the larger world. The odd-numbered chapters are written by a political scientist, Harry Papasotiriou; they move chronologically through major events in international relations and American domestic politics. The even-numbered chapters are written by a literary historian, Paul Levine; they explore thematically the central developments in American culture and society. By structuring our book in alternating chapters emphasizing political and cultural developments respectively, we hope to establish a dialogue between the authors and with the reader.

The two authors come from different cultural backgrounds but share similar intellectual interests. Harry Papasotiriou is Greek. He was born in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1961 and grew up in Athens, Greece. He was educated in England and the United States, earning a BA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from the University of Oxford (1983) and an MA and PhD from Stanford University (1992). In 1992 he joined the faculty of the Institute for International Relations at Panteion University; since 1998 he has taught in Panteion's Department of International Relations, where he now holds the rank of Professor.

Paul Levine is American. Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1936, he studied English Literature and Art History at Wesleyan University (BA, 1958), American Literature and Intellectual History at Princeton University, and received his PhD in the History of American Civilization from Harvard University (1973). Afterwards he taught at Wesleyan and the University of Rochester and in Canada at York University. In 1975 he became the first Professor of American Literature at Copenhagen University, a post he held until his retirement in 2006. He has also been a visiting professor in American Studies in Hungary and China.

In 1994 Levine became the director of the Athens American Studies Seminar. Over the past decade he and Papasotiriou collaborated on this annual interdisciplinary symposium where American, Greek and other European academics, students and professionals meet to explore a variety of complex issues ranging from the legacy of the Cold War to the crisis of Globalization. As we studied problems ranging from the rule of international law to the role of global media, we became aware of the need for a new kind of textbook to introduce students and general readers to the issues facing the United States and the world. Over the past eight years we have worked together in formulating a new approach, drawing on recently released archives in international relations and the latest research in social science and the humanities. This book, first published in 2005, is the fruit of this collaboration.

But much has happened in the last five years which requires a new edition. Increased instability in the Middle East, the expansion of the European Union eastward, the increasing threat of global warming, the economic rise of developing nations in Asia and Latin America, and the worst global economic recession

since the Great Depression have all transformed the international landscape. In the United States, there have been great changes as well, culminating in the stunning election of Barack Obama in 2008. In *A Long Time Coming* (2009) Evan Thomas writes, 'A nation whose Constitution enshrined slavery has elected an African-American president within living memory of days when blacks were denied fundamental human rights – including the right to vote.' In the process, perennial issues of race, class and gender have been transformed.

Meanwhile a generation of cultural icons have died: civil rights activist Rosa Parks, conservative movement godfather William Buckley, diplomat George F. Kennan, economist John Kenneth Galbraith, feminist Betty Friedan, journalist David Halberstam, political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, President Gerald R. Ford, pop idol Michael Jackson, urban critic Jane Jacobs, and three veterans of the Vietnam conflict: General William Westmoreland, antiwar candidate Senator Eugene McCarthy and former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. The world of letters lost dramatists Arthur Miller and August Wilson, and novelists Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, J. D. Salinger, John Updike and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Finally, in 2009 a modern political dynasty ended with the deaths of President John Kennedy's sister, Eunice Shriver, and his youngest brother, Senator Edward Kennedy.

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century the world looks different. With the economic rise of Brazil, Russia, India and China, some analysts predict the decline of the United States in the next decades. 'Look around,' says Fareed Zakaria. 'The tallest building in the world is in Taipei, and it will soon be overtaken by one being built in Dubai. The world's richest man is Mexican, and its largest publicly traded corporation is Chinese.' Even traditional American icons have been supplanted: the largest Ferris Wheel is in Singapore, the largest gambling casino is in Macao, the largest shopping center is in Beijing. Globalization has transformed the postmodern world in surprising ways.

These are some of the issues we try to address in this new edition.

NOTE

1. In January 2000 the Time-Warner-CNN conglomerate combined with the giant Internet provider AOL in a multi-billion dollar merger that aimed at exploiting the 'synergy' between old and new media. The merger was not successful and in December 2009 they separated.

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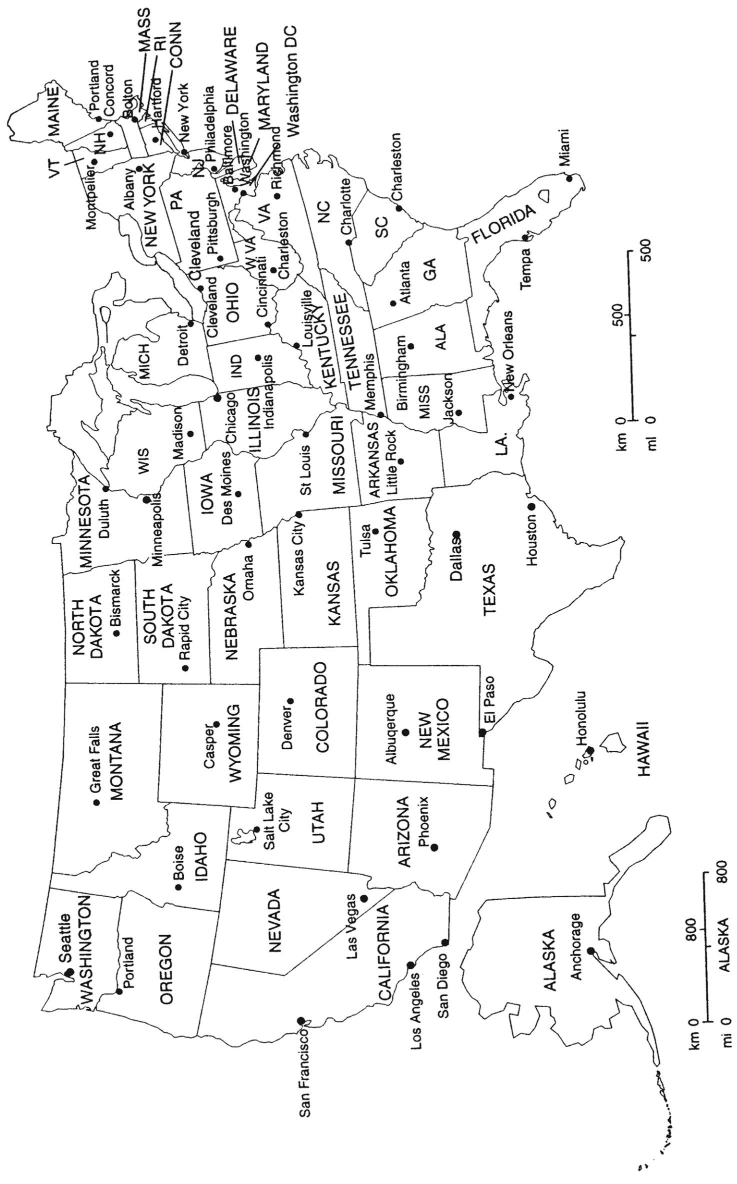

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