

THE AMERICAN CENTURY IN EUROPE

Edited by **R. LAURENCE MOORE** and **MAURIZIO VAUDAGNA**

VOLKER R. BERGHAHN
ALAN BRINKLEY
DAVID W. ELLWOOD
GIULIANA GEMELLI
DETLEF JUNKER
JAMES T. KLOPPENBERG
WALTER LAFEVER
R. LAURENCE MOORE
MARY NOLAN
RICHARD POLENBERG
FEDERICO ROMERO
MASSIMO L. SALVADORI
RONALD STEEL
MAURIZIO VAUDAGNA

The American Century in Europe

The American

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Century in Europe

Edited by

R. LAURENCE MOORE

and

MAURIZIO VAUDAGNA

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Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	1
<i>R. Laurence Moore and Maurizio Vaudagna</i>	
The Concept of an American Century	7
<i>Alan Brinkley</i>	
PART ONE DIPLOMATIC RESPONSES	
The United States and Europe in an Age of American Unilateralism	25
<i>Walter LaFeber</i>	
Democracy and Power: The Interactive Nature of the American Century	47
<i>Federico Romero</i>	
Europe: The Phantom Pillar	66
<i>Ronald Steel</i>	
Utopia and Realism in Woodrow Wilson's Vision of the International Order	79
<i>Massimo L. Salvadori</i>	
The United States, Germany, and Europe in the Twentieth Century	94
<i>Detlef Junker</i>	

PART TWO CULTURAL RESPONSES

European Elitism, American Money, and Popular Culture <i>Volker R. Berghahn</i>	117
American Myth, American Model, and the Quest for a British Modernity <i>David W. Ellwood</i>	131
American Religion as Cultural Imperialism <i>R. Laurence Moore</i>	151
Western Alliance and Scientific Diplomacy in the Early 1960s: The Rise and Failure of the Project to Create a European M.I.T. <i>Giuliana Gemelli</i>	171

PART THREE SOCIAL RESPONSES

American Democracy and the Welfare State: The Problem of Its Publics <i>James T. Kloppenberg</i>	195
A Checkered History: The New Deal, Democracy, and Totalitarianism in Transatlantic Welfare States <i>Maurizio Vaudagna</i>	219
Consuming America, Producing Gender <i>Mary Nolan</i>	243
The Right to Have Rights: Citizens, Aliens, and the Law in Modern America <i>Richard Polenber</i>	262
Contributors	275
Index	277

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Ithaca, New York

R. LAURENCE MOORE

Turin, Italy

MAURIZIO VAUDAGNA

The American Century in Europe

Introduction

R. LAURENCE MOORE AND MAURIZIO VAUDAGNA

When the world marched into a new millennium on January 1, 2001, the United States had just ended a decade of unprecedented economic prosperity. For a much longer period it had been the world's most powerful nation. In 1941 Henry Luce, in *Life*, his hugely popular magazine of photojournalism, heralded "The American Century." Luce expected the United States to play a crucial role in the global war it had not yet entered and to lead other nations into a better world once fascism was defeated.

Luce was certainly right to imagine that in the last half of the twentieth century, the United States would act self-consciously as a superpower. However, if more assertive in that role after World War II, the United States had seen itself as a great world power since the beginning of the twentieth century. Even before the Great War that began in 1914, a debate had begun in Europe and in other nations of the world, including the United States itself, as to whether American efforts to export its political and cultural values were good or bad. No one on the eve of the new millennium foresaw the events of September 11, 2001. Yet whatever changed on that day, the attacks on Washington and New York City did not mark the first time that the United States had confronted unpleasant consequences from anti-Americanism.

The authors of this volume have reviewed one century of American political, economic, and cultural power as it was felt in Europe. Disagreements among the authors will be clear. However, in one way or an-

other, all of them accept at least this premise: the twentieth century has been profoundly affected by Woodrow Wilson's desire to make the world safe for democracy and for economic exchange between nations. American policy makers, whether or not they thought of themselves as Wilsonian, consistently sought a "new" world order to replace the one established by European-style imperialism. In place of that European system, Americans talked about an international system of autonomous states freed of colonialism but that operated, especially in trade relations, according to a common set of rules.

American dreams, which rested with impossible simultaneity on a theory of American exceptionalism and a wish to re-mold other countries in the American image, left room for irony, hypocrisy, and plain old deception. As Alan Brinkley notes in the opening chapter, American efforts to promote its own values as ones applicable everywhere seemed to much of the world a reflection of America's insularity, self-regard, and isolation from the legitimate concerns of many of the world's most populated nations. Through a long series of global interventions, many of them useful and some vital, American statesmen in the twentieth century misrepresented and possibly even misunderstood their own colonial designs. However, American influence was without doubt large throughout the world and loomed much larger than it would have because of a century of difficulties that beset Europe. Without Hitler and without Stalin, the United States could never have continued for so long to imagine itself a redeemer nation. And it could never with equal power have pressed American goals upon Europe.

As several authors in this volume argue, efforts by the United States to create a world in its own image reflected deep uneasiness about the ability of democracy to sell itself and even about the fragility of democracy within America's own boundaries. Nervousness led the United States on many occasions to seek a secure future for democracy by coming to the rescue of undemocratic regimes. It viewed friendly, stable, and authoritarian states as better in the short run than "rogue" democratic states. Yet at no point in the twentieth century was American power able to create an orderly world. It took two nations, two "superpowers," to impose a semblance of order among nations during the period of the Cold War. The United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies and client states threatened one another with nuclear disaster. The potential horrors produced a stalemate because the two nations were not prepared to risk annihilation as long as their essential interests, however vilified by the other side, were acknowledged and let alone. From George

Kennan's "containment" policy emerged a set of rules that restrained the actions of both the United States and the Soviet Union. When the rules of the game were seriously broken, as when the United States sent spy planes over the Soviet Union or when the Soviet Union tried to introduce missiles into Cuba, the offending side backed off.

This is too romantic a reading of the Cold War. The two superpowers may not have fought each other, but in their rivalries they devastated other countries. Military ventures into Afghanistan and Southeast Asia produced disastrous results and left legacies that were to roil world politics far into the future. The Cold War only looked orderly compared with what followed. Some optimists greeted the collapse of the Soviet Union as an American victory. They suggested that American hegemony was complete and that the American Century, now called globalization, would extend well into the twentieth century. History had ended. That fact left many people far from sanguine. If the United States was now the world's only superpower, then what was going to check rash exercises of that power? What was going to blunt the force of American unilateralism, which, as Walter LeFeber notes, had guided American foreign policy in the twentieth century even when Americans ostensibly worked within the framework of NATO or the United Nations?

One answer to that question, of course, is a United Europe. As many of the chapters in this book argue, European states in the twentieth century were not powerless in responding to the American policies pressed upon them. Ronald Steel in particular shows how America's leadership role in NATO was in part thrust upon the United States by Europe, a Europe that wanted the security of American military might without having to pay the costs. French "independence" from American power carried too high a price tag for other nations that worried less about American supremacy than about the dangers posed to them if the United States really took its troops home. For all that, European states tried to guard their sovereignty and bowed to American leadership graciously only when it suited their purposes. A United Europe ought to do better. Perhaps Europe can emerge as something more formidable than the redundant "second pillar" that it has been for most of the post-World War II era. Countries in the Pacific Rim as well loom as potential checks on American power.

But with or without effective checks on the exercise of American power, there is much to worry about. The disintegration of old political boundaries that followed the breakup of the Soviet state spawned new conflicts that threatened to spin out of control. If the American-led coali-

tion won a victory in the Gulf War, then we should be sobered by the understanding that such victories, even if the cause can be justified, bring more trouble. The Gulf War exacerbated old regional tensions and created new global ones that were even more ominous. Meanwhile, ethnic cleansing erupted in Africa, in Asia, and in the Balkans. No nation could halt it before it rang up enormous death tolls and left countless numbers of people homeless and without a stake in the prosperity promised by the new world economy.

Globalization, to the extent that it weakens nationalism, may also work to weaken old-fashioned diplomacy. Some states may collapse, unable to govern and unable to command the resources necessary to maintain an infrastructure. An opportunity opens to terrorists to lodge within weakened nations. These people, as the world has learned, can have agendas quite different from the sorts of considerations that guide diplomatic relations among states, even states hostile to one another. The events of September 2001 sounded a warning about what can happen when state diplomatic channels are bypassed and destructive weapons are up for sale to private groups. Ironically, the technology that launched the global economy was the same technology that made possible a worldwide al-Qaida network. Take away fax machines, cell phones, and the Internet, and they both collapse.

World capitalism, whether emanating from the United States, or Europe, or Asia, may have made everyone unsafe, though not for the reasons advanced by Karl Marx or by the protestors who disrupted world trade meetings in Seattle and Genoa. The disruption of politics as usual is one context for reading the chapters that follow, although they were written well before the attacks on Washington and New York City. Some of the authors revised their chapters in light of those events, although not so drastically as one might suppose. The relative lack of revision owes in part to the simple fact that no one knows how the so-called war against terrorism is going to turn out. Some imagine that at least in the short run the attacks will keep alive the idea of an American Century since the United States, with characteristic retention of decision-making power in a coalition of supposed equals, is the only nation able to mount an effective assault on world terror.

Perhaps more to the point, the triumphalism often associated with boosters of the American Century has played a role in provoking the terrorist threats that now stalk the globe. The sites of American financial power and of American military power were the carefully chosen targets of bin Laden. If most people around the world were profoundly shocked

by the wantonness of a lethal assault, without warning, on innocent, ordinary people from many countries, large numbers of those same people thought that Americans could not escape blame for what had happened. More than one political commentator suggested with stupefying bluntness: "America had it coming." The evangelist Jerry Falwell said much the same thing, though for different reasons. The United States is not the cause of all the world's ills, but arrogance invites reprisal. So do global economic activities that advance primarily the interests of the United States and its richest trading partners.

Commentators have recorded the curious fact that the enthusiastic embrace of American culture by many peoples of the world has happened simultaneous with the eruption of anti-American sentiments. People on all continents protest the foreign policy of the United States while wearing American-designed baseball caps. They criticize American materialism yet flock to Hollywood films in which abundance is conspicuously displayed. They find fault with American individualism and dance to American music. Questions about the American Century stretch well beyond issues of international diplomacy. The chapters in this volume also give attention to issues of cultural influence as well as to values associated with the American social system. One general theme is relevant to the study of American influence anywhere in the world. Whatever that influence was, it was never total nor did it cross oceans in only one direction. The volume's title, *The American Century in Europe*, is meant to remind readers that the transmission of ideas and policies to another place always involves translation, not only in the most literal sense of going from one language into another but also in a more general sense of passing through selective cultural filters.

Alan Brinkley's opening chapter provides a historical overview of many of the issues that run through the rest of the volume. In part 1, five senior scholars who have spent their careers working on questions of international relations analyze the consequences of American diplomacy through the course of the twentieth century. While agreeing that the actions of the United States beyond its borders have been significant in shaping the twentieth century, they also show that the American Century cannot be analyzed without appreciating the ways in which Europe made it possible—either through the collapse of its own political institutions or by its calculated efforts to use the United States to further its own goals.

In part 2, four scholars direct their attention to the influence of American culture in Europe—high culture, popular culture, and religion. One

important question is whether European attraction to an American style of life changed European national identities. To say that American movies and pop music are very popular in Europe and throughout the world is only to say that Americans are very good in these particular industries. It does not necessarily mean that they successfully sell American values, not without resistances and transformations, or destroy other national cultures. After all, Americans have read Dickens for years without becoming English.

The four chapters in part 3 underscore this point in a different way. In transport, medical service, education, social insurance, housing, and consumer habits, Europeans have not copied the American way. They have created a different sort of public sphere and different forms of social capital. The United States, with more visible poverty on its streets than anywhere in Europe, may be trying to learn from European social legislation. And Europe, saddled with social programs whose costs drive up unemployment, may be looking to the United States for effective forms of privatization. But this exchange is not marked by American dominance. In the section's final chapter, Richard Polenberg considers the future of America's global influence in the context of the wave of immigration into the United States over the past thirty years, mostly from Latin America and Asia. A republic of citizens who carry at least two passports may not solve the problems of globalization. However, a transnational model of citizenship may prove to be a significant means of restructuring relations between First and Third World nations.

The Concept of an American Century

ALAN BRINKLEY

The concept of an American Century has become a phrase usually used to describe a particular period in history: the emergence of the United States as the world's greatest power during and after World War II and its crusading internationalism during the Cold War. But such is the power of the idea that it has survived, in popular discourse, as a description of America's continuing image of itself as a nation that somehow sets the course of the world's history—a nation whose values and virtues continue to make it a model to other peoples. This chapter describes the origins of this idea during and immediately after World War II. But in the world of the early twenty-first century—a world seemingly defined by the catastrophic attack on the United States in September 2001 and by the new wave of nationalism that swept the country in its aftermath—the concept of an American Century suddenly seems alive again.

In many ways, of course, the idea of an American Century (if not the phrase) is as old as, indeed older than, the nation itself, and it is in the early origins of this idea that some part of the modern understanding of the concept can be found. Ever since the first Europeans set their eyes on the American continents, the idea that the New World would somehow transcend and redeem the Old became an article of faith among many people on both sides of the Atlantic. The European settlements in America were destined to be a “city on a hill,” “the last best hope of man on earth,” or—as Herman Melville wrote in the mid-nineteenth

century—the “political messiah,” who has come, he said, “in us . . . the pioneers of the world.”

The seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century proselytizers of American exceptionalism, and of the special role America was to play in history, saw the New World and the new nation as an example, a model, a light shining out to a wretched globe and inspiring it to lift itself up. It was a morally energized vision, but also a largely passive vision. Few people in those years supported active efforts to impose the American vision on other societies, or even to promote it abroad with any real fervor. It was a vision of the United States looking out across a decadent or uncivilized globe, vaguely disapprovingly, hoping its nations would choose to follow the American example and improve.

Another, different vision of America’s role in the life of the world emerged late in the nineteenth century when a new and more muscular form of nationalism began to penetrate American thinking about the country’s place in the international order. This new vision was inspired by, and was at times not very different from, the European imperial visions of the time, as Henry Watterson, the editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, suggested when he wrote around the time of the Spanish-American War and the American acquisition of the Philippines and other colonies:

From a nation of shopkeepers we become a nation of warriors. We escape the menace and peril of socialism and agrarianism, as England has escaped them, by a policy of colonization and conquest. From a provincial huddle of petty sovereignties held together by a rope of sand we rise to the dignity and prowess of an imperial republic incomparably greater than Rome.

Theodore Roosevelt, similarly, told a California audience in 1903 that all nations pass away but that “the great expanding nations” of history leave behind “indelibly their impress on the centuries. . . . I ask that this people rise level to the greatness of its opportunities. I don’t ask that it seek the easiest path.”¹

The more powerful expression of this new sense of America’s global role, however, was not a conventionally imperialist one. It was the vision articulated by, among others, Henry Cabot Lodge, the Massachusetts senator who became the most powerful obstacle to Woodrow Wilson’s dream of a new world order. Lodge saw no contradiction between his fervent opposition to the League of Nations and his equally fervent commitment to the idea of America as a global power. But he did

place boundaries around that idea. "We are a great moral asset of Christian civilization," he said in 1919, during the debate over the league:

How did we get there? By our own efforts. Nobody led us, nobody guided us, nobody controlled us. . . . I would keep America as she has been—not isolated, not prevent her from joining other nations for . . . great purposes—but I wish her to be master of her own fate.²

The cluster of ideas that such statements represent marked an important departure in America's relationship to the world but also a sharply bounded one. America would take its place among the great world powers, the early champions of empire insisted, but it would not tie its fortunes to those of any other nation. It would make no alliances and acquire no colonies (other than the ones it had somewhat hesitantly absorbed after the Spanish-American War). The United States, unlike European colonial powers, would not seek new opportunities to remake other societies in the Western image. It would, rather, act unilaterally to promote its interests and to preserve an "open door" for American trade.

THE vision of an American Century that emerged during and after World War II was a fusion of these two related, but until the 1940s mostly separate, visions. The critical ingredient that now set the United States on its new path—born of the nation's experience in World War II—was the determination of many Americans to use the nation's great power actively and often very aggressively to spread the American model to other nations, at times through relatively benign encouragement, at other times through pressure and coercion, but almost always with a fervent and active intent.

Many prominent Americans worked to promote this new and more expansive vision of America's global destiny, which for a time in the 1940s had relatively little broad public support. But the man whose name is most clearly linked to the idea of an American Century is undoubtedly Henry R. Luce, the founder and crusading editor/publisher of *Time*, *Fortune*, and *Life* magazines and as early as 1940 one of the nation's most outspoken internationalists. He believed strongly that the United States must assist Britain and its allies in their war against Germany, and he also believed, earlier than most supporters of Britain, that eventually America itself must become a combatant. In 1940 he joined a group of influential internationalists to pressure the Roosevelt admin-

istration to find new ways to help the imperiled British war effort. Known as the Century Group, after the elite New York men's club in which they held their meetings, they played an important role in persuading the president to create the Lend-Lease program in March 1941. A few weeks before that, on February 17, 1941, Luce published a celebrated and controversial essay in *Life* magazine called "The American Century," whose title—although not original to Luce—he helped make a part of the nation's public language.³

Luce's vision of an American Century was rooted in part in his own experiences. He was born and spent his entire childhood in China, the son of a Presbyterian minister and missionary who taught in a small college for Chinese converts to Christianity. His first sustained experience with America came when he entered prep school in Connecticut in 1913. In China, Luce lived with his family inside walled missionary compounds, where he encountered virtually no Chinese people (except domestic servants) and instead spent his youth almost entirely in the company of like-minded missionary families from America and England. Outside the compounds were the fetid villages and ravaged countryside of a desperately poor nation. Inside were the pleasant houses, carefully tended gardens, and stable communities of the Victorian Anglo-American bourgeois world.⁴

The contrast between the ordered world of the missionary compound and the harsh social and physical landscape outside it reinforced the assumptions driving the Protestant missionary project in China: the unquestioned belief in the moral superiority of Christianity and in the cultural superiority of American (and Western) culture; and the commitment to showing the way not just to the love of Christ, but to a modern, scientific social order based on the American model. Luce as a child knew relatively little about America other than the idealized image of it that his father and other missionaries created to justify their own work. America to him began not as a physical place, not as a diverse and contentious culture, but as an abstraction—an ideal and a model. And even though he spent over half a century living in the United States after 1913, he never really abandoned his youthful attachment to a carefully constructed myth about America's history and its place in the world. Decades later, the ebullient, moralistic, paternalistic language of "The American Century" echoed in many ways the missionary credo that Luce—and the many other missionary children who went on to play influential roles in America's late-twentieth-century global missions—must have heard every day as a child.⁵

But “The American Century” was also an impassioned piece of propaganda written for a particular historical moment—an essay designed to rouse Americans out of what Luce considered their slothful indifference and inspire them to undertake a great mission on behalf of what he considered the nation’s core values. It was an effort to force his fellow citizens to confront the reality of the war and America’s obligation to play a forceful role in both ending it and building a better world in its aftermath; it was an effort to persuade them of the importance of saving Great Britain and defeating fascism. As part of that effort, he sketched a bold picture of the nation’s destiny that exaggerated only slightly what would by the late 1940s be a widely shared and increasingly powerful view—a vision in which American abundance and American idealism seamlessly merged.

The American Century, Luce wrote,

must be a sharing with all people of our Bill of Rights, our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, our magnificent industrial products, our technical skills. . . . we have that indefinable, unmistakable sign of leadership: prestige. And unlike the prestige of Rome or Genghis Khan or 19th century England, American prestige throughout the world is [the result of] faith in the good intentions as well as in the ultimate intelligence and strength of the whole of the American people.⁶

How, Luce wondered, could a nation that embodied such important and potentially universal values, a nation with such unparalleled wealth and power, remain on the sidelines in the battle for the future of the world? All America’s hopes for its future would fail, he insisted,

unless our vision of America as a world power includes a passionate devotion to great American ideals . . . a love of freedom, a feeling for the equality of opportunity, a tradition of self reliance and independence, and also of cooperation. . . . we are the inheritors of all the great principles of Western civilization—above all Justice, the love of Truth, the ideal of charity. . . . It now becomes our time to be the powerhouse from which the ideals spread throughout the world and do their mysterious work of lifting the life of mankind from the level of the beasts to what the Psalmist called a little lower than the angels.⁷

Something of the same moralistic, evangelical language appeared in another powerful call for a new American role in the world, a speech delivered a little more than a year later, on May 8, 1942, by Vice President Henry A. Wallace and widely known as “The Century of the Common

Man" (although its original title was "The Price of Free World Victory"). Wallace would later become a controversial, even reviled figure for his leadership of dissenting leftists in the early years of the Cold War, for his bitter criticisms of what he considered America's excessive militarism and aggression, and for his perhaps unwitting alliance with communists in the 1948 campaign. But he gave his speech at a high watermark in his political career. A little more than a year into his vice presidency, he had a reputation—soon to be shattered—as the second most important figure in government, as the "assistant president," as Roosevelt's likely heir. His 1942 speech was not the work of the later, embittered and ostracized Wallace. It was the work of a prominent, mainstream Democrat—an important and influential figure in the Roosevelt administration—attempting to rouse the public behind a war that the nation was not yet clearly winning.⁸

Wallace was implicitly critical of what he considered the imperialistic rhetoric of Luce's 1941 essay, and he was careful to distance himself from any notion that the United States could unilaterally impose its values and institutions on the world. But he too presented a vision of the future that included a central role for the United States in both inspiring and shaping a new age of democracy. "This is a fight between a slave world and a free world," he said. "Just as the United States in 1862 could not remain half slave and half free, so in 1942 the world must make its decision for a complete victory one way or the other." Naturally, Wallace expected the "freedom-loving people"—who were not Americans alone, but among whom Americans stood preeminent—to answer that question and to shape the postwar world. The shape of their answer, he said, was embodied in the Four Freedoms that Franklin Roosevelt had proclaimed in January 1941, freedoms that "are at the very core of the revolution for which the United Nations have taken their stand." And just as Luce's vision of an American Century included a vision of exporting Western industrial abundance to the world, so Wallace insisted that "the peace must mean a better standard of living for the common man, not merely in the United States and England, but also in India, Russia, China, and Latin America—not merely in the United Nations [as the Western alliance then called itself], but also in Germany and Italy and Japan."⁹

"Some have spoken of the 'American Century,'" Wallace added, in an obvious effort to distance himself from Luce. "I say the century on which we are entering . . . can be and must be the century of the common man." In the years to come, as Wallace's own vision (and political fortunes)

changed, he came increasingly to see his speech as a full-throated rejoinder to what he considered Luce's more imperialist vision. At the time, however, both Wallace and Luce spoke generally kindly about each other's remarks and seemed to agree that they were, on the whole, fighting the same battle. ("I do not happen to remember anything that you have written descriptive of your concepts of 'the American Century' of which I disapprove," Wallace wrote to Luce shortly after he delivered his speech. Luce's description, he added, "is almost precisely parallel to what I was trying to say in my talk.") In his vision of a world modeled on American notions of freedom, in his commitment to spreading the fruits of economic growth to the world, in his insistence that "older nations will have the privilege to help younger nations get started on the path to industrialization," and perhaps most of all in the extravagant rhetoric with which he presented these ideas, Wallace's speech was less an alternative to Luce's essay than a variation on it. "There are no half measures," he concluded. "No compromise with Satan is possible. . . . We shall fight for a complete peace and a complete victory. The people's revolution is on the march, and the devil and all his angels cannot prevail against it. They cannot prevail for on the side of the people is the Lord."¹⁰

"The American Century" and "The Price of Free World Victory" were major documents of their time. Both Luce and Wallace arranged to have them repeatedly reprinted, and they circulated widely throughout the United States and the world. But they are of interest today not mainly because they had great influence on the public conversation of their time; their influence was, in fact, relatively modest in the end. They are of interest because they are among the most visible symbols of a growing movement among American leaders, and eventually among many others, to redefine the nation's relationship to the world and, in the process, to redefine America's sense of itself. They make clear that the idea of an American Century was not a product of the Cold War, that the idea preceded and helped to define the Cold War—just as the Cold War eventually helped to redefine it. And they suggest something of the crusading power that idea came to assume among influential Americans across a wide swath of the political and ideological spectrum.¹¹

THE idea of an American Century found concrete expression in many ways. It helped support the aggressive internationalism of American foreign policy after World War II and throughout the Cold War. It helped inspire the Marshall Plan and the larger postwar system of foreign aid.

It helped sustain America's vast military establishment and justify the nation's increasing covert interventions in other nations. It helped bind the United States to the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, and to legitimize the complex system of alliances that the nation created in the 1940s and beyond.

Another compelling expression of that idea came in efforts to refurbish, and even redefine, the idea of the American nation itself in the years after World War II. For in the aftermath of that terrible struggle, it no longer seemed possible to take for granted the moral and practical claims of democracy and freedom. To many Americans, the great task after the war—a task that came to seem even more urgent several years later as the Cold War cast its shadow across the nation's cultural landscape—was to define American identity, to tie it firmly to a belief in the nation's great moral power, to mobilize the American public to embrace it, and then to export it to the world. This was the great cultural project of the 1940s and 1950s, a project fully compatible (and often synonymous) with the nation's geopolitical goals. And it mobilized in its service not just the state but a large community of intellectuals, academics, writers, philanthropists, business and labor leaders, clergy, journalists, and many others.

One of the earliest and most celebrated efforts to arouse popular enthusiasm for the idea of an American Century, to reinforce Americans' commitments to the particular virtues of the national project, was the Freedom Train—an exhibit of more than a hundred important documents and artifacts from American history, which between 1947 and 1949 traveled across the nation behind a red, white, and blue locomotive. Among the items in the train's exhibit were the Mayflower Compact, the Bill of Rights, a manuscript copy of "The Star-Spangled Banner," the Gettysburg Address, the Emancipation Proclamation, a draft of the Declaration of Independence edited by Jefferson, a copy of the Constitution annotated by Washington, one of Woodrow Wilson's drafts of the Covenant of the League of Nations, the flag that had flown at Iwo Jima, and much more. Upon leaving the train, visitors were invited to add their names to a Freedom Scroll and to take a pledge rededicating themselves to the American creed. More than 3.5 million Americans visited the train during its two-year journey.¹²

The Freedom Train represented not only the urgency behind the effort to promote American identity but the wide array of forces committed to furthering that promotion. The idea emerged out of the federal government. William Coblenz, who worked in the public information office of

the Justice Department, proposed a traveling exhibition after being inspired by a lunchtime visit to the National Archives. "It seemed to me incredible that a display of such topical interest was not being brought to all the American people," Coblenz later wrote. He enlisted the support of the attorney general and eventually the president behind the idea. By allowing these great documents to travel across the nation, Attorney General Tom Clark argued, it might be possible to reverse the "cynicism, disillusionment and lawlessness" that the end of the war had produced. "Indoctrination in democracy is the essential catalytic agent needed to blend our varying groups into one American family," he claimed. "Without it, we could not sustain the continuity of our way of life." Funding for the train came from major American banks and corporations, funneled through the American Heritage Foundation, which was created to organize the train and "to remind people that freedom is a continuing struggle." The design of its exhibits was supervised by Hollywood studio executives. Its progress across the country was eagerly chronicled by the national press and publicized through an elaborate campaign designed by the advertising industry. The Freedom Train was one of many efforts by such private/public alliances to promote American values and cement the idea of the American Century in the first years after the war.¹³

The promotion of the American Century was not simply a product of government and of defenders of free enterprise, however. It was a major project of the academic and intellectual worlds as well and became most clearly visible in the growth of the American Studies movement. Before the war, there had been about a dozen such programs scattered among a few elite northeastern colleges and universities and mostly devoted to interdisciplinary work in history and literature with no particular ideological foundation. After the war, both the number and the character of such programs rapidly changed. By 1947, there were more than sixty programs, spread through almost all regions of the country, and more than a dozen graduate programs training scholars to keep the movement alive. And out of the American Studies movement—out of the formal American Studies programs but also out of the even more widespread scholarly ethos that the movement created—came an extraordinary outpouring of scholarship devoted to exploring American national identity, the "American character," and the nature of American democracy. "Somewhere back of the American Studies ideas," Leo Marx wrote in 1979, "there once lurked an amorphous conception of the United States as the embodiment of a social ideal." This scholarship was not uni-

formly, or even primarily, celebratory; indeed some of it provided some extraordinarily harsh critiques of American culture and politics. But there was an essential unity within the movement in the belief that there was such a thing as a national character and identity; that it was important for the nation to examine, strengthen, and improve its culture; and that there were lessons in this effort both for Americans themselves and for much of the rest of the world.¹⁴

Many of the early founders of American Studies became deeply involved in the Congress for Cultural Freedom, funded (unknown to some of them at the time) by the CIA, whose goal was to trumpet the superior virtues of American culture to a world tempted by communism. Some helped create the Fulbright program, which for half a century now has sent American scholars overseas to help other peoples understand the United States. And others helped create the Salzburg Seminar, a summer program in Europe—conceived by three Harvard students in 1947, taught by leading American scholars of American Studies, and specifically designed to help European students understand the United States and use its history and culture to rebuild their own. Most of the faculty—led by F. O. Matthieson of the American Civilization program at Harvard—were people of the liberal left, determined to present a critical view of the United States and to illustrate its long and painful struggle against its own demons. Hence Matthieson's passionate belief that the central document of American Studies was Melville's *Moby Dick*. "No more penetrating scrutiny has yet been made of the defects of individualism," he wrote of it. And hence Richard Hofstadter's insistence that "we Americans came with no intention of acting . . . as national apologists." But they also had, as Matthieson told the first group of students, who came from all over Europe, "a strong conviction of the value of American democracy" and of its suitability for other societies. "Heretofore Americans have come to Europe as students," Matthieson told the participants. "But now we come, not to study your culture, but bringing our own." The Salzburg Seminar (which still survives) attracted funding from the Ford Foundation and many other proselytizing American philanthropies, and the support of the State Department.¹⁵

In 1944 the British historian Denis Brogan published a book titled *The American Problem* (later published in the United States under the title *The American Character*). In it he wrote of the challenges facing the United States after the war in dealing with a world destined to become more and more interconnected. The American problem, he wrote, was a double one:

the problem of making intelligible to the American people the nature of the changes in the modern world which they can lead, or which they can resist, but which they can't ignore. That is a problem for Americans. There is the second problem: the problem of making intelligible the normal American's view of the world, of his own history and destiny.

Americans, he concluded, "have much to give, materially and spiritually: a well-founded optimism about their own possibilities; a well-founded belief that some of the problems of unity . . . have been solved in the American Experience." The American Studies movement embraced the challenges and, at times, expressed the faith that Brogan described.¹⁶

So did Henry Luce, who had helped popularize the idea of an American Century in 1941, and who devoted much of his postwar energy to making his magazines effective champions of that idea both at home and abroad, both in promoting the aims of American foreign policy and in leading a highly public search to define the "national purpose." To Matthieson and many other academics and intellectuals, the Luce publications were crude purveyors of a simplistic, hegemonic vision of the American Century. In fact, Luce's magazines were far from uniformly celebratory, and Luce himself sought constantly to persuade leading intellectuals (including some of the most dyspeptically critical) to contribute essays to *Life* and *Fortune*. But Luce's magazines did include a large dose of exuberant nationalism—particularly in the overseas editions that were becoming an increasingly important part of the company's activities. Luce believed that by illustrating the brilliance and variety of American culture, business, religion, and politics, his publications could help arouse Americans to commit themselves to the larger purposes he believed they must accept, and also inspire the peoples of other countries to recognize the value of the American model. Most of all, his magazines could inspire the world to emulate the core value of the American people.

The "postwar *Time*," Luce once explained to his editors, will have to do "plenty of explaining" to the new readers it hoped to attract around the globe. It would have to explain itself, certainly, but it would also "have to explain about America." There was much about America that needed explaining to the world, not all of it attractive, Luce argued. "But if we had to choose one word out of the whole vocabulary of human experience to associate with America—surely it would not be hard to choose the word. For surely the word is Freedom. . . . Without Freedom,

America is untranslatable.” And that, then, was the postwar mission of his magazines. “Despite all confusions by which we have been confused and may have confused others, I think we have achieved some intellectual right to say that we of Time Inc. have fought, are fighting and will fight . . . ‘For the Freedom of All Peoples.’ . . . We believe that the relation of the people of the U.S. with the other peoples of the world must be based on the principles of Freedom. (This can be endlessly celebrated.)”¹⁷

THE idea of an American Century, and the widespread efforts to promote and solidify that idea, reflected a vision of the nation that even in the 1940s many Americans feared was unstable. How else can we explain their fevered efforts to promote and solidify that vision among a public they suspected had a weak attachment to it. Even the proselytizers themselves offered very different versions of what America was and what an American Century would mean. Yet in the end, almost everyone involved in this great, sprawling project seemed to agree that it was possible to define the meaning of America in terms that would be broadly acceptable; that there was such a thing as an American creed and an American character; that the idea of an American Century rested on something more than a realistic appraisal of American power; that it had a basis in the values and culture of the American people.

In the end, though, the American Century theorists were never able to produce a definition of an American character or an American creed that adequately represented their own time, let alone ours. The Freedom Train is one of many examples of the great difficulties inherent in defining the American ethos. It was the product of awkward compromises that belied its message of a universal American commitment to a set of national symbols. There was a vigorous debate over whether to include the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 as one of the central documents of American freedom, a debate the defenders of including the act lost. Even the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution—guaranteeing African Americans “equal protection of the laws” and the right to vote—were, the organizers feared, too controversial to add to the train’s picture of the American creed. There was a prolonged struggle over how the train should deal with the racial norms in the South and elsewhere, and a bitter debate among the organizers about the appropriate stance to take. Ultimately, the organizers forbade segregated viewing of the train and cancelled visits to several cities (including Memphis and Birmingham) that balked at that requirement, but they

also made concessions to segregationists. In some cities, they permitted separate lines for black and white visitors and admitted them in alternating groups of twenty-five. They permitted an extra car containing the Confederate constitution to accompany the train through Georgia. Despite the huge popular interest the train provoked, the admittedly scanty evidence suggests that few African Americans, and indeed few people of color of any kind, visited it—perhaps a reflection of their view that freedom, for many Americans, remained an empty ideal. “I want freedom itself,” Paul Robeson said at the time, “not a freedom train.”¹⁸

Those who announced the dawn of the American Century, and the much larger group of people who attempted to promote it as a projection of American values and morality into a crippled and beckoning world, were able to sustain their image of a vital American creed only with considerable difficulty—and only by ignoring, suppressing, or marginalizing the considerable conflict and diversity and injustice that lay beneath the bright, shining surface of American life; by flattening out their vision of America and the world and creating a Manichaeian image of the globe. Their enthusiasm was understandable. They were acting in the shadow of the greatest war in human history that produced some of the greatest crimes against humanity the world has ever seen. And they were acting, too, in the midst of a new conflict—more difficult to understand, sometimes vague in its aims, subject to no easily foreseeable resolution—that they considered equally momentous and that they believed required a firm commitment from the American people and from the nation’s allies, a commitment they knew would not be easy to sustain. Similar efforts have followed the terrible events of September 2001, as leaders from many areas of American life have mobilized themselves to fortify and inspire the nation in a new and difficult struggle against a shadowy and elusive foe. The example of the comparable efforts of a half century ago, therefore, can be seen both as an inspiration and a warning.

For in embracing the idea of an American Century in the 1940s, a generation of internationalists—determined to overcome the nation’s long tradition of isolation and autonomy in the world—were in fact inventing a national image, sometimes wittingly, sometimes not, that they believed would be helpful to that goal. And in creating this carefully constructed artifice and projecting it so energetically into the world, they were not only contributing to the creation of the kind of American Century so many predicted—a century in which they hoped America would be not just all-powerful but widely emulated and admired. They were