



America through Its Great Lives: An Informal Readers' Guide

Abstract: Taking as a starting point the events of Donald Trump's presidency, the healthcare crisis caused by the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, and the perception of the United States of America as a (fading) symbol of democracy, this essay investigates whether a balanced discussion on the contemporary image of America is still possible. As it is argued, such a balanced view might be achieved thanks to the genre of biography. Therefore, a subjective selection of biographies contributing to this view is presented, starting with those dedicated to Alexander Hamilton and George Washington and ending with the ones focusing on Michelle and Barack Obama; as it is shown, they allow us to investigate the complicated personages who contributed to the contemporary image of America.

Keywords: biography, major figures of American culture, major figures of American history, major American biographers, American history through biography

For Americans and America's allies alike, it has been a dispiriting few years in the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave. Donald Trump was the kind of populist, race-baiting, nativist demagogue who has often risen to power in other countries but never before in the United States. Tom Wolfe once poked fun at the fears of liberals by joking: "The dark night of fascism is always descending in the United States and yet lands only in Europe."¹ Well, with Trump's election, it appeared that authoritarianism was a real danger in America.

Trump turned out to be an even more disastrous president than most of his critics had feared. By the time of the November 3, 2020, election, nearly 400,000 Americans lay dead – more than in any other country – because of his mismanagement of the Covid outbreak, and Trump himself had already been impeached once for trying to use military aid to blackmail Ukraine into helping him politically. Yet more Americans voted for Trump in 2020 – 74.2 million – than in 2016. Although he lost by a decisive margin in the Electoral College and in the popular vote, Trump did not accept the results and instigated a violent insurrection against Congress when it was meeting to certify the election results. His actions in provoking the January 6 attack on the Capitol led to Trump's second impeachment – this

1. Tom Wolfe, "Quotes/Quotable Quote," *Goodreads*, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/376418-the-dark-night-of-fascism-is-always-descending-in-the> (24.03.2021).

time with slightly more Republican support than the first time around. (Seven Senate Republicans and ten House Republicans voted for impeachment in 2021, up from only one senator in 2020.)

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky spoke for many of America's friends abroad when he expressed his shock in beholding the January 6 uprising: "We are used to believing that the United States has the ideal democratic institutions, where power is transferred calmly. [...] In Ukraine, we lived through two revolutions [...] we understood such things can happen in the world. But that it could happen in the United States? No one expected that [...] I was very worried [...] I did not want you to have a coup. After something like this, I believe it would be very difficult for the world to see the United States as a symbol of democracy."²

America's role as the leader of the Free World is indeed tarnished, and President Joe Biden will struggle to restore our luster. The point of this essay is not to argue that America is much better than it appears to be at the moment. We are exactly what we appear to be: a nation with deep flaws that include a large number of people who labor under racist beliefs and conspiracy theories. Moreover, one must acknowledge the dark side to America's history – from the persecution of indigenous peoples to the enslavement and segregation of African Americans. But there is also a nobler side to America that should not be forgotten and a host of achievements that should be celebrated. We are, after all, the country that invented the airplane, defeated diseases like measles and polio, pioneered the personal computer and the Internet, landed on the moon, led the way in new art forms such as film and jazz, provided a prosperous and dignified life for countless ordinary people, helped to defeat Nazism and Communism, and managed to preserve our liberal democracy for more than two centuries.

How, then, can overseas readers gain a balanced perspective on America, both good and bad? One way to do it would be to read histories of the country such as Jill Lepore's *These Truths*.³ But there is another way that is potentially more enlightening and entertaining: through the medium of biography. Few would agree anymore with Thomas Carlyle's famous maxim: "The history of the world is but the biography of great men."⁴ For one thing, it would be (rightly) considered sexist these days to refer to "men" rather than "men and women." More importantly, generations of historians have labored to cast light on the contributions

2. See Jonathan Swan, "Exclusive: Ukraine's Zelensky calls riots "strong blow" to U.S. democracy," *Axios*, Jan 31, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/ukraine-zelensky-capitol-riots-axios-hbo-f223c6d4-1aee-4779-a26d-f5f0eefb90f2.html> (24.03.2021).

3. Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).

4. Thomas Carlyle, *Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1840), 34.

of ordinary people – many of them impoverished and oppressed – in the making of history. For reasons both understandable and specious, the story of “dead white men” has become decidedly unfashionable.

But the reality remains that one can still learn a lot about a country by studying some of its most notable personages. That study should not, of course, be limited to men or people of European ancestry. It should also be done without canonization and without falsification – showing the good and bad of America’s leaders and heroes to gain a truer picture of this mighty, and mightily complicated, country. What I would like to do in this essay is to recommend some of my favorite American biographies that cast light on the complicated characters that have made America what it is.

Any examination of U.S. history must begin with the Founding Fathers – that extraordinary and uniquely talented group of men who guided America to independence and wrote its Declaration of Independence and Constitution, two of the most important political documents in history. The Founders were highly imperfect, and in recent years we have focused more on their faults – including the fact that many of them owned slaves. But they also designed an extraordinarily successful government that has endured for more than two centuries. By creating a process for amending the Constitution, they made it possible to more fully realize the benefits of liberty for all Americans – including those who were denied basic rights for far too long.

There are far too many books about the Founders for any one person to read them all but I would start with two by Ron Chernow, one of America’s greatest biographers: *Alexander Hamilton*⁵ and *Washington: A Life*.⁶ Both books are widely read and admired (*Alexander Hamilton* even inspired the hip hop musical *Hamilton*) because they are so fair and readable. They are far from hagiographies, but Chernow clearly admires both of these men, who worked closely together, and he shows how their contributions continue to shape the American republic.

The only president who rivals Washington in rankings of the greatest American presidents is Abraham Lincoln. Indeed, whereas Washington did more than any other individual to create the United States of America, Lincoln brought about its second Founding in the 1860s – an achievement crowned by the abolition of slavery and the enshrinement of equal rights into the Constitution. Lincoln, like Washington, has been the subject of thousands of tomes. The most popular book about the Civil War president in recent years has been Doris Kearns

5. Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

6. Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010).

Goodwin's *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*,⁷ which showed how he managed an obstreperous collection of cabinet officers. Reading this book helped to inspire President Barack Obama to give a key cabinet post – secretary of state – to his own rival, Hillary Clinton. Lincoln's greatest general and an eventual president himself was Ulysses S. Grant, whose single-minded devotion to victory distinguished him from most other Union generals and who was a better president than has often been argued. His memoirs,⁸ written while he was dying, are considered the best book written by any American general and he is also the subject of another doorstopper biography by Ron Chernow called simply *Grant*.⁹ After Washington and Lincoln, one of the most admired presidents in U.S. history (and a personal favorite of mine) has been Theodore Roosevelt – a progressive Republican who oversaw an increase in the regulation of business, broke up trusts, created national parks, built the Panama Canal, and earned the Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating an end to the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. He was also, of course, an imperialist who glorified war and held racist, Social Darwinian views (although he was also the first president to host a black man for dinner at the White House – Booker T. Washington¹⁰). Edmund Morris did a brilliant job in capturing TR's complexity in his trilogy: *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*,¹¹ *Theodore Rex*,¹² and *Colonel Roosevelt*.¹³ The most captivating is the first of these books, which won the Pulitzer Prize. Its opening chapter (“New Year's Day, 1907”) wonderfully captures TR's energy and enthusiasms by focusing on one day when he received the public at the White House.

Of course, there is much more to America than its presidents. Perhaps because I am a newspaper columnist, I am unusually interested in the history of the press. There is no doubt that journalists and press barons have exerted a tremendous influence on American history. The paradigmatic case is the role of the “yellow press” which fomented the Spanish-American War in 1898 by turning unusually close attention toward what would now be called Spanish human rights abuses in Cuba. One of America's most famous (and acerbic) newspaper columnists was H. L. Mencken of the *Baltimore Sun*. His heyday was the 1920s when he coined words like the “booboisie” and the “Bible Belt” to mock Southern fundamentalists

7. Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

8. Ulysses S. Grant, *The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012).

9. Ron Chernow, *Grant* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018).

10. Konsultacja

11. Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Random House, 2010)

12. Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House, 2010).

13. Edmund Morris, *Colonel Roosevelt* (New York: Random House, 2010).

who believed in the literal truth of the Bible. Mencken wrote a charming trilogy of memoirs – “Happy Days,”¹⁴ “Newspaper Days,”¹⁵ and “Heathen Days.”¹⁶ Together they provide an unrivaled portrait of America in the late 19th and early 20th century. For a more impartial view, Terry Teachout has produced a fair-minded biography of Mencken called *The Skeptic*¹⁷ – as well as a biography of the seminal jazz musician Duke Ellington (*Duke: A Life of Duke Ellington*¹⁸).

There have also been important biographies in recent years of major news barons. They include David Nasaw’s *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst*,¹⁹ Richard Norton Smith’s *The Colonel: The Life and Legend of Robert R. McCormick*,²⁰ and Alan Brinkley’s *The Publisher: Henry Luce and the American Century*.²¹ Hearst, who unwillingly inspired Orson Welles’s film *Citizen Kane*, owned the largest chain of newspapers in early 20th century America. McCormick owned the *Chicago Tribune*, the most important newspaper in the Midwest. Luce was the founder and publisher of *Time* magazine, the most influential magazine of mid-20th century America. It was Luce who coined the term the “American century,” and his support of internationalism in the years after World War II did much to make that characterization a reality. McCormick, on the other hand, was an incorrigible isolationist who supported the America First movement before World War II. Both men were highly influential, for better or worse.

McCormick hated Franklin Delano Roosevelt, usually judged the third greatest president after Washington and Lincoln. FDR, who was Theodore Roosevelt’s distant cousin (and who married TR’s niece Eleanor), rescued America from the Great Depression and orchestrated its victory in World War II – both monumental achievements. The best single volume biography of him is Jean Edward Smith’s *FDR*²², but my personal favorite is Eric Larabee’s *Commander in Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, His Lieutenants, and Their War*,²³ which focuses on his relation-

14. H. L. Mencken, *The Days Trilogy, Expanded Edition: Happy Days / Newspaper Days / Heathen Days / Days Revisited: Unpublished Commentary* (New York: Library of America, 2014).

15. Mencken, *The Days Trilogy*.

16. Mencken, *The Days Trilogy*.

17. Terry Teachout, *The Skeptic: A Life of H. L. Mencken* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002).

18. Terry Teachout, *Duke: A Life of Duke Ellington* (New York: Gotham Books, 2014).

19. David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000).

20. Richard Norton Smith, *The Colonel: The Life and Legend of Robert R. McCormick 1880–1955* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997).

21. Alan Brinkley, *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

22. Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2008). Kindle Edition.

23. Eric Larrabee, *Commander in Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, His Lieutenants, and Their War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988).

ship with his talented but often difficult generals and admirals. FDR had a talent for management by indirection and even deception (Roosevelt once confessed, “I am a juggler and I never let my right hand know what my left hand is doing”²⁴) that Larrabee dissects with great acuity.

One can gain a harrowing picture of World War II from the perspective of an ordinary American soldier by reading E. B. Sledge’s memoir, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*.²⁵ Sledge was a Marine who saw heavy combat in the Pacific and wrote an exceptionally honest account of what it was like. Like many of the finest memoirs, it was not produced until decades after the events he writes about because they were so difficult for him to process.

The most difficult, flawed, and talented of all of America’s World War II generals may well have been General Douglas MacArthur, who foolishly allowed the Japanese to destroy his air force on the ground in the Philippines after Pearl Harbor but then led an audacious island-hopping campaign to reclaim the islands. His life is told with novelistic verve in William Manchester’s *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur, 1880–1964*.²⁶ Manchester’s book has been rightly criticized for its inaccuracies, but its readability is unmatched.

MacArthur eventually met his downfall in the Korean War. After his brilliant landing at Inchon – one of the most successful gambits in military history – he not only drove back the North Korean invaders but insisted on advancing all the way to the Yalu River, heedless of the risk of war with China. When China’s armies entered the conflict, throwing the United Nations forces back, MacArthur agitated for full-scale war with China and showed open contempt for President Harry S. Truman. Truman therefore fired him – a move that temporarily made Truman deeply unpopular but, like many of his decisions, has been vindicated by history. The story of this haberdasher who never went to college and yet became a great president is magnificently told by one of America’s great historians, David McCullough, in *Truman*.²⁷ Like William Manchester, McCullough is a biographer who writes with the skill of a novelist – his books are not only highly informative but endlessly enjoyable.

It was under Truman that America launched the containment policy that eventually won the Cold War. But while America was contesting Soviet power around the world, it was undergoing a profound transformation at home – the extension of civil rights to African Americans who had suffered through more than

24. Smith, *FDR*. Non paginated.

25. Eugene B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (New York: Presidio Press, 2010).

26. William Manchester, *American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur, 1880–1964* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2008).

27. David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

two centuries of slavery and a century of post-Civil War segregation. America's greatest civil rights leader – our Mandela, Gandhi, or Wałęsa – was the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. His story is compellingly told by Taylor Branch in his three-volume series, *America in the King Years, 1954–63*. As so often happens with trilogies, the first volume – *Parting the Waters*²⁸ – is the most gripping. King's younger collaborator, John Lewis, who went on to become a long-time member of Congress, has his story told by the talented historian Jon Meacham in his recent bestseller, *His Truth Is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope*.²⁹ No one can understand America without understanding the civil rights struggle, which continues to this day, and one cannot understand the Movement without understanding the heroism of brave leaders like King and Lewis.

That the civil rights movement finally triumphed in the 1960s owes no small amount to President Lyndon Johnson, a son of the South who was viewed as a traitor by many of his fellow whites for championing the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. Johnson's story is told by Robert A. Caro in four magnificent volumes – and counting – of his landmark series *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*.³⁰ These books are true masterpieces of nonfiction that should be read by anyone interested in human psychology and the exercise of power. If Balzac or Trollope had chronicled modern U.S. politics, this would be the result.

Johnson was a complex figure, an extraordinary mix of admirable and contemptible qualities. One of the worst consequences of his presidency was America's futile and costly involvement in the Vietnam War. There have been many important books about the conflict, but I would argue that two biographies offer interesting and unusual vantage points – one of them mine. (Apologies for the self-promotion!) In *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*,³¹ Neil Sheehan tells the story of a little-known U.S. military adviser whose efforts to fight a “better war” were stymied by American military bureaucracy – and by his own character flaws. In *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy of Vietnam*,³² I present the life of a legendary American covert operative

28. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988).

29. Joe Meacham, *His Truth Is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope* (New York: Random House, 2020).

30. *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* includes: Robert A. Caro, *The Path to Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982); Robert A. Caro, *Means of Ascent* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990); Robert A. Caro, *Master of the Senate* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002); Robert A. Caro, *The Passage of Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

31. Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988).

32. Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy of Vietnam* (New York and London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018).

who helped to defeat Communist insurgents in the Philippines and later helped to create the state of South Vietnam – only to find himself, like Vann, a marginalized critic from within of the firepower-intensive U.S. war effort in the 1960s.

There was more to America in the 1960s than the civil rights struggle and the Vietnam War. There was also the space race – the effort to beat the Soviets to space and ultimately to the moon. The test pilots and astronauts make for appealing, heroic figures – and never more so than in Tom Wolfe’s nonfiction novel *The Right Stuff*³³ which tells their stories as they have never been told before or since.

Compelling biographies of more recent U.S. figures still have yet to be written, but a few recent titles merit attention. In *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century*,³⁴ George Packer tells the story of a leading diplomat who exemplified faith in America’s global leadership. Holbrooke is best known for negotiating the Dayton Accords that ended the war in Bosnia but there was much more to his life – and Packer does full justice to both his messy private and public lives.

Finally, I recommend a pair of books by our most literary president since Theodore Roosevelt. As a young man, Barack Obama wrote a lovely memoir of his life as the son of a white mother and African immigrant father called *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*.³⁵ More recently he has published the first volume of his presidential memoirs, *A Promised Land*,³⁶ which showcases his introspection, thoughtfulness, and sheer writing skill. As if that weren’t enough, his wife, former First Lady Michelle Obama, has penned a highly readable memoir of her own, called simply *Becoming*.³⁷ These books cast an important light not only on the Obama presidency but on the issue of race in America – a subject that remains of central concern more than half a century after the great civil rights struggles of the 1960s. The massive protests in 2020 following the death of black motorist George Floyd at the hands of a white Minneapolis police officer attest to the continuing struggle for racial justice.

I do not by any means suggest that these biographies offer a comprehensive history of America. This is not even a comprehensive guide to American biographies – a huge subject in and of itself. These are merely a few of my favorite biographies that reflect important insights on America’s past and present

33. Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (New York: Picador, 1979).

34. George Packer, *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019).

35. Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

36. Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Random House, 2020).

37. Michelle Obama, *Becoming* (New York: Random House, 2018).

– and by implication its future. By reading them, an interested observer of the United States will gain a better understanding of America and Americans.

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