

# Lindbergh and the Meaning of American Society

John William Ward

MORE THAN 2,500 people braved spring showers to gather on the lawn of the Lindbergh House in Little Falls on Sunday, May 22, 1977, for a special program observing the fiftieth anniversary of Charles A. Lindbergh's New York-to-Paris flight of May 20-21, 1927. Anne Morrow Lindbergh, widow of the world-famous aviator, and three of the Lindbergh children — Jon M., Land M., and Reeve Lindbergh Brown — spoke to the enthusiastic crowd about Charles Lindbergh's lifelong attachment to his Minnesota home and his concern for the environment and the preservation of natural resources. Also speaking briefly were Senator Wendell R. Anderson of Minnesota, State Senator Nicholas D. Coleman, and Brendan Gill, author of a new book, *Lindbergh Alone*, reviewed in this issue. Ivan D. Miller, superintendent of Grand Portage National Monument, speaking on behalf of the National Park Service, presented a certificate designating the Lindbergh House a National Historic Landmark to Mrs. Eva Lindbergh Christie Spaeth, Lindbergh's half-sister, who accepted for the Lindbergh family and the state of Minnesota.

John William Ward, president of Amherst College, delivered the principal address on this significant occasion. Professor of history and American studies at Amherst, former student at the University of Minnesota, where he received his M.A. and Ph.D., and former professor of English at Princeton, Ward is the author of a landmark article, "The Meaning of Lindbergh's Flight," first published in the *American Quarterly* (Spring, 1958), which examines Lindbergh's achievement and public reaction to it within the context of American attitudes and ideals. Following is a major part of Ward's thoughtful address of May 22, which we believe will stimulate the "fruitful meditation" he discusses.

—NANCY EUBANK

WHY are we *here*? To celebrate, to commemorate an event which took place fifty years ago, of course. But the accent in that simple question falls on the word "here." Why here? Why at Lindbergh's home in Little Falls? Why has the sovereign state of Minnesota made a park and built a museum at the Lindbergh home where Charles Lindbergh grew as a boy?

To reach an answer, let me read you a passage from a book I much admire, a book I doubt I would have thought to use if it had not been that Anne Morrow Lindbergh referred to it in a recent letter. The passage is from Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, a comparative study of religious myths from every corner of the world:

"For a culture still nurtured in mythology, the landscape is made alive with symbolic suggestion. Here and there, furthermore, are special shrines. Wherever a hero has been born the place is marked and sanctified. A temple is erected there to signify and inspire the miracle of perfect centeredness; for this is the place of the breakthrough. Someone at this point discovered eternity. The site can serve, therefore, as a support for fruitful meditation."

Now, you will object that the United States today is surely not, in Joseph Campbell's words, "a culture still nurtured in mythology." The eighteenth century, the age of reason, has intervened. We live in a secular and rational world. Man controls nature; he does not worship it. The landscape is not a storehouse of moral value; it is a storehouse of material wealth. Even the event we celebrate, Lindbergh's flight, is a monument to man's ability to control nature, to conquer its laws by the ingenuity of reason embodied in the technological triumph of the machine.

We live, that is to say, in a demystified world, a



*ANNE MORROW LINDBERGH* spoke briefly. Listening to her are (from left) MHS Director Russell W. Fridley, MHS President Ronald M. Hubbs, Senator Wendell R. Anderson, and State Senator Nicholas D. Coleman. — Minneapolis Star photo.

world of cause and effect, a world where the sacred is banished to Sunday morning, not allowed to get in the way of the day-to-day work of the world. Yet, how do we account for our Monticellos and our Mount Vernons, our bronze plaques on the homes of the great, our interpretive museums at the place of their youth? How do we account for the care and preservation of Lindbergh's home, especially when it is not where he was born, not even the wooden frame house of his early years. Why are we here?

We are here because we still need heroes, and, under the guise of historical fact, will continue to create them. We need them, to use Joseph Campbell's words again, "as a support for fruitful meditation." What we meditate upon, though, is not the actual, living individual, Charles Lindbergh. We meditate upon the man who has become a hero. That is his role. Through him, we meditate finally upon ourselves, upon the values and the direction and the meaning of our collective lives, the meaning of American society. What the hero does for our imagination is to dramatize, to act out, to give human focus to questions which are central to our lives, to our understanding of our own selves. That was Lindbergh's fate, to become a hero, to be used by us to understand ourselves.

From the days of his flight to the simplicity of his final burial, Charles Lindbergh has commanded the imagination of Americans because his life and his actions have

brought to the emotional surface of attention deep conflicts in the meaning of American history and the future of American society. He presents, in the full sense of that verb, questions which deserve "fruitful meditation."

Let me put the major question to you as baldly as possible, as simply and directly as possible, by reminding you of what you already know.

Think of Lindbergh's life: the dramatic flight to Paris, the conquest of space and the laws of nature by what he himself called "that wonderful motor," the machine which represented the achievement and the collective effort of a technological and industrial society; his tour of the country, after his flight to Paris, to all the forty-eight states to demonstrate the reliability of aircraft as a mode of travel and communication, its annihilation of traditional attitudes toward time and space, ultimately leading to the creation of a single global community; the work with Dr. [Alexis] Carrel on the transplantation of human organs, the artificial extension of human existence through the achievements of medical technology; his quick recognition and support of Professor [Robert H.] Goddard at Clark University and his rockets which devastated the cities of Europe in World War II, put men on the moon, and now threaten with global disaster the global community which modern technology has created.

One could go on, but the point is obvious: Charles Lindbergh was the creation of, the publicist for, and one of the shapers of the incredible achievements of modern, technical, interdependent, and advanced industrial society, the world we now inhabit.

Yet, think of another side of Lindbergh's life. Our memory of him as the "lone" eagle, the single individual conquering all obstacles by his independent will, the child of nature's woods and streams, here in Minnesota; the shy and private man who strove increasingly to avoid the public world his every act created; the man who turned more and more away from the modern world he lived in, who turned more and more toward primitive society and the simplest of things; the aviator who said, if he had to choose between birds and airplanes, he would choose birds; the boy who tinkered all his life with motorcycles and machines, who became, as a man, the ecologist who wished finally to leave civilization behind because, as he said before his death, "I do not want to be a member of the generation that through blindness and indifference destroys the quality of life on our planet."

Little wonder that Lindbergh has stood at the center of our national imagination. His every act, his entire life, was the dramatization of the central question which haunts the meaning of modern America. Is the power of modern technology the fulfillment of the promise of American life, the achievement of human community, the creator of a world free from pain and degrading

labor? Or does a society built upon the power of the machine mean the negation of the individual, lost in a collective mass, the denial of simple human felicity, the destruction of nature, the despoliation of the landscape, a world from which even the primitive tribes of the Philippines cannot escape?

Now, all I have just said is highly abstract, terribly general, uncomfortably rhetorical. Quite so; and meant to be quite so. That is why we are here today. The function of the hero is to make personal and dramatic and immediate the abstract questions and general problems which define the meaning of a culture.

Let me give you some quick examples of what I mean from what I have written elsewhere, if only to put some flesh on the bare bones of what I have so far said about the meaning of Lindbergh.

At the moment of the flight — and one should remember that our historical memory tends to repress the fact that the Atlantic was not unconquered when Lindbergh flew; dirigibles, seaplanes, and even a heavier than air land plane as early as 1919, had flown the Atlantic — but at the moment of the flight and ever since the dominant theme in the ecstatic response of Americans was that Lindbergh had done it alone. *Lindbergh Alone*, as the title of Brendan Gill's new book puts it. Lindbergh was compared to the heroes of history who represented individualism and self-sufficiency and the power of the single man's will. He was "the young Lochinvar who came out of the West and flew all unarmed and all alone." A line from a poem by Kipling became a favorite: "He travels the fastest who travels alone." The National Geographic Society, when it presented a medal to Lindbergh, wrote on the scroll, "Courage, when it goes alone, has ever caught men's imaginations." One magazine wrote, "Charles Lindbergh is the heir of all we like to think is best in America. He is of the stuff out of which have been made the pioneers that opened up the wilderness, first on the Atlantic coast, and then in our great West. His are the qualities which we, as a people, must nourish."

By emphasizing the single individual, the American imagination, then and since, drew upon a rich tradition in American values, the primacy of the individual person, the ideal of individualism. It also linked Lindbergh with the American past, the world of the frontier, so that the world of outer space, opened up by flight, became a new frontier. But, as one stops to think about it, it is strange that the long-distance flight of an airplane, the achievement, as I have said, of a highly advanced and organized technology, should be the occasion of hymns of praise for the solitary and unaided man. Further, the frontier of the airplane, of rockets and moon landings, is hardly the frontier of the trailblazers and settlers of the Old West. The machine which made Lindbergh's flight possible represented an advance into a complex indus-

trial society, not a return to the self-sufficient simplicity of new beginnings in the virgin continent of an unspoiled nature.

But, at the same time that the American public celebrated the past by emphasizing the single individual and linking Lindbergh with the rich tradition of the significance of the frontier in American life, the public also celebrated the machine which made the flight possible and the modern world it represented. As the *New York Times* said, "Lindbergh is the son of that omnipotent Dedalus whose ingenuity has created the modern world." Modern industry had created a new America. The *Times* went on: What Lindbergh "means by the Spirit of St. Louis is really the spirit of America. The mechanical genius, which is discerned in Henry Ford as well as in Charles A. Lindbergh, is in the very atmosphere of the country."

Lindbergh led the way in this emphasis on the meaning of his flight by always saying "We." The plane, the Wright engine, were not to go unnoticed. At a ceremony in Washington, he said that the flight was not "the act of a single pilot. It was the culmination of twenty years of aeronautical research and the assembling together of all that was practicable and best in American aviation." The flight, he said, "represented American industry," and the president of the United States agreed that the flight represented American genius and industry. "I am told," said President Calvin Coolidge, "that more than 100 separate companies furnished materials, parts, or service in its construction."

Without piling up further anecdotes and quotations, one may say, in short, that the meaning symbolized by Lindbergh's flight ultimately involved two ways of looking at the historical meaning of the American experience. One view had it that America represented an escape from history and society, an emergence into a new and open world with the self-sufficient individual at its center, in a world of nature free from the institutions and restraints of social organization. The other view had it that America represented the idea of progress, an advance in the further development of industrial organization, the elaboration of the economic and social organization which made the power of modern society possible.

Lindbergh did not create these different ways of apprehending the meaning of American society. His role was to dramatize them. His flight and his life have held the minds and the imaginations of Americans because through them we experience the antinomies which define the meaning of American culture: the individual *versus* society, nature *versus* the machine, a return to the past *versus* progress into the future. Our celebration of Lindbergh, to the degree we are self-conscious of why we celebrate him and know why we are here, should lead us to confront the meaning of American society, not just the meaning of Lindbergh's flight.

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*Excerpts from Anne Morrow Lindbergh's remarks:*

USUALLY, when one comes back to a boyhood home, one's own home, or that of another, one thinks, "How far he came from this," "How separated he grew," "What a different man he grew to be." I feel just the opposite. I find him here. Not just the child, or the boy, or the young adult who grew up here. I find the man he was at the end of his life. In reading his posthumous book, *The Autobiography of Values*,\* I found a passage describing how he felt as a boy when he was on the train coming back to Little Falls after being in Washington with his father, the congressman:

"I remember returning to my Minnesota home after a winter spent at the capital a thousand miles away. Riding the train westward in springtime, I seemed drawn by an elastic force and the traction-like gravity that grew stronger as I neared my home, drawing me over mountains, hills, and fields back to Minnesota to our farm and, finally, through the doorway of the house itself."

He kept Minnesota and the farm in Little Falls always as a core in his character, a base to come back to in his mind and heart. It represented not only home, but the qualities that had made him and fed him and were to stand by him all his life: the love of nature, the beauty of the wilderness, the sense of freedom and adventure, of the rivers, the traditions, and inheritance of Minnesota pioneers, courage, independence, and a sense of the boundless future.

\*To be published in 1978 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

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*Jon Lindbergh, an oceanographer, writer, and lecturer, who now lives in Puget Sound, Washington, also spoke:*

THE FLIGHT was a memorable enough feat, but to me as one of his children it is in a sense an abstraction. It took place before I was born, and my father was not given to dwelling on the past. The real memories to me are more personal, and I'd like to share a few with you now.

My father introduced me to the appreciation of the caress of the wind, the feel of spring rain, the smell of moist earth. He taught me that there are other creatures in this world than simply people. For instance, there are blue whales in the sea and monkey-eating eagles over the jungles of the Philippines. And he felt that these had as much God-given right to life as man, and he spent much effort in his years to maintain their opportunity to survive.

My father had a strong sense of history and the continuity of time. He watched from the cockpit of his plane as our country's wilderness [was] transformed into civilization. He believed that civilization was good in many ways, and certainly he took advantage of it. But without the balance of the wilderness he felt that a key part of the value of life would be lost. He felt that our lands, our waters, the resources of our world are not just owned outright by us but held in trust for the short periods of our lifetimes. To consume and to despoil them in one extravagant splurge would be a crime against our children and their children. Now if my brother Land can be considered delinquent in not having seen "The Spirit of St. Louis," I am certainly delinquent in not having been here to visit Little Falls before, because it is here that the beginnings, the roots, of his philosophy of life began.

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If we do that, if we truly honor Lindbergh, then we move beyond mythology. The hero may provide us with the occasion for fruitful meditation, but he does not provide us with answers. We must provide those. The answers are not easy. We may wish to escape the complexity of the modern industrial society. We may, as Charles Lindbergh himself seems to have, feel the pull of Robert Frost's line, "Back out of all this now too much for us." But if there is to be an escape from the strident and insistent demands of complex civilization, if there is to remain territory to take off to, paradoxically we will probably have to use organized political power, the instrument of our national government, to preserve it.

Or, if we insist on the central importance and the primacy of the individual in American society, we are going to have to exercise our political imagination and devise ways in which the institutions and the organiza-

tion of modern society provide ways for people to participate in the determination of the meaning of their own lives.

In sum, the questions about the meaning of American society which are dramatized in the life of Charles A. Lindbergh are questions which largely define the political and social questions of our own lives. That is the function of the hero. To cause us to pause, to contemplate the meaning of the fable, the meaning of existence. If we turn away, saying to ourselves that only the hero, only the extraordinary man, can do such things; or, if we turn away, saying that's not what it's all about, it's just the anniversary of a solo flight across the ocean, then we will not understand why Lindbergh has remained vivid in our imaginations now for fifty years. We will have failed to understand why we are here.



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