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0521835771 - Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia

Robert E. Herzstein

Excerpt

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Introduction

A little more than a century ago, Henry Robinson Luce was born to missionary parents in China. To the Reverend and Mrs. Henry W. Luce, it seemed like a happy coincidence that the little boy came into the world during the very time when America was acquiring an empire in the Pacific. The Luce family hero was Teddy Roosevelt, the symbol of the expansive America of that era. Henry R. Luce died at a time when Americans were fighting in another Asian war. A year before his death, Luce wrote, “I judge [Vietnam] to be a good thing rather than a bad thing – certainly an inescapable thing which is better to deal with than to try to escape from.”¹

Two forces shaped Henry Luce’s character and worldview. One was Protestant Christianity; the other was a fervent faith in America’s God-ordained global mission in Asia. As an adult, Luce used his vastly successful journalism as a kind of secular pulpit from which he preached the virtues of American engagement in Asia. Luce has been called the most influential private citizen in the America of his day. He controlled an enterprise that reached one-quarter or more of the American reading public. As the publisher of *Time*, *Life*, *Fortune*, and the *March of Time* film and radio documentaries, as a fervent Republican, philanthropist, and patron of the missionary cause, Henry R. Luce relentlessly lobbied for greater American involvement in the affairs of China and its neighbors. He operated at the center of a powerful network, one that encompassed the China lobby and other “Asia-firsters,” members of Congress, philanthropists, business leaders, and people active in Hollywood and the arts. Luce was a prime supporter of the Christian educational mission in China, and during the war, his United China Relief was an influential part of the foreign aid effort. And as a journalist, Luce often enjoyed access to classified information. His sources were superb, especially among Republicans, and the written record, as amplified by interviews, allows us to reconstruct the networks within which he operated.

Henry R. Luce was the greatest journalistic innovator of his century and a dedicated patriot during some of the most turbulent times in our history. I have written with admiration about him, especially when looking at Luce’s

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work before and during World War II.² Whether he was right or wrong at any given time, Luce was the most ardent and consistent interventionist of his day; he intended to make sure that politicians and the public thought the way *Time* told them to think. In 1953, John Shaw Billings, a close associate, said of his boss that he was “obsessed with the subject of foreign policy and his direct influence on it.”³ Billings added, “Nothing else interests him,” and “he regards his position as ‘unique’ for exerting pressure – [with] Clare in Rome,* C. D. Jackson† in the White House and his magazines to press his points.” Billings then concluded that Luce was uninterested in the daily operations of those magazines but believed that he was “molding the destiny of the U.S. in the world.”

Luce’s journalism educated – and sometimes miseducated – millions of people, bringing to them marvelous works of art and profound economic inquiries, along with snappy gossip and vivid personality portraits. His journalism damned enemies and lauded friends, in prose that could be snide and colorful – but also heroic and moving. The company’s magazines (and sometimes, its newsreels and radio broadcasts) were a force in American culture, thanks in some measure to the vast prestige that accrued to the Luce publications in the wake of World War II. After all, this was the war that Henry Luce had foreseen as the final act precipitating the onset of American global hegemony. *Life* brilliantly covered the global conflict and moved millions with its pictures and words.

To Henry Luce, the American Century, which he had first prophesied in 1940, was a way station in humankind’s attempt to build the City of God on earth. Humans, who were sinners, must fail, but try they must. Always, Luce had his eye upon America’s opportunity, and he looked ahead to the time when Americans would make his better world. But after 1944 he discovered a new obstacle to the advent of the American Century. An unfashionably early anti-Communist increasingly suspicious of the Soviet ally, Luce resolved to block the rise of atheistic Communism in China and the lands adjacent to the Central Kingdom. To Luce, this contest pitted the true church against a Marxist, un-Chinese heresy. Americans, Luce insisted, could save China and, in the process, would save themselves. And thus occurred the most bitter experience of his lifetime. Unlike *Time*, the administration and the American public wanted no part of massive intervention in China’s civil war; nor did they favor war against the entity that became “Red China.” Luce, however, remained insistent. To him, America belonged in China, so when America failed to save China, Luce’s anger knew few bounds.

To Luce, Asia, and not Europe, was the real prize. It was more populous, a veritable garden of souls, and, being underdeveloped, it was also subject to American influence. But to Luce’s annoyance, most Americans were more

* Ambassador to Italy Clare Boothe Luce, Henry Luce’s second wife.

† Charles Douglas Jackson, a senior executive and editor at Time Inc., served Eisenhower in 1953–1954 as an adviser on Cold War strategy.

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interested in Europe than in Asia, even when the national interest seemed to mandate a more balanced view of the world. Even today, if you mention the Cold War, most Americans identify it as the great contest with the Soviet Union in Europe. But if Luce were here, he would probably remind us that very few Americans or citizens of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries died in the struggle against the Soviets. In fighting Communism in East Asia, by contrast, an estimated one hundred ten thousand Americans paid with their lives.

This book examines one man's attempt to involve the United States deeply in the battle against Communism in China and Korea and Vietnam. It is also the tale of a man who was indefatigable. Indeed, what Henry Luce first called "nation-making" in Vietnam became part of his controversial legacy. But behind the advocacy journalism, the ideological crusades, and the bitterness lurked a fascinating man, one who merits careful study. Luce's character, after all, contributed both to his greatness and to his defects.

Despite his cold, brusque demeanor, "Harry" Luce (he detested the name Henry) was more than the "thinking machine" described by his colleague John Billings. Inspired by a Christian sense of duty, Luce was also a complex, contradictory, and often suffering human being. For example, Luce had a poetic and nostalgic side that he concealed from most contemporaries and that would have astonished many of them. And there are other surprises in store for those who study Luce's life and work: A Presbyterian layman fascinated by theology, this Calvinist son of a missionary came close to converting to Roman Catholicism. A moralist and something of a work-obsessed prude, Luce committed adultery with guilty abandon and grew rich selling advertising space to liquor distillers. (In a moment of remorse, he suggested that his church try him for this transgression.) Possessed of fabled curiosity, Luce also had what *Life's* Dan Longwell called "the faculty of not listening to anyone he didn't want to hear (or anything they said he disagreed with)."⁴ Luce hated to fire anyone, but he abandoned the famous witness Whittaker Chambers at the lowest moment in the life of that *Time* senior editor.

When we examine Luce's media, it is fair to hold him responsible, because as editor-in-chief, he always claimed responsibility for *all* of their contents. To a remarkable extent, Time Inc.'s three great magazines more often than not reflected the views that Luce also expressed in memoranda, speeches, and diary notes. This was especially true in regard to issues in which Luce was passionately interested, among them the American commitment to "uplifting" – that is, modernizing and Christianizing – the people of China.

True, Luce's magazines spoke different languages: *Time* was the smart-alecky product of a union between an earnest college graduate and the fast-changing culture of the 1920s. *Fortune* was deeper and better researched, because it hoped to educate and influence the business elites, whose ignorance dismayed Luce. *Life* was America's magazine – friendly, diverse, easily accessible. All three publications conveyed the world as Henry Luce saw it to millions of Americans during difficult years. In the understated words of a *Life* managing

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editor, Ed Thompson, “We knew enough about what [Luce] didn’t believe in to avoid direct contradiction of his views.”⁵ When Luce cared about an issue and made his views known, his magazines took his message to the American people.

With what results? At home, almost every major politician of the age courted Luce, and foreign heads of government were available. Luce was a major force within the Republican Party between 1940 and 1964. Yet Luce’s impact upon Republican politics has been virtually ignored by historians, for two reasons. First, Henry Luce was a journalist who usually shunned personal publicity. (His second wife, Clare Boothe Luce, more than made up for her husband’s reticence.) Second, Luce’s papers, stored at the Library of Congress, have until recently been inaccessible to historians.* But these archival materials, along with various interviews and memoirs, now enable us to evaluate Luce’s influence upon the Republican Party. Those documents show that Luce and the editors of *Fortune*, more than anyone else, created the presidential candidacy of Wendell L. Willkie. Without Luce and Time Inc., Dwight Eisenhower’s decision to run, his nomination, and his election become more problematic.[†]

If historians have overlooked Luce as a player in Republican politics, his reputation as a man obsessed with China has never been challenged. In a bizarre tribute to Luce’s alleged influence, a homesick Marine almost assassinated him right after the war: The would-be assassin blamed *Time* for making sure that he and some of his buddies were stationed in a land they wanted to abandon. But if Luce was so powerful, how did FDR and Truman win five straight elections? In 1948, Luce supported Senator Arthur Vandenberg for the Republican presidential nomination, and he crowned “President” Dewey before the election. And why did Luce, despite a media crusade that he waged for five years, fail to involve Americans more deeply in the Chinese civil war?

The answer lies in the fact of saliency: If an issue or cause did not engage the public’s imagination, Americans generally allowed any administration to pursue its foreign policy without undue opposition. But if a problem engaged the public’s imagination and if the administration seemed listless, that was another matter altogether. Large numbers of Americans favored assisting Britain in July 1940, but FDR failed to act until early September. Into the gap jumped Henry Luce and his media, and Roosevelt was happy to have the support of Time Inc.’s Republican bias. He ultimately did what Luce wanted him to do, though for his own reasons. When it came to aid for China in 1947, by contrast, the public was largely disengaged or opposed, and Luce failed to achieve very much. But later, when Communist triumphs fueled a growing aversion to the current administration, *Time*’s snarling question – “Who Lost China?” – mightily contributed to the national trauma of the McCarthy years.

* Luce’s papers are now open to all.

† In 1964, when the Goldwaterites took over the GOP, Luce’s influence was waning in a changed party, but by then he was ready to retire.

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In examining Henry R. Luce's political use of his media, I will ask two questions: What information did Luce and his editors receive in regard to China and Vietnam? And what did they tell their thirty to forty million weekly readers?

In fact, there was a huge discrepancy between received facts and published articles. Newly available materials make it possible to explore this chasm and see how it widened year by year. A turning point in Luce's journalism came in 1945 and 1946, when instead of his benevolent American Century, there emerged a bipolar world of conflict. Luce's vision darkened, and he resolved to combat and if possible destroy the "cancer" – Communism – that had defaced or even derailed his American Century. Luce became bitter and frustrated, especially when America failed to save his China.

A 1946 encounter brings alive Harry Luce's suffering as he watched the decline of his Nationalist China. The scene took place in Nanjing, during the early stages of the civil war. A persistent detractor of the Nationalist regime, John Melby, was serving as a political officer at the U.S. embassy. Though new to China and only thirty-three years old, Melby had already concluded that "we were backing a dead horse."⁶ He shared his opinion with Harry Luce, who felt wounded:

Those of you who criticize people like me for our stand in support of the Nationalists, you've got to remember that we were born here. This is all we've ever known. We had made a lifetime commitment to the advancement of Christianity in China. And now you're attacking us for it. You're asking us to say that all our lives have been wasted; they've been futile. They've been lived for nothing. That's a pretty tough thing to ask of anyone, isn't it?⁷

Unconvinced, John Melby replied, "Of course it is!" He added, "I'm still asking it of you. Because things have changed." But for Harry Luce, essential verities had *not* changed, not in 1946, not ever.

The gap between Luce's preconceptions and the realities of China and East Asia had widened into an abyss.

Fittingly, the story begins with Luce's triumphant return to China after World War II. Optimistic, even euphoric, Luce foresaw the day when Chiang's China, with our help, would enter the American Century.

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PART ONE

FROM THE AMERICAN CENTURY TO THE
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I

Henry Luce and China

Prelude to an American Crusade

Soon after the second atomic bomb fell on Japan, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek decided to launch an offensive aimed at postwar American public opinion. Chiang was determined to counter the growing number of Americans who accused China's government of corruption and worse. As part of its campaign, Chiang's government invited Henry R. Luce, head of Time Inc., to visit China. In the words of the Chinese ambassador, the influential publisher's return to the land of his birth would be "of mutual benefit to China and the United States."¹ The Beijing *Chronicle* was more direct: Luce, the paper commented, published "articles on China which greatly influenced American public opinion in favor of China."²

Henry Robinson Luce (1898–1967) was the man who had cofounded the powerful newsweekly magazine called *Time*. His *Fortune* was the leading business magazine, and everyone read *Life*, America's weekly picture book. The *March of Time* newsreels were the best of their day. Henry Luce the would-be traveler, however, was aware of a potential problem. Harry S Truman detested *Time* for its Republican bias. As a result, a nervous State Department official decided to ask the White House about Luce's request for a revalidated passport. Much to Luce's relief, Truman's aide Charles Ross voiced no objections, perhaps because Chiang himself had invited Luce to China.³

Harry Luce, who was then forty-seven years old, left the United States on 29 September 1945 on a plane provided by General Robert B. McClure, head of the Chinese Combat Command. On 6 October, for the first time in more than four years, Luce saw the land where he had been born in 1898. After his plane landed near Chongqing, this devout son of Presbyterian missionaries attended church services at U.S. Army headquarters, once the site of a Methodist missionary compound. Luce was in a marvelous mood. American soldiers thanked Harry Luce for the "pony," or wartime overseas editions, of *Time*. Their gratitude moved Luce, but he most enjoyed his meetings with the men who ran China. Luce took tea with Nationalist financier Dr. H. H. "Daddy" Kung and

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dined with Chiang and his beautiful wife Mei-ling Soong, known to Americans as Madame Chiang.

Luce, the ever serious guest, discoursed with the Generalissimo on the nature of freedom. Chiang believed that freedom consisted of behaving in accord with one's nature, like a fish in water; he added that people sometimes needed to be told how to act. Luce overlooked the disturbing implication of his host's simile: Despite demands for liberalization, Chiang Kai-shek would not easily surrender his role of tutor to his people.⁴ In the face of demands for land reform, democracy, and multiparty governance, he intended to stand firm. To Chiang, the most dire threat was the burgeoning Communist insurgency. Instead of liberalism, Chiang would face down the Reds with weapons and propaganda. Americans, he worried, did not understand the Chinese Communists. They were not, Chiang knew, "agrarian reformers," eager to bring democracy and reform to the impoverished millions. Because of American pressure he had to negotiate with the Marxists, but the Generalissimo knew that he could count on the support of Henry Robinson Luce and his powerful network of philanthropic and political contacts. They formed the heart of what would soon become known as the "China lobby."

The latest American-mediated attempt to reunite China had reached a dead end. The Communist delegation would soon return to its wartime base, in the remote northern outpost of Yan'an. At the farewell banquet for the Communist leader Mao Zedong (then known as Mao Tse-tung), Harry Luce found himself the only foreigner among the three hundred assembled guests. His hosts had seated him on the dais, near Mao, where Luce examined his heavy, peasantlike face and his "sloppy blue-denim garment." He noticed that when Mao spoke to the gathering, he started slowly and then engaged in a "full-voiced shout." Perhaps Mao needed to convey sincerity, for he was making an unlikely pledge to support "unity under Chiang Kai-shek." Later, Luce and Mao met face to face, and the Communist leader expressed surprise at seeing the American in Chongqing. He gazed at Luce, Luce wrote in his diary, "with an intense but not unfriendly curiosity." The two men had little to say, however, and Luce soon found himself listening to Mao's "polite grunts."

Luce also renewed his acquaintance with Zhou Enlai. The two men had first met in 1941, when Luce was gathering information about China's resistance to the Japanese invader. At that time, Zhou invited the Luces to dine with him at the Guangdong (then Kuang-tung) restaurant, in this same city of Chongqing.⁵ Zhou traded on his famous charm, but he was wasting it on Harry Luce, who disliked that quality in men – and especially in a Communist. On 10 October, when the two men met at the banquet for Mao, Zhou complained to Luce about Time Inc.'s coverage of China. *Time's* editor-in-chief responded heatedly and denounced the current "world-wide left-wing propaganda" campaign against Chiang. But Luce, who would soon be traveling to Communist-infested Shandong, nonetheless professed his interest in meeting rural Communists in the field. Zhou promised to oblige Luce, but Chiang Kai-shek would have viewed

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any such visit as apostasy. Luce never visited Yan'an, nor did he ever review Communist units in the field.

Luce's tour only underscored his lifelong isolation from the great masses of China's people. He had spent his boyhood in a missionary compound in Shandong province and had later attended a British-run school. In his relative isolation, Harry had followed in the footsteps of an earlier generation: "The missionaries," one historian has written, "made little attempt to understand what we might broadly call the social structure of Chinese life."⁶ As Luce admitted when a young man, "I know nothing of their [Chinese] social life aside from the formal feasts & holidays."⁷ In 1945 Luce still viewed China from the vantage point of a Christian missionary compound.⁸ Though famous for his curiosity, Luce relegated journalistic inquiry to a distant second place, behind his moral commitment to Chiang's Nationalist cause. As Luce defined it, China was America's ward. Step by faltering step, China would enter a marvelous new age in which Christianity, modern science, and the American big brother would bring the blessings of liberty and salvation to 450 million Chinese. Chiang welcomed his American visitor in ways calculated to please him.

Wes Bailey, Luce's personal aide, did not think that "any foreign visitor" had been "so welcome in China since Marco Polo." Indeed, Chiang's government turned Luce's tour into one long celebration.⁹ Everywhere Luce rejoiced in the smiling faces of cheering schoolchildren, self-important governors, decorated generals, deans of Christian colleges, Buddhist monks, and government-approved newspaper editors. He was unaware that the citizens and children who cheered him in October 1945 were really actors playing roles in Chiang's version of Potemkin's village.

Despite the pleas of at least one prominent Chinese liberal, Luce refused to pressure Chiang into embracing democratic reforms. Instead, he agreed that "lawless military activity of every sort" must first be vigorously suppressed.¹⁰ The publisher had come to strengthen and celebrate China and not to criticize its leaders. He came not as a journalist, but as a pilgrim. Luce returned to his boyhood haunts in Shandong for the first time in thirteen years and then traveled to Beijing. There, Luce inspected his father's old campus at Yenching University, where the Reverend Luce had once served as vice-president. Luce's Christian conscience was gladdened. In Beijing, the mayor hosted a fabulous banquet in the publisher's honor, and Luce, who was usually a moderate drinker, emptied many a glass filled with a highly potent local beverage. True to form, he was up and about early the next morning, resuming his tour. Eventually, Luce boarded a U.S. Navy ship docked in the harbor at Tianjin and visited the nearby Marine headquarters, where the local people, he believed, rejoiced in the presence of one thousand U.S. Marines.

In Tianjin, a homesick, disturbed Marine decided that Luce's magazines were responsible for his postwar duty in China. For years, they had argued for intervention, for war, for what Luce had in 1941 called the "American Century."

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One day, this Marine saw Harry Luce in the distance. After loading his M-1 rifle, the soldier took aim at the back of Luce's neck. Fortunately for his would-be victim, another Marine dissuaded his buddy from firing the weapon. Years later, Luce learned about the incident and thanked his benefactor for his "interference in changing the signals."¹¹

Saved from an early death, Luce arrived in Qingdao, where he had passed many summers as a child. He again admired its "magnificent port" and swam in the blue Pacific, which had recently been stained with the blood of American soldiers. Luce dined aboard the USS *Alaska* in the light of a full moon and basked in the fullness of American power. At times, Luce seemed entranced, as when he wrote that "incredible military power" was "represented by the Stars and Stripes." He later recalled that evening off Qingdao as part of "an autumn so rare and bright [that it] makes the heart joyful." Luce had surrendered to a sentimental euphoria generated by his hosts. "Problems [in China] are terrific," Harry Luce admitted, but he quickly added that they were "by no means insoluble."¹² By late November 1945, Luce predicted, "crack government armies, mostly U.S.-equipped and U.S.-trained, will have arrived in North China." This reoccupation of China "by the Chinese with American aid is something . . . unique in history," he added. Yet some observers urged caution: *Time's* Bill Gray warned against overestimating the firepower of Chiang's vaunted American-trained and -equipped divisions.¹³ Luce ignored him.

In a telegram home, Harry Luce cabled that China needed only "three or four ships to carry coal from Manchuria to Shanghai to get the wheels of industry started there."¹⁴ He would send a hundred American businessmen to China, where they could help to restart the economy. But Luce also favored dispatching ten missionaries to that garden of souls. All that was required, he believed, was what his father had called "Lucepower," but on a grand scale: more money, more missionaries, more technicians, more modern weapons, more ships. Luce's thoughts raced ahead to glorious projects, such as restoring Christian missions and colleges disrupted by the terrible war. A proud alumnus of Yale College, Luce intended to reactivate Yale-in-China, an educational program that dated back two generations. Luce also hoped to do even more for United China Relief, the highly successful private aid program that he had founded in 1940.

The United States, *Time* pontificated, had "gone too deeply into the China affair to duck all responsibility for what may ensue."¹⁵ Congresswoman Clare Boothe Luce, Harry's second wife, captured his mood when she wrote that he had sent "a note of urgency concerning immediate aid for China" but seemed "cheerful about the long term chances of our friends there." She added, "How well Harry and his father built in this matter of our friendship and understanding with the Orient!"¹⁶ Never was such confidence so misplaced. In fact, Henry Luce's Chinese acquaintances were members of a beleaguered elite. Many of them had converted to a religion alien to their compatriots. Luce had few if any recorded contacts with poor peasants or struggling urban workers, whose misery and aspirations offered Communism its chance. Even as a teenager, Luce had recognized the problem of his cultural isolation: "I have talked with our