America Transformed

Sixty Years of Revolutionary Change, 1941–2001

RICHARD M. ABRAMS
University of California, Berkeley

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521862462

© Richard M. Abrams 2006

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2006

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
Abrams, Richard M.
America transformed : sixty years of revolutionary change, 1941–2001 /
Richard M. Abrams.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-521-86246-9 (hardback)
1. United States – History – 1945– 2. United States – Social
conditions – 1945– 3. Social change – United States – History – 20th century.
4. United States – Politics and government – 1945–1989. I. Title.

E741.A22 2006
973.92 – dc22 2006005049

ISBN-13 978-0-521-86246-2 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-86246-9 hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for
the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or
third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication
and does not guarantee that any content on such
Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

Preface — *page* ix
Acknowledgments — xix

PART ONE RETROSPECT — 1
1 "The American Century" — 3
2 Before the Revolutions — 6
3 The Challenge of Power — 12
4 The Inflation of Moral Possibilities — 18
5 The Generational Chasm — 21

PART TWO EIGHT REVOLUTIONS — 25
6 Affluence — 27
7 From Isolation to International Hegemonic Power — 62
8 The Rise of the Military in American Society — 80
9 The Reorganization of American Business — 92
10 The Revolution in Racial Relations — 121
11 The Revolution in Gender-Based Roles — 137
12 Revolution in Sexual Behavior — 157
13 The Demise of Privacy — 183

PART THREE COUNTERREVOLUTION — 199
14 Liberalism: Ascension and Declension — 201
15 The Liberal Democratic Coalition — 207
16 The Failure Syndrome — 219
17 The Rise of the New Left and the Birth of Neoconservatism — 268

18 Right-Wing Ascendancy 279
19 The Reagan Revolution 290
20 Summary 312

PART FOUR EPILOGUE 317
21 "The New American Century" 319

Index 335

1

"The American Century"

The twentieth century did not turn out to be quite what Henry Luce (head of Time, Inc.) had in mind when, at the start of 1941, he declared it "The American Century." "We have," Luce claimed, "that indefinable, unmistakable sign of leadership: prestige," which, he elaborated, "is faith in the good intentions as well as in the ultimate intelligence and ultimate strength of the whole American people." The United States, he noted, was "already a world power in all the trivial ways," including the influence of Hollywood movies, jazz, American slang, and its control of major patented products. It had also already made its mark in science, literature, and the graphic and performing arts. He regretted, however, that in its self-satisfied isolationist absorption during the first forty years of the century, America's failure to use its power responsibly had cost it some prestige. "But most of it is still there," he concluded. He looked forward to the United States taking on its responsibilities as a nation of great resources by accepting the burdens of leadership.[1]

After 1941, the United States would indeed take on a leadership role as one of the world's "superpowers," with dramatic effect on global politics and economy. Its military power would help turn the tide against fascism in Europe and Asia and then hold the line against the expansion of Soviet communism. Its political and economic systems would in many respects become models for many countries of the world where, at least before 1940, liberal democratic institutions had had little apparent attraction. By the last decade of the century, even the powerful Soviet Union would collapse, at least partly because its leaders as well as its people could no longer withstand the appeal of precisely those American-promoted institutions that had made the United States, Western Europe, and Japan amazingly prosperous. These would be among the revolutionary

[1] Henry R. Luce, *The American Century* (Farrar & Rinehart, 1941), pp. 32–4.

changes that Americans would experience during the last half of the twentieth century.

The rest of the world would also experience revolutionary changes, many of them for the better. But for most of the peoples of the world, the century did not shape up in the mellow, American-style, God-blessed democratic image Luce had in mind. When in the final months of the war most Americans and Europeans were forced at last to face up to the horrors of the Holocaust, when it became clear that at least 11 million European civilians – men, women, and children – had been murdered in cold blood, including 6 million Jews who were targeted solely because they were Jews, the postwar cry went up: "Never again!" But within 25 years and for the rest of the century, genocide and "ethnic cleansing" would become almost commonplace: Rwanda, Cambodia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Iraq were only some of the places where sustained, massive atrocities occurred. There were also the millions of victims of "The Great Leap Forward" and the "Cultural Revolution" in Mao Zedong's China and of the attempted violent extermination of the Baha'i in post-1979 revolutionary Iran.

In testimony to America's powerful standing in the world, many people at home and abroad blamed the U.S. government for not preventing or doing enough to avert the horrific tragedies. Unhappily, too often the blame was not misplaced. Things got off to a bad start when, despite President Harry Truman's urgings, Congress in 1948 rejected ratification of the Genocide Convention that the United Nations General Assembly had passed. Elected officials of the most powerful democracy in the world expressed fear that their constituents would punish them if they endorsed a commitment to join with the UN to intervene against genocide in some foreign land. Isolationist sentiment – or unilateral nationalism – still prevailed at the time, especially among Republicans who controlled the Congress then. They were powerfully represented by Senate majority leader Robert Taft of Ohio, who, as his most authoritative biographer put it, "was too budget-conscious and too nationalistic to listen to new ideas."[2] It took outrage against President Ronald Reagan's obliviously respectful visit to the graves of German SS officers at Bitberg cemetery in 1986 before another U.S. president felt compelled to endorse the Genocide Convention. Congress finally ratified it in 1988, making the United States the ninety-eighth nation to do so. The ratification, however, did not prevent abstinent or dilatory American responses when prompt action could have stayed at least some of the appalling massacres that the world would witness in the concluding years of the century.[3]

[2] James T. Patterson, *Mr. Republican: A Biography of Robert A. Taft* (Houghton-Mifflin, 1972), p. 295.

[3] See Samantha Power, *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide* (Basic Books, 2002).

American power and influence would grow to near dominating levels during the last half of the twentieth century, but the same could not be said of its moral stature. For one thing, the behavior abroad of powerful, profit-fixated American corporations often contradicted the democratic and humanistic ideals that Americans generally liked to profess. Valuing stability and influence with host-country rulers over principle, as most businessmen do, those who ran multinational corporations often found military dictators to be agreeable partners, from Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua and Castillo Armas of Guatemala in the forties, fifties, and sixties to Saddam Hussein of Iraq in the eighties and Augusto Pinochet of Chile in the seventies through the nineties. Corporations frequently abetted and even subsidized corrupt and barbaric regimes in the impoverished countries they operated in. Meanwhile, the preoccupation of U.S. policy makers with the Cold War against the Soviet Union too often meant assisting tyrannical and corrupt governments whose presumed value to the United States was simply that they were not Communist. Nor did the thrust of U.S. military power abroad increasingly after 1963, in Vietnam and elsewhere, do much for the country's posture as a benevolent democracy. Indeed, as the twentieth century waned, American influence and power sometimes evoked venomous hostility in some impoverished parts of the globe, while people in "Old Europe" smirked at a long-standing belief, held by many of their cousins across the Atlantic, in a benign "American exceptionalism."

It must be said that, when all the goods and bads are toted up for a century's work, the United States probably did significantly more good than harm in the world. But by the turn of the new millennium, the once hallowed image of America – the great hope and model that it had been when the century started – had become badly faded.