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PART ONE

RETROSPECT

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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.

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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).

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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.

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2

Before the Revolutions

Probably most Americans looking back fifty years from the end of the century would perceive much that seemed entirely familiar. Clothing, language, architecture, and in general the overall aspect of the country would seem much the same. City high-rises, suburban tract homes, telephones, air travel, radio, and even television were all in place by mid-century. Old movies would show rather less urban traffic, and the autos and airplanes would betray their vintage; perhaps strangest to the modern eye would be how easily automobile drivers found curbside parking spaces. In fact, although it would not be readily evident, America was a far less crowded society back then. The nation's population in 1940, 132 million, was slightly less than half what it became by the end of the century.

On the whole, most modern Americans would comfortably recognize the United States of the 1940s as "their own" country. Only the absence of personal computers and push-button cellular telephones would seem clearly to separate the America of the forties and fifties from the nation in the last decade of the century. Yet the sense of familiarity would be misleading. Quite apart from the fantastic achievements of science and technology, a closer look at the America of the forties and fifties would reveal a society that was virtually an alien country.

Contemplate an America in which tens of thousands of U.S. citizens of Japanese background were interned for years in detention camps and were forced to dispose of their property at a great loss, without trial, without charges of any kind, without compensation, and without serious protest from other Americans; in which the very army that defeated fascism in Europe and the very navy that defeated the Japanese in Asia were racially segregated; in which nonwhite persons could not enter most motels or hotels anywhere in the country except as menial laborers. In at least a dozen states of the Union, even military men were barred from most restaurants, rest rooms, drinking fountains, hospitals, swimming pools, or beaches if they were not white.

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How strange must seem an America in which, until almost mid-century, not a single black person was permitted to compete in any major-league team sport; in which female athletes were regarded with skepticism and amusement; and in which most major medical, law, engineering, and business schools formally barred women. Even more enduringly, in most states a man could legally appropriate his wife's income and inheritance, could force his wife to move with him to another city or state against her will, and in most cases could physically brutalize her with impunity. America in the forties and fifties was also a country in which a man and his wife could be pulled from bed in the early morning hours by police who would jail them for violating a state law forbidding interracial marriage; in which more than a dozen states barred nonwhites from serving on juries and from testifying against a white person; in which a poor person accused of a major felony would be tried in court without access to a defense attorney; in which all-white juries in many states routinely acquitted white thugs who had openly kidnapped, tortured, and lynched young black men and teenage boys. Kidnapping had been a federal crime since the notorious Lindbergh case in the 1930s, but it was never applied to lynching because the doctrine of "states' rights" still served to defeat even the most modest proposals to guarantee American citizens equal protection of the law regardless of race, gender, or state of residence.

Not all the contrasts between the America of mid-century and that of the century's end point to progress in civil behavior and humane sensibilities. As late as 1965, an urban homeowner might have difficulty locating the keys to the front door, so common in many cities was the practice of safely leaving doors unlocked. Shops did not require steel shutters after closing. Bicycles could be secured safely to a lamp post or railing with a simple combination lock rather than with special steel-hardened chains. Car alarms and home burglary alarms were virtually unknown. Police still walked their beats singly in most urban neighborhoods, without radio contact with headquarters and without the likelihood of being attacked. No place in America required special scrutiny or devices to prevent children from bringing weapons into a school or to prevent library books from being stolen. Automobile traffic did not yet prevent children from playing games in most urban streets. Public libraries typically were open evenings and on weekends. Most major cities outside parts of the Old South offered tuition-free college education. Smog was not yet an urban commonplace; most rural streams still ran free and unpolluted. Divorce was not yet the rule rather than the exception in urban family relationships. Nor was single teenage motherhood a widespread problem.

Personal integrity – a term that had not yet lost a commonly understood meaning – still implied a strong sense of personal privacy. It was beyond decency, as the word was commonly understood, to publicly boast of one's own extramarital escapades or other familial betrayals, as became the fashion a quarter century

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later for numerous celebrities whose autobiographies made best-seller lists. Nor would it have been viewed as anything but repugnant for celebrity-craving exhibitionists to air on television their own, their spouses', their parents', and their children's sexual and other intimate activities, as became a daily phenomenon by the seventies. Before 1970, embarrassment and shame still exerted a powerful influence on personal behavior.

There were other, more subtle signs that America in the forties and fifties was not quite the familiar country that a young American at the end of the century might imagine. Of course the language would be familiar, although nouns like "interface," "impact," and "access" were not yet common as verbs while "incentivize" was not a recognizable word at all. People would "sleep *late*" rather than "sleep *in,*" and they would say "how *much* fun" something was, not "how fun." More significantly, "Ms." was 25 years away from being invented to take its place beside "Mr." as a maritally neutral term of address for women. "Black" was a not altogether friendly way of describing an Afro-American owing to its historical association with slavery and linguistic association with evil. "Negro" and "colored" were the preferred, polite terms. But after 1968, especially young black people made clear that they viewed "colored" as condescending, "Negro" as reminiscent of a subservient "Uncle Tom," but "black" as defiant, proud, and assertive. The new terminology stuck, signifying the revolutionary change in attitude that marked the late 1960s.

Because language is an important clue for understanding the deeper sensitivities of a people, it must signify how different was the world of the forties that Americans then watched movies and read books completely lacking in the provocative "four-letter words" that, by the 1970s, regularly punctuated dialog in popularly distributed movies and proliferated in best-selling novels. In fact, by the seventies it seemed that some people would have become completely inarticulate without them. Not that those words didn't exist in the forties: everyone knew them and probably most used them, at least sometimes. But official America felt a strong need to repress them. A person could be jailed for using such words in a public address, a song, or a comic routine on stage, as occurred even in the Sixties to the notoriously popular comedian, Lenny Bruce. Publishers ludicrously forced Norman Mailer to fudge the real, colorful language of combat troops in his prize-winning *The Naked and the Dead,* probably the best World War II novel ever written. Major literary works went without publishers, were kept from library shelves, or – like Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer,* James Joyce's *Ulysses,* D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover,* and Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County* – were banned entirely from the country. These books contained in dialog one or more of the forbidden words that anyone could hear in a crowd and could read on the walls of every public rest room

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and train station. As J. D. Salinger's troubled teenager, Holden Caulfield, would complain in *The Catcher in the Rye*: "It's hopeless, anyway. If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn't rub out even *half* the 'Fuck you' signs in the world. It's impossible."

Published in 1951, *Catcher* became a runaway best-seller. Custodians of village culture throughout America worked fiercely to keep it out of schools and libraries, with spotty success. They were right: the scatological breakthrough was at hand, and village culture went reeling. For better but also for worse, other standards of traditional decorum and civility would soon be falling.

The way people present themselves also tells a story. Most properly dressed adults in the forties wore hats outdoors, even in summer. The fedora, a high-crowned and wide-brimmed felt hat, was favored among males, while the once elaborate women's chapeaus had dwindled to virtual skullcaps with ribbons, feathers, and/or decorative veils. A white or light-colored shirt with necktie was the public uniform for proper males aged 5 to 85. Women of every age remained tied to their skirts; slacks or jeans might be worn in the house, on the job in a factory, or on a country holiday, but they would result in rejection at the door of "better" restaurants, clubs, and hotels, and even at college mess halls and libraries. No socially sensitive male under 60 sported any kind of beard unless to make a religious statement or to affect an Old World allure. (The mustachioed Republican Thomas E. Dewey was the last man to seek the presidency on a major ticket with any kind of facial hair; he lost to FDR in 1944 and lost to Truman in 1948.) Men's haircuts uniformly left ears outstanding and neck conspicuously bare. Straight hair was "in" for males and females, and for blacks as well as for whites. Although most Negroes could not or would not spend the money to use them, pharmaceutical companies made fortunes selling hair straighteners to the thousands who did. Until the "Afro" became a symbol of racial pride in the late 1960s, most black males were content to keep their hair cropped close to the skull. (By the 1990s, bald would become the macho, "in your face" fashion for young males and for some females, too.)

These are just some of the evidences of a society that was self-conscious about propriety, concerned with rules, deferential to standards of decorum, "individualistic" by most historical measures and yet – certainly by comparison with American society as it evolved over the next two decades – strikingly bound by limits prescribed by custom and authority. Of course many people chafed against the constraints of custom and authority, especially those members of minority groups whose sometimes maliciously enforced exclusion inspired rebelliousness or bitterness. Even so, the pressures for conformity were usually greater. The canons of "good taste," indeed of "goodness," generally were not yet seriously

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challenged. The sense of belonging to a large, encompassing community that transcended racial, religious, ethnic, class, or expatriate loyalties may not have been universal, but it ran strong. Patriotism was not yet a word of scorn among social critics; it came naturally to both progressive reformers and militant conservatives, reinforced by the felt exigencies of the war effort and perhaps also by the camaraderie fostered by people's common struggle with the privations of the Depression. The challenges of major wars and economic need tended to make life relatively simple.

This touches on more subtle differences, differences in mentality, outlook, attitude, and mindset. The adult population of the forties and fifties had endured hardships in life rarely experienced by most Americans born after 1940. Most adults would have lived through the traumas of both World Wars and the decade-long Great Depression that came between the wars. They had intimate knowledge of material want and personal anguish. For them, life had always seemed difficult, fearsome, unpredictable, even treacherous. Their experience engendered in them cautious, order- and security-coveting attitudes as well as frugal habits that would outlast the postwar affluence to which most of them rapidly ascended.

The generations born after 1940 had starkly contrasting experiences. Over the course of fewer than two decades after the Second World War, Americans (and people of the other industrial countries) would experience a greater increase in material wealth than any people in the history of the world. A rapid, sustained, and widespread increase in affluence would become the most conspicuous feature of the postwar era. Most of the young during the third quarter of the twentieth century would have difficulty comprehending their parents' "hang-ups." Charles Reich, author of the popular book, *The Greening of America*, remarked in 1970: "Older people are inclined to think of work, injustice and war, and of the bitter frustrations of life, as the human condition."[1] Not so their children, many of whom believed they knew how to end war and injustice once and for all, thought work to be greatly overrated, and refused to abide frustration.

The increase in real disposable income for Americans in the 1940–1970 period was one of the revolutionary developments of the times, as it would approach the increase for the entire 75 years since the close of the Civil War. This prosperity would have the most transforming effect on a multitude of features of American society. In emancipating the great mass of Americans from the anguish or even the threat of poverty, it would contribute to major changes in racial and gender relations as well as in American foreign policy and the structure of the business system. It would inspire a rampant individualism, though for a while it would

[1] Charles Reich, *The Greening of America* (Random House, 1970), p. 6.

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also contribute to a broad-based, good-spirited social consciousness. Americans in general during the quarter century following the Second World War would have much to celebrate, most particularly their growing personal prosperity.

And yet . . . .

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