Introduction

On May 8, 1973, Pelé visited the White House to meet with President Richard Nixon. The latter gushed at the chance to greet the Brazilian soccer legend. "You are the greatest in the world," exclaimed Nixon. Pelé knew a modicum of English at the time but didn't know how to respond. Pelé was a three-time World Cup winner and Santos FC's leading scorer. Yet, he was surprised by Nixon's appellation. Outside of the United States, people didn't talk that much about greatness or define symbolic exemplars as the very greatest. Pelé didn't reply. Instead, he handed Nixon an old newspaper from São Paulo that reported on an earlier meeting between the pair and hurried through that awkward second encounter.[1]

Pelé was right. Over the course of the twentieth century, Americans were overeager to engage in conversations that designated "great people." They were particularly poised to elevate individuals to the ranks of the "greatest of all time." They liked that greatness was indexical, that there was no absolute definition of greatness; that it changed with the ebbs and flows of American cultural sensibilities.

This book tells a history that reads in between the lines of "greatness" discourse. It's not an encyclopedia that selects areas of expertise and decides who is the greatest of all time. There are plenty of heavy tomes that set out to do this, from modern music to oratory excellence.[2] Some

[1] See Michael Beschloss, "A Quick and Awkward Meeting between a President and Pelé," *New York Times*, June 28, 2014, D5; and Pelé and Brian Winter, *Why Soccer Matters* (New York: Celebra, 2014), 225.

[2] See, for example, Fred Bronson, *The Billboard Book of Number One Hits* (New York: Billboard Publications, 1992); and Stephen E. Lucas and Martin J. Medhurst, *Words of a Century: The Top 100 American Speeches, 1900–1999* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

rank the "greats" of a stated field using popular polls or by tabulating the results of a survey submitted to so-called experts. More recent iterations use math and machine learning to settle longstanding greatness debates.[3] Withal, the unsettled arguments about the greatest cartoon character, parish preacher, economist, statistician, and action hero of all time will not be decided in these pages.[4]

To borrow from the essayist Raymond Carver, this book explores what Americans talk about when they talk about greatness. These are coded conversations. The history of greatness discourse provides a uniquely American language for participants to discuss their "ideal" values and make meaning of their personal lives. The many incarnations and insinuations of "greatness" suggest more about those carrying on the conversation than it does about the famous people under discussion. An argument for Abraham Lincoln or, later on, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, over George Washington as America's greatest statesman says as much about the interlocuter as it does about the legacies of former US presidents. Making a case for the Beatles, Michael Jordan, or Mickey Mouse involves the prioritizations of politics and perspectives. The same goes for selecting between Jane Addams versus Eleanor Roosevelt or whether Thomas Edison, the so-called greatest inventor of all time, possessed a station or wisdom to pontificate about God or another nonscientific area. The persistence of Henry Ford as a great American despite his toxic antisemitism offers another layer to this historical phenomenon, one that Ford would, as was his wont, no doubt, describe as "bunk."

Why did Americans take to greatness? It helped that the term defied discrete definition. "Greatness," and therefore someone deemed "the greatest," is not measured by a uniform standard. To the contrary, the calculus of greatness varied by time and place. The only constant (excepting the 1950s) was that greatness, intuitive to Americans' collective understanding, was inextricably tied to change. Americans fawned over changemakers, social disrupters with designs to transform the status quo. This contrasted with more incorrigible forces in Europe

[3] See Steven Skiena and Charles B. Ward, *Who's Bigger: Where Historical Figures Really Rank* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[4] Some useful citations on these matters include Bill Diamond, "Things Really Hopping at 'Roger Rabbit' Premiere," *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 1988, 3; "The World's Greatest Orator to Speak," *Chicago Defender*, September 11, 1915, 3; A. K. McClure, "Tom Corwin, the Greatest Orator," *Nashville American*, November 17, 1901, 26A; "Lincoln Greatest Orator," *Washington Post*, November 7, 1913, 2; "Greatest Orator of United States," *Boston Globe*, April 3, 1912, 10; "Jesus, Greatest Orator, to be Rev. Sanders Subject," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 7, 1951, 2.

that discouraged change in favor of established traditions and status. Celebrating change was also important for a liberal American spirit to distance itself from a pernicious force that had just migrated to its shores from Europe. Eugenics was steeped in people's incapacity to change. Sir Francis Galton, the forefather of the movement, had singled out America's unexceptional state as proof that people cannot deviate all that far from their genetic code. Galton surmised that since the United States was formed by, according to his judgment, the lowest crust of European life, its current stock lacked the biological wherewithal to elevate to Europe's high cultural standards.

It took a very long time for Europe to consider the American standards of greatness, and even then, critics observed that celebrants of greatness on the Continent had missed the point. In 2002, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) aired the TV show *100 Greatest Britons*, based on a poll of the British people. Such programs were commonplace in the United States but in the UK the BBC's two seasons of indigenous greatness rankings was unusual and fascinated viewers. The show also called for public comment. Critics quipped that the BBC's poll merely proved that the nation was still overly focused on royals and that the shadow of Galton's chauvinism had darkened any potential light to illuminate "poets, artists and women [who were] woefully under-represented."[5] Three years later, the TV channel France 2 debuted *Le plus grand Français de tous les temps* (*The Greatest Frenchmen of All Time*), a show that apparently "baffled" viewers.[6] The French press blasted their surveyed compatriots for a very poor sense of French history; lack of appreciation for women and feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, who was left off the list; and generally resolved that "Nous voilà avec un sondage sympathique et idiot," that the public television venture had resulted in a "nice and idiotic survey."[7] Hence, my focus on the United States. Here, the History Channel's *Greatest of All-Time* series, hosted by football legend Payton Manning, debuted in 2023 to rave reviews.[8]

Once braided together and placed into historical context, the stories shared in these chapters suggest something, well, deeper. The historian David Hackett Fischer called the phenomenon "Deep Change."

[5] Matt Wells, "The 100 Greatest Britons," *Guardian*, August 22, 2002, 1. See also Nicola Methven, "The 100 Greatest Britons, but Why Are They All White?" *Daily Mirror*, August 22, 2002, 11.
[6] Jon Henley, "French Baffled by List of National Heroes," *Guardian*, March 16, 2005, 13.
[7] "Grands hommes et petits sondages," *Le Monde*, April 19, 2005, 15.
[8] See "Today's Picks," *Newsday*, February 27, 2023, 16.

In the language of political science, Fischer explained his phrase as a "change in the structure of change itself." In mathematical terms, "deep change is the second derivative. It may be calculated as a rate of change in rates of change."[9] In somewhat plainer parlance, I detect that there's something afoot, historically speaking, when Charles Lindbergh, Charlie Chaplin, and Mickey Mouse are all demoted from their high stations around the start of World War II. There's a change regime in motion as America suddenly takes unparalleled interest in the greatness of Babe Ruth and the Roosevelts, and perhaps that untold history suggests something even more important for how Americans think about change and greatness in the postwar 1950s. The same is the case for a historical coupling the Beatles with Muhammad Ali to throw new light on the countercultural 1960s.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein taught that words carry significant value.[10] Beginning at the start of the twentieth century, Americans found value in "greatness" because they intuited a corresponding devaluation in fame. The rise of new technologies enhanced media, permitting publishers to print images in their newspapers. Advances in radio science broadcasted music and speech to a widening public audience. Suddenly, a larger swath of people became better known and, therefore, more famous. In economic terms, Americans detected a fame inflation and required a new currency to transact meaning in their conversations about the influential people they held up on a pedestal. The reason they cared so much about that pedestal in the first place is the subject of this book. Their choice of a new coveted commodity, "greatness" and those deemed "the greatest," is the lens to see and, ultimately, to understand their thinking. The wide reach of this coded language extended to feelings about race and gender, as I will show through prejudices of Jimmy Cannon to accept the greatness of Muhammad Ali and the contentious deliberations at Bryn Mawr College to award the M. Carey Thomas Prize to a most "eminent woman."

[9] See David Hackett Fischer, *The Great Wave: Price Revolutions and the Rhythm of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), xv. See also, David Hackett Fischer, *Growing Old in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1878), 100–101; and David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 449; and in Fischer's student, Lincoln A. Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 9.

[10] See, for example, Theodore Redpath, "Wittgenstein and Ethics," in *Philosophy and Language*, eds. Alice Ambrose and Morris Lazerowitz (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1972), 95–119.

The erasure of women and people of color (and Jews, according to some bigoted critics who sought to eliminate Albert Einstein) from the ranks of greatness is an important subject taken up in these pages. In addition to my treatment of Muhammad Ali, I have selected the cases of Eleanor Roosevelt and Michael Jordan to highlight the American limitations of greatness discourse and its implications for how the public has narrowly imagined its great symbolic exemplars. Eleanor Roosevelt's climb to the high station of greatness in the 1950s required that she shed her association with feminism and restyle herself as a loyal wife (turned widow) and doting grandmother. In the case of Jordan, I examine how basketball aficionados worried that the famous men who flourished in the National Basketball Association (NBA) after Jordan's (first) retirement in 1993 were not fit to inherit Jordan's throne. The potential heirs to the clean-cut "Air Jordan" were raised in a generation of rap music and dreadlocks – and therefore deemed unbecoming of a sport league that had overcome an epoch of rampant drug use by elevating the likes of Magic Johnson, Larry Bird, and Jordan. Pundits seized on the light-skinned, piano-playing, Duke-educated Grant Hill as the worthiest successor to Jordan, despite an ample roster of more famous and, frankly, much more dominant basketball players.

Fame wasn't immediately and summarily discarded. Being famous was often a prerequisite for becoming the greatest. Some believed that the greatness (or lack thereof) of someone's personality could be approximated by fame. In 1932, for example, Mark May of Yale University published a paper that postulated that personality could be evaluated by the "responses made by others to the individual." Or, as May put it a sentence later, personality ought to be measured by someone's "popularity."[11]

May's take on personality stuck, at least for a short while. Four years after May first wrote on the subject, Henry Link, a psychologist and self-help philosopher, judged there was "general agreement" about May's assigned correlation between personality and popularity. An "unattractive boy" who impresses friends through masterful tennis skill or a "homely girl" who gains renown after an exemplary piano recital had, suggested Link, accrued more personality by "bringing friends."[12] It didn't take all that long for the Harvard psychologist Gordon Allport to

[11] Mark A. May, "The Foundations of Personality," in *Psychology at Work*, ed. Paul S. Achilles (New York: Whittlesey House, 1932), 83.
[12] Henry C. Link, *The Return to Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), 89–90.

point out the fallacy, that personality could not be mistaken for a popularity contest. "A queen of the movies seen by millions of people on the screen," wrote Allport, "would have incomparably 'more' personality than a complex and tortured poet dwelling in attic obscurity."[13] Yet, it betokened the odd predicament that reputable researchers clung to the challenge of parsing "greatness" from "fame." Beginning with the troubling posthumous "life" of Edgar Allan Poe, fame remains a part of this book, even as I do my very best to isolate one term from the other.

The scholarly literature on "fame" is significant. It helped develop this book's argument and framed its chapters – even as I allow the storytelling to control the tempo of this work. In American Studies, researchers – perhaps not so different from the public – are captivated by the circumstances that surround celebrities. To borrow from terms deployed by the noted film expert, Richard Dyer, the piles of books and journal articles on the subject tend to center on the "commodification" of the "idealized" icons manufactured by famous people and the attendant media and fans.[14] Fame, thus, has value and possesses measurable influence and power in daily life.

The increased attention paid to celebrity culture did much to revive interest in Leo Löwenthal, a member of the Frankfurt School. Löwenthal was part of a circle of scholars that included the likes of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Max Horkheimer. These intellectuals flourished during the interwar period and employed critical theory in a host of disciplines. Löwenthal's area was communication and social thought, with a rather middlebrow interest in popular culture and media technologies.[15]

Löwenthal aimed to pave inroads in New York, where he fled to escape Nazi Germany on the eve of World War II. In the United States, Löwenthal observed how his new neighbors idolized famous people. In step with the Frankfurt School that demanded consideration of historical and political context, Löwenthal had hoped to show his American colleagues how the biographies and magazines that their indigenous media machines used to depict "successful people" were deeply indebted to "historical processes."[16] He was rather nonplussed, therefore, that his readers – ensconced, in Löwenthal's view in a "empiricist-positivist"

[13] Gordon W. Allport, *Personality: A Psychological Interpretation* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1937), 41.
[14] See Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 2–11.
[15] Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 29–45.
[16] Leo Löwenthal, *Literature and Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1984), 207.

point of view that discounted external forces – that did not seem to care all that much about context.[17] Löwenthal's work was not all that much consulted until scholars started to consider "celebrity."[18]

This book answers a question unanswered by Löwenthal, perhaps because it was not discernable when he conducted his research in the 1940s. Back then, Löwenthal tabulated and aggregated the biographical articles that had appeared in *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post* since the turn of the century. He was astounded that the percentage of stories about famous people in the entertainment sector – and mostly women and men detached from what Löwenthal classified as "entertainers from serious arts" – had become the dominant proportion of biographical pieces in these magazines. How did this come to pass?

Löwenthal downplayed the fact that famous people associated with "Political life" and the area of "Business and Professional" no longer held the pole position in these journals. However, articles about them had increased, too. From 1901 to 1914, Löwenthal counted about sixteen articles per year about statesmen and politicians and ten that centered on businessmen and high-ranking professionals. These articles comprised three-quarters of all published biographies in these two important magazines. In 1941, the same journals published thirty-one articles about people in the political sector and twenty-five that concerned well-known figures in the business and professional ranks. Löwenthal focused his attention on the fifty-five pieces on entertainers, the so-called idols of consumption, leisure moguls, that made up more than half of all published biographical articles. Yet, it seems to me noteworthy that the total number of all human interest stories on famous people had increased, albeit at a disproportionate scale.[19]

In truth, Löwenthal's math suggests that America had become deeply invested in consuming information about celebrities, craving further access to these famous people far beyond what radio, cinemas, and, in time, television could provide to them. Yet, the influence of any one of these unprecedented number of celebrities had decreased. No longer could a Mary Pickford, Humphrey Bogart, or, for that matter, Henry Ford, hold, by themselves, a dominant market share of cultural

[17] See Leo Löwenthal, *Critical Theory and Frankfurt Theorists: Lectures, Correspondence, Conversations* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1989), 234.
[18] See Hanno Hardt, "The Legacy of Leo Löwenthal: Culture and Communication," *Journal of Communication* 41 (September 1991): 60–85.
[19] Leo Löwenthal, "Biographies in Popular Magazines," in *Radio Research, 1942–1943*, eds. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton (New York: Arno Press, 1979), 509–11.

currency in the United States. It was, then, a case of fame inflation. That Americans sought a new taxonomy to describe cultural powerbrokers is evident from a national survey conducted concurrent to Löwenthal's research. It reported that when asked to "name two or three living Americans you would really call great," those polled were far more likely to rate Franklin Roosevelt, Douglas MacArthur, or James Doolittle than Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio, or a Tinseltown movie star.[20] Amid the run on celebrity and fame, "greatness" emerged as a new commodity packed with Wittgensteinian value. Greatness was traded in a variety of denominations and the market for great men (and eventually women) fluctuated based on historical context, as taught to us by Leo Löwenthal's Frankfurt School.

Löwenthal's ideas inform these pages, even as I examine greatness as a commodified contrast to "fame." This book is the flipside of his pioneering work on fame. I draw from Löwenthal's well-known distinction between "idols of production" ("heroes" who led a "productive life") and the "idols of consumption" ("magazine heroes" famous for leisure activities) that emerged in the post-Depression period. In the chapters that follow, I analyze the shift and use it to explain how the metrics of American greatness had changed, quite drastically. Likewise, scholars such as David Marshall, Chris Rojek, Karen Sternheimer have published books in Media Studies which build on Löwenthal's arguments to examine how fame is negotiated by journalists in a way that detaches the image of celebrities from the personal lives of those well-known women and men. The idea of Taylor Swift is perhaps disconnected from the daily life of that famous music performer. By contrast, the arbiters (which is all of us) of American greatness are discombobulated by such dissonance. The perception of great people and their personal lives and decisions are rarely decoupled. Perceived authenticity and sincerity function as key attributes in the formulation of greatness; another critical differentiation between the present book and aligned work on Fame Studies.

This book is both lively and learned. The scholarly scaffolding is crucial for all that it helps with comparisons and contrasts. I am indebted to these scholars for providing frameworks that inform "achieved" versus "attributed" renown, as well as the rise and fall of the American "cult of veneration," even as I refocus my lens on "greatness" and take my cue from Leo Löwenthal's call to remain most mindful to the historical circumstances and forces that determined significant change in

[20] "The Fortune Survey," *Fortune* 26 (November 1942): 14.

American culture.[21] Scholars, I hope, will appreciate this useful framing as much as other curious readers will value the unusual tales of "great" people (and an animated rodent) that follow.

This book isn't exhaustive. Its goal is to spur thought, and perhaps add to the terrific literature on reception history that draws from the biographer Carl Van Doren's insight about Benjamin Franklin, that "the death of a great man begins another history, of his continuing influence, his changing renown, the legend which takes the place of fact."[22] Biographies of varying qualities directed me to primary sources and archival data to add new information to our collective understanding of so-described great individuals. In keeping with this book's big idea, and in concert with Michael Oriard's important book on media and historical reception, I often learned much more about the people who wrote about the greatests of all time.[23] My hope is that this book will shed light on the way Americans, perhaps without realizing it, have sanctified the mundane through their oft-tired debates about their favorite Hollywood actress or legendary football star. The reader will be the judge of whether the succeeding chapters provide historical antecedents to Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" motto, and why his opponents took exception to Trump's use of the phrase as opposed to when Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton had deployed a similar incarnation.[24] I will happily permit others to tackle that subject. I'll also defer to others whether there's attendant learning to be applied to current discussions on the appropriateness to maintain statues and monuments memorializing problematic American figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Woodrow Wilson whose "great" lives no longer measure up to contemporary expectations. These are the most recent examples of the contested contours of a most important word in the American cultural lexicon. It invites us to consider what Americans are truly talking about when they talk about greatness.

[21] Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Hearst's International Library Co., 1915), 63–68.

[22] Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Viking Press, 1938), 781. In addition to the many reception histories directly cited in the subsequent chapters, I learned much from John Rodden, *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St. George' Orwell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Robert E. Kapsis, *Hitchcock: The Making of a Reputation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[23] See Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

[24] See Karen Tumulty, "How Trump Came Up with 'Make America Great Again,'" *Washington Post*, January 20, 2017, H3.

1

The Economics of American Greatness

Chancellor Henry Mitchell MacCracken of New York University established the Hall of Fame of Great Americans in 1900. This was a peculiar name for the first Hall of Fame formed in the United States. MacCracken tended to conflate "greatness" with "fame." It had been more forgivable to confuse the terms in his youth since the United States had possessed an ample supply of great men, mostly famous patriots and statesmen, and there was nothing anyone else engaged in another profession could do to manufacture similar quantities of fame. MacCracken had come of age in Antebellum America, an epoch marked by an impulse to valorize the founders of the Republic who had died a generation earlier.[1] The very same spirit washed over men of letters. That "Great Man" fascination, for instance, occupied the writings of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Lives of great men all remind us," wrote Longfellow, "we can make our lives sublime." Emerson wrote a book on Representative Men on the presumption that it was "natural to believe in great men."[2]

As a young man in Oxford, Ohio, Henry MacCracken was raised in this creed of Great Men; Longfellow's prose made an indelible impression on MacCracken as a small child. His father, John Steele MacCracken,

[1] See Douglas Adair, *Fame and the Founding Fathers*, ed. Trevor Colbourn (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 3–26; Drew R. McCoy, *The Last of the Fathers: James Madison and the Republican Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 171–216. See also Harlow Giles Unger, *The Last Founding Father: James Monroe and the Nation's Call to Greatness* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010).

[2] Peter H. Gibbon, *A Call to Heroism: Renewing America's Vision of Greatness* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2022), 18–28.