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Charles A. Lindbergh. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)
Parade procession for Charles Lindbergh in New York City.
(© Bettmann/Corbis)
THE MEANINGS OF LINDBERGH: The response to Charles Lindbergh's solo flight from New York to Paris illustrates the ambiguity Americans felt about their nation. As an individual, Lindbergh represented the best nineteenth-century Victorian values of self-sufficiency, courage, and determination, while his achievement represented the pinnacle of modern, cooperative, industrial society. His popularity rested on his ability to represent conflicting visions of America simultaneously. Even though Lindbergh was seen as an extraordinary individual, his achievement brought unity to a diverse America. He stood for the individual as well as for society as a whole.

In the 1920s Americans faced a perplexing world. While many Americans still believed in the Victorian values of modesty, hard work, and respect for tradition, status, and place, others defiantly broke from convention in their work and personal lives and in their actions and words. Most Americans searched for a compromise between the world they knew and the world they would come to know, not yet ready to fully disengage from the past or to fully embrace the future. While this is true of every historical period, the difference between past and future in 1920s America seems particularly acute, especially for those who lived through it. People sought to reconcile their traditions and values with changes in society, the economy, politics, technology, and culture. This search did not always end successfully. Indeed, although the search to understand one's time never really ends, in most periods there is a chance of finding a comfortable middle ground between past and future. But between the end of the Great War and the start of the Great Depression, Americans found it hard to find an accommodation between tradition and change. No single event, such as a war or depression, focused the nation's attention and presented definitive options for the future (winning the war, ending the depression). As a result, people individually and in small groups sought their own middle ground, their own vision of what America should be, often dependent on what they assumed America had been. They searched for answers in technology, in social justice, in feminism, in migration, in sensationalism, and in such leisure activities as collegiate and professional sports, motion pictures, jazz music, and radio. What they found was
modern America, a country not completely new, but one with a very
different appearance, sound, and feel.

Some events transcended the differences between past and present
and as a result became widely celebrated by all Americans. One single
act, flying nonstop from New York to Paris, made Charles Lindbergh
the most celebrated man in the country, and indeed, the world. In his
single-engine plane the Spirit of St. Louis, he traversed the Atlantic
Ocean in thirty-three and a half hours, landing at Le Bourget airfield
outside Paris on May 21, 1927. Others had attempted or were in the
process of attempting the flight. Such well-known aviators as Com-
mander Richard E. Byrd, who had earlier made headlines flying over
the North Pole, assembled and trained crews in large multiengine
planes in preparation for the crossing. Flight-endurance record-holder
Clarence Chamberlin, American Legion–supported Commander Noel
Davis, and Great War flying ace René Fonck from France, as well as
Byrd, all encountered difficulties in their attempts. Both Byrd’s and
Chamberlin’s teams experienced accidents during test flights and
training; Davis and copilot Stanton Wooster were both killed during
their final test flight. Two members of Fonck’s crew also perished as
the tri-engine biplane carrying them crashed and exploded taking off
for France from Roosevelt Field in New York. Two other French pilots,
Charles Nungesser and François Coli, successfully departed Le Bourget
on May 8, 1927, but were never seen again after flying past the French
coast out over the Atlantic. Six aviators had died in the attempt to win
a $25,000 prize established in 1919 by French-American hotel owner
Raymond Orteig for the first nonstop flight between Paris and New
York.

Each participant in the race for the Orteig Prize was a veteran flyer
and was financially supported by wealthy organizations and airplane
manufacturers, except for Lindbergh. Lindbergh was the only contest-
ant to use a single-engine plane, and the only one to forgo both the
use of radio communications and a copilot to share flying time during
the day-and-a-half-long flight. Lindbergh was also an unknown, not
just to the public but to many in the aviation establishment. Younger
than the rest of the field, Lindbergh had not flown in the Great War,
nor had he established any records or pioneering feats; he was, in fact,
a working pilot delivering air mail. His plane, the Spirit of St. Louis
(named in honor of the group of St. Louis businessmen who backed Lindbergh), was made by Ryan Aircraft, a relatively unknown manufacturer in San Diego, and consisted almost exclusively of a cockpit surrounded by fuel tanks with an engine in front. Because of the need for fuel and the demands of aerodynamics, a tank was placed directly in front of the cockpit, obscuring any forward vision. Lindbergh could not sleep, nor could he contact anyone during his flight. That Lindbergh accomplished the flight is remarkable, especially given the way he accomplished it.

When Lindbergh landed at Le Bourget, he encountered a mob of thousands gathered to witness his historic achievement. Completely underestimating the impact of his undertaking, he flew past the field, which was lit with automobile headlights, since he had expected to see a darkened airfield unaware of his arrival. He carried on his person letters of introduction to guard against French authorities’ mistaking him for an antagonist. Indeed, Lindbergh assumed that the French public and administration would be indifferent or even hostile to him for accomplishing a task that had claimed the lives of two of their countrymen. He appeared before the public not as a brash, aggressive American full of bravado, arrogance, and superiority but, rather, as a humble, innocent young man whose naiveté was in part responsible for his success. His diffidence and humility endeared Lindbergh to the French and to the public worldwide, but it was especially important to Lindbergh’s own countrymen, who saw in him the best of the American past alongside the best of the American future.

“It is a long flight from New York to Paris;” wrote John W. Ward in his seminal 1958 essay “The Meaning of Lindbergh’s Flight”; “it is a still longer flight from the fact of Lindbergh’s achievement to the burden imposed upon it by the imagination of his time. But it is in that further flight that lies the full meaning of Lindbergh.” Ward explored the ambiguity, mainly unnoticed at the time, with which Americans celebrated Lindbergh’s flight. Accounts in newspapers, in magazines, and on newsreels, not to mention in poetry, drama, and song, primarily emphasized the singular nature of the Atlantic crossing. These accounts compared Lindbergh to heroes of the past, such as Christopher Columbus and the pioneer settlers of the American West. In many ways, Lindbergh represented for Americans those traits that they
treasured as being historically and characteristically American: individuality, courage, and self-sufficiency, all traits associated with the past. But included in these celebrations of the American past were impressive visions of the future hinted at in Lindbergh’s success. The potential of air travel, the first major advance in overseas mobility since the steamship and a significant advance over train and automobile travel, sparked the interest of the public and gave a boost to a developing airline industry. But the flight represented more than just potential; it was the culmination of American industry, engineering, and financial investment. Only a highly organized and industrialized society could produce a plane capable of such a feat. Not only the research, both theoretical and practical, but also the way the plane was built and the flight was funded and coordinated all illustrated to Americans and the world the success of the American economy and society. Lindbergh was able to draw on the vision of businessmen who saw his attempt as a way to put St. Louis on the map as an aviation center (both industrially and geographically) for the country, and on the knowledge of engineers and engine mechanics, aircraft designers, flight instructors, and meteorologists. News of the flight spread across the nation and the world via the medium of the day, the radio. Newspaper accounts and photographs were readily accessible within hours of Lindbergh’s landing, and once in Paris, Lindbergh was able to telephone across the Atlantic, via London, to talk to his mother and let her know that all was well. The vast network of individuals involved in completing and reporting this event illustrated the success of American industry, organization, and society. While Lindbergh, as a traditional American hero, was exceptional enough to perform such a feat, his exceptionalism, many believed, was a product of a capitalist and democratic America.

Lindbergh, the *Spirit of St. Louis*, and the trans-Atlantic flight were more than a person, a machine, and an event. They were each symbols of the age, as well as important symbols of the past and future. For Americans in 1927, Lindbergh embodied the best American virtues and values, whether individuality, self-reliance, and courage, or cooperation and a belief in progress and technology. Lindbergh could represent each of these values, depending on which part of his story one chose to focus on: the solo flight; the pioneering aspect of being the
first to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles; the danger involved, as evidenced by earlier failed attempts at the flight; the hundreds of technicians, machinists, engineers, mechanics, pilots, navigators, and so on who played important roles in making Lindbergh’s flight possible; or the technology of aerodynamics and navigation that enabled Lindbergh to fly. Lindbergh’s flight was the symbolic achievement of the age because it could encompass the conflicting views that Americans held about the world, their nation, and themselves. While Lindbergh’s achievement became all things to all people, bringing Americans of all ages, classes, races, and genders together in national celebration, it also highlights the cultural divide between the Protestant work ethic of Victorian America and the therapeutic consumer ethic of modern society. Lindbergh’s flight was almost unique in its ability to occupy the comfortable middle ground between past and present. Other events were not so able to unify Americans; rather, they tended to reinforce and even worsen conflicts within society. Many of those events happened in the same year Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic Ocean, 1927.

The events of 1927 illustrate the often awkward ways Americans sought to come to terms with changes in American life, from developments in and increased accessibility to technology, to natural disasters like the Mississippi River flood, to such political and social changes as women’s forays into the electorate and African Americans’ migration from the rural South to the urban North. Americans also dealt with the development of a mediated culture in the tabloid press, radio, and motion pictures, which in turn created a celebrity culture of not only movie stars, radio personalities, and sports heroes but infamous criminals and other notorious news makers. Those uncomfortable with the changes occurring in American society sought to gain some control over them by incorporating some aspects and rejecting others; those responsible for the changes sought to gain respect and wealth without completely abandoning traditional values. Many Americans found themselves caught in between the two extremes and pulled in both directions. How one reacted to these changes depended on a variety of factors such as age, race and ethnicity, gender, region, occupation, religion, education, and wealth, to name just a few. Americans and American culture were not homogeneous in the 1920s, and the mass
appeal enjoyed by such celebrities as Lindbergh, baseball player Babe Ruth, and movie star Clara Bow depended on Americans’ ability to interpret those celebrities’ achievements according to their own individual values. Not all events and celebrities of 1927 were amenable to conflicting interpretations, and accepting change often meant letting go of the past. How much were Americans willing to give up in order to get the new and modern? There was no single answer for Americans in 1927.

Describing the ways Americans searched for a comfortable middle ground between past and future is not an easy task, since it necessarily relies on an attention to detail and specifics while at the same time requiring discussion of a broad range of topics. Simultaneously keeping a narrow focus and presenting the larger picture is achieved best by looking at many different events of a single year rather than looking at well-known examples from throughout the decade. This narrow focus allows for a deeper analysis of the events, of their meaning and significance, and draws attention to the roles of individuals instead of to larger historical trends, forces, and ideas. While selectively choosing events from throughout the decade would make for a more clearly presented argument about the conflicts, contradictions, and varieties of ideas and events necessary to an understanding of modern America’s development, looking at the events of 1927 lets the process of a developing modern America unfold with the same ambiguity and disjunction that people experienced at the time. An onslaught of events, both positive and negative, overwhelmed Americans in 1927, and they sought to make sense of them much in the same manner as I seek to make sense of the year’s events. The focus on a single year allows for a synthesis of historical approaches as political, economic, and social histories illuminate the broader cultural history of the period. Film studies, literary analysis, media studies, sociology, musicology, and cultural theory all help inform this study, emphasizing the description of events, within their context, in order to illustrate their significance in understanding modern American history. Americans in 1927 were particularly focused on cultural issues rather than on specifically political, economic, or foreign policy issues, and therefore the year is ideally suited to describing the development of modern American culture. America did not become modern in 1927; no single year was the year...
America became modern. The variety of people and events in 1927—from the celebrated, like Lindbergh, Herbert Hoover, and Babe Ruth, to the derided, like convicted and executed murderers Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray; from the disastrous, like the Mississippi River flood and the flawed trial for anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, and the hopeful, like the success of the sound film The Jazz Singer—all illustrate the variety of experiences in American life and how Americans tried to make sense of those people and events and to determine what they meant, for better or worse. This is not to say that 1927 is the only year for which this argument could be made, but it is the best year with which to make this argument. While other years may have been better to illuminate an aspect of modern America (immigration reform in 1924, fundamentalism in 1925, or economic instability in 1929), 1927 is the best year to discuss a wider variety of events and ideas. Even though Lindbergh's achievement was the biggest story of the year, it did not influence every other event of the year, as the aftermath of the Great War had dominated the early part of the decade and economic concerns would dominate the final years of the decade.

Earlier studies have also selected 1927 as an important year in the decade, but these works have followed the popular historiographical trend of viewing the 1920s as primarily an age of frivolity and excess. Allen Churchill's The Year the World Went Mad (1960) refers to 1927 as the year “the Era of Wonderful Nonsense reached its peak” and focuses each chapter on a big news story from the year, in roughly chronological order and with no analysis of each event. Churchill delights in the extreme and the wacky as he describes divorce and murder trials, Lindbergh's flight, the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, and the year in sports, without examining the meaning these events held for Americans. Likewise, Gerald Leinwald's 1927: High Tide of the Twenties (2001) claims that “like a great wine, 1927 was a vintage year,” as he focuses on twelve major events of the year, one in each month. Like Churchill, Leinwald refrains from analyzing or explaining the significance of these events beyond labeling something as new, record-breaking, or now obsolete. Both studies fit alongside such broader studies of the 1920s as Frederick Lewis Allen's Only Yesterday (1931), the model on which much of 1920s historiography has been based, and Nathan Miller’s New World Coming (2003), which seeks to
build on Allen’s narrative and uses the life of F. Scott Fitzgerald as its narrative thread. These works are primarily descriptive and do not seek to explain how these events came to be or what meaning they hold for their readers besides entertainment.\textsuperscript{2}

Much closer to my approach are works by such historians as Lynn Dumenil, whose *The Modern Temper* (1995) takes a thematic approach to the decade, arguing that despite the continuities to be found with political, social, economic, and cultural trends from before the Great War, the 1920s still represent a distinctively “modern” age. While I agree with Dumenil, I think the issue is not when the United States became modern but, rather, how the ideas of the modern world came to be accepted, and in part rejected, by various Americans.\textsuperscript{3} The focus on a single year allows for a fuller explication of process over description. How Americans dealt with the modern is more telling than when the country became modern. Closer still to my interpretation is Roderick Nash’s *The Nervous Generation* (1970), in which he argues that the 1920s were more than the extremes “of resigned cynicism and happy reveling” characterized in such works as Allen’s *Only Yesterday* and most 1920s historiography. He describes the post–World War I generation as “nervous,” searching for clarity in the changes they were experiencing, but he limits his study to intellectuals and how they expressed their nervousness. Although he does engage popular culture, he does not really view American culture beyond the minds of intellectuals.\textsuperscript{4} Paul Carter has also explored the conflicts evident during the decade in his short work *The Twenties in America* (1968), in which he describes these conflicts using three distinct dichotomies, characterized as bohemians versus consumers, Calvin Coolidge versus Ernest Hemingway, and town versus country. In explaining these conflicts, he does suggest that there were not two clearly defined sides to each debate but, rather, multiple shades of gray. In describing the faith many had in progress versus tradition, Carter notes, “the more one probes into attitudes towards progress during the Twenties, the more these attitudes dissolve into ambivalence.”\textsuperscript{5} It is this ambivalence that I seek to describe and explain. Other short works that have touched on these same ideas in different forms are Lawrence Levine’s “Progress and Nostalgia” and Warren Susman’s “Culture and Civilization” and “Culture Heroes.”\textsuperscript{6} All three essays raise the specter of conflict, ten-
sion, and ambiguity in the decade; I seek to extend and deepen their work.

Studies looking at a single issue or limiting their scope regionally have also interpreted the Twenties as a transitional period between Victorianism and modernism. Roland Marchand on advertising, Lewis A. Erenberg on New York nightlife, Elaine Tyler May on marriage, Charles L. Ponce de Leon on celebrity, Nathan Irvin Huggins on Harlem, and Lary May on the movie industry are a few of the studies that highlight many of the same ideas about the 1920s that I seek to explicate. Each has provided a necessary aspect to the larger synthesis I present. By looking at the events of a single year, the continuities and conflicts of American society stand out not only because of the events and people themselves, but because of the connections with other events and people as well. This approach allows for an examination of how a wide variety of Americans searched for a comfortable middle ground in modern America. Modern America is not so much a definable historical period as it is a set of ideas and values that emerged to compete with older sets of values (Puritan, Protestant, pioneer, Victorian). And just as Victorian sensibilities in America did not completely replace older Puritan ideas, neither did modern ideas replace Victorian ones; rather, they coexisted, sometimes comfortably, most times not. I use both the phrase “modern America” and the term “modernity” to refer to a combination of industrial modernization (as characterized by a corporate-dominated and consumer-driven economy), urbanization, cultural modernism (as represented by modernist approaches to literature, art, architecture, and music), and the development of a widely accessible popular culture. Each of these factors influenced the others, and none can be understood on its own. Together they brought about the changes that Americans had to deal with, cope with, and understand. The 1920s, and 1927 in particular, illustrate the discomfort that came from the search for understanding. What follows is an attempt to describe and explain the ways various Americans faced their present, based on their understanding of the past and vision of the future.

The goal of understanding how people came to grips with modern America does not lend itself to a chronological approach or to a traditional narrative structure. Instead, I have focused on four separate,
but not mutually exclusive, agendas in which Americans engaged: mastery, equality, notoriety, and respectability. In their search for modern America, many people sought mastery over aspects of their lives, whether that meant mastery of industry, as in the case of Henry Ford; the expression of machine-age ideals, as in the case of the precisionist artists; or an understanding of such current events as the Sacco and Vanzetti execution, of the debate over contemporary religion, or of the past sought for by novelists and historians. All in their own ways sought mastery over and comprehension of their world as a way to understand modern America.

Others searched for equality in modern times. Women became the most visible symbol of change during the 1920s, not only in political and economic power but also in appearance and actions. Clara Bow exemplified the “new” woman and was both admired and scorned for it. Theatrical personalities, such as Texas Guinan, and performances, such as the musical *Show Boat*, illustrate the conflicted attitudes many had toward women. Seeking much more basic aspects of equality, African Americans, especially those in the flood-ravaged Mississippi delta, sought equal treatment and a better life. Through organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Colored Advisory Commission, created in the wake of mounting criticism of discrimination in the flood-relief efforts, African Americans demanded fair treatment and an end to an economic system that held many in a condition of peonage.

Those less concerned with mastery or equality just wanted to be famous, whether for positive contributions or notorious reasons. Politicians like Herbert Hoover, true-crime figures such as Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray, and even professional and collegiate athletes saw any publicity as a benefit to their careers and lives. Public relations, crime reporting, and sports writing all became industries whose main goals were not to celebrate extraordinary achievement but, rather, to sell a product, be it a politician, newspapers, or footballs.

Those mainly in the newer entertainment professions of motion pictures, jazz music, and radio sought ways for their respective industries to gain respect in a society inundated with leisure pursuits and entertainments but still deeply conflicted about their importance in American culture. Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks epitomized the
wholesome Hollywood couple; African American artists and intellectuals capitalized on the popularity of jazz music and black culture to stage the Harlem Renaissance. White entertainers, like Paul White- man, sought to legitimize jazz by “elevating” it to the level of classical music, as radio sought to legitimize its role in American society by proclaiming its function as an educational and nationalizing force. Each of these people found ways to find meaning and understanding in the numerous changes occurring around them, and while they did not all succeed in finding success or satisfaction, they all contributed to what we know as modern America and the development of American culture.

Once again, Charles Lindbergh illustrates the way a single event could embody each of these agendas. Lindbergh’s flight demonstrated mastery over what many believed was an unobtainable goal. It illustrated the equality—some may say even superiority—of American enterprise and industry, as it made Lindbergh a celebrity both at home and abroad, and the event brought a measure of respectability to aviation, while not necessarily infringing on the traditional values of some Americans or the more modern values of others. The flight celebrated the triumph of both traditional and modern values and emphasized the ambiguity that characterizes modern American culture. But Lindbergh’s flight is merely the most famous of events in 1927 that help explain American culture in all of its ambiguity. There are many more.