

# Charles A. Lindbergh — Man, Mason, American

by  
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## Origins

The Mississippi River begins its 1700-mile course to the sea at Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota as a modest stream one can jump or wade across. In its journey from Nordic Minnesota to French New Orleans, the Mississippi takes on many characters. In some places it cascades over falls or churns between steep banks. Elsewhere, it broadens out to form the placid Lake Pepin or merges with other great rivers — the St. Croix, the Ohio, the Missouri — to create giant avenues of commerce. As Mark Twain recognized and celebrated in much of his writing, the Mississippi, in all its diversity, does much to reflect or even create the character of the American heartland. Although initially an obstruction to the westward migration, and in some ways a dividing line between the eastern and western societies within America, the Mississippi and its tributaries span many different American subcultures and have united them into one common whole.

About a hundred miles from its headwaters, the Mississippi meets an early obstacle on its passage to the sea. The small city of Little Falls, Minnesota, named for that feature of the riverbed, is the town where Charles A. Lindbergh grew up. Today, Little Falls is less than two hours' drive from the Twin Cities metropolitan area, and much of its small town character is gone. The same stores can be found there, or in the nearby larger city of St. Cloud, as in many suburban shopping malls, the major Minneapolis and St. Paul papers are delivered daily, and the increasing homogeneity of American society is as evident in Little Falls as in any other city of its size in other states.

In 1902, when Lindbergh was born, things were far different. Few who read this article today can really remember what turn-of-the-century America was like. For those who lived on farms,

a trip into town was a once-a-week activity. Roads were bad, horses had to be rested, and time was scarce; excursions to more distant cities were exceptional, even when rail service was more plentiful. The necessities of life in that time were such as to foster a spirit of self-reliance and independence, since one often was isolated and had to depend solely on one's own resources. Paradoxically, the circumstances also fostered a sense of community: One's neighbors seldom changed, even over generations, people were well-acquainted through the many small organizations of small-town life, and friends were always ready to help with barn-raising, crop-harvesting, and at family events like childbirth and death.

Lindbergh's father was practicing law in Little Falls when Lindbergh was born, but his mother, unwilling to rely on the limited facilities of country doctors and midwives, chose to have her child in Detroit. When Charles jr. was two months old, she returned to central Minnesota to live. Lindbergh's parents were not well matched, and a fire that destroyed their first house when Lindbergh was quite young led to the effective end of the marriage.

Although Little Falls was isolated from the more metropolitan parts of America, Lindbergh did not grow up unaware of the rest of the world. His father was an immigrant who acquired U.S. citizenship and rose to become a member of Congress, serving several terms there. The senior Lindbergh thus provided his son an early introduction to public life. Lindbergh's formal schooling was disrupted by the travel among Little Falls, Detroit, and Washington that kept up appearances of family life while his father was serving in Congress. Such studying as he did was divided among those locations, along with Redondo, CA. He had never been much of a student anyway, and, despite poor grades, received his high school

diploma under a wartime law providing credit for those willing to undertake farm chores as replacements for those serving in the armed forces. He later attended the University of Wisconsin but did not graduate. The lack of the college degree was not such an impediment to achievement in those days, and his enormous natural talent in engineering, as well as his aptitude for aviation, overrode his lack of credentials. At the age of 20, he enrolled in a flying school; his career was determined from then on.

## **Mason**

In St. Louis, where the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers flow together, Lindbergh joined the Craft. Most famous Masons joined the fraternity before coming to world notice, and Lindbergh was no exception. He completed his degrees in Keystone Lodge Number 243, A. F. & A. M. of Missouri, in December of 1926, months before the flight that was to bring him world renown.

At the time, he was working as a mail pilot for Robertson Aircraft Corporation and already planning his trans-Atlantic flight in pursuit of the Orteig prize. Reading Lindbergh's own accounts of his experiences in 1926-27, one is struck by how thoroughly busy he was, making his efforts on acquiring the Masonic degrees more remarkable. During that period, he engaged in negotiations with aircraft manufacturers for the construction of the plane that was to be named The Spirit of St. Louis, flew the mail regularly between St. Louis and Chicago, and survived several parachute landings when bad weather forced him to ditch the mail plane. Only once did he fail to recover the mail bags and send them on by train.

Lindbergh's biographers, including Lindbergh himself, make essentially no mention of his connection with Masonry. Perhaps it was that he, like many other Masons, carried the duty of secrecy beyond that which is actually required. We do know that he wore the Square and Compasses on his historic flight and the plane bore a Masonic emblem; he also later joined the

National Sojourners in St. Louis and the Sciots in San Diego.

## **Hero**

The lasting fame of Charles A. Lindbergh stems from his success at being the first person to cross from New York to Paris non-stop in a solo airplane flight. Today, we take for granted the ease with which the Atlantic and even the Pacific may be spanned by modern jets; tens of thousands of travelers do so daily. Even the Apollo lunar landings of the late 60's and early 70's did not excite the popular mind as did Lindbergh's trip, perhaps partly because the same medium of television so often brought fiction and sensationalism as well as news. When the science-fiction of Star Trek was already on television, the missions of Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins suffered by comparison. It might also be that the Apollo astronauts were simply the spearhead of a gigantic effort of thousands of government employees and contractors, spending enormous sums of public money over a long period to reach a goal that was hardly a surprise when it was met. Even the element of personal danger seemed to be missing, at least until events like the scary Apollo 13 and the tragic Challenger missions reminded us that space exploration was not yet risk-free.

In 1927, there were fewer distractions for the public's attention. Commercial radio had barely begun broadcasting. Most people received their news in newspapers. The competition to be the first to cross the Atlantic solo captured the public attention, especially as the newspapers sought to play up the competitive angle. Aviation was not yet routine--many people had never seen an aircraft close up, and very few had flown in one. Barnstormers, of whom Lindbergh was one, could attract huge crowds with demonstrations of aerobatic routines. The risk of serious injury or death was always present for aviators in the 20's and 30's. But the rewards were there for those who took the risks — not only Lindbergh, but men like Billy Mitchell and Howard Hughes built careers and fortunes on their daring.

Against this backdrop, Lindbergh's accomplishment stood out, nevertheless. Not only for the \$25,000 prize (worth perhaps ten times that in 1989 dollars), but because of how he achieved it, taking risks that older and more experienced fliers would have rejected as beyond foolhardy: There was considerable competition for the award among a number of aviators, and the contest had already cost some of them their lives. Lindbergh's trans-Atlantic flight came exactly one day after he set a transcontinental flying record. Piloting a plane that was little more than a fuel tank with wings, carrying only a few sandwiches and virtually no navigational equipment, he made the crossing in 33-1/2 hours, landing at Le Bourget Field in Paris to become one of the greatest celebrities of the twentieth century. The fame and connections that his flight brought him far overshadowed the monetary prize.

Over the next year or so, Lindbergh was feted in many countries. Some said he was the single best known person in the world. In the many speeches he gave during this period he continually urged the further development of aviation, doing much to shape the world we know today, with its innumerable air links among the continents and extending to some of the remotest parts of the globe. His goodwill flights took him many places in the Americas, having already been celebrated in the European capitals. It was at a reception in Mexico City given by the American ambassador there that Lindbergh met the ambassador's daughter, Anne Spencer Morrow, who became his wife on 27 May 1929.

### **Victim**

Sometimes it seems that the breathless media have announced a new "crime of the century" to have occurred every five or six weeks. Perhaps televised violence and news reporting have desensitized us to it altogether, while crimes of brutality have been replaced in the newspapers with government scandals. In some ways, however, the 80's pale before the lawless period of the 20's and 30's, when criminal gangs led by the likes of Capone, Dillinger, and Barker

roamed the country and cities were owned and run by the Mob. The 20's had seen such celebrated cases as Sacco and Vanzetti and Leopold-Loeb run their course in the papers. Nevertheless, against this backdrop, the Lindbergh kidnapping case stood out.

Of course, it was Lindbergh's fame that made the crime impossible to treat routinely. The cruel circumstances are well known: The Lindbergh's first child, Charles A. Lindbergh, III, was kidnapped from his New Jersey home in 1932. Although a ransom of \$50,000, substantial for that time, was paid, the child's body was eventually found in a wooded area, apparently murdered even before the money was delivered. Bruno Hauptmann, a carpenter, was arrested, tried, convicted, and executed for the crime. Most laws are named for the legislators who draft and enact them; it is a sign of the magnitude of the Lindbergh kidnapping that the Federal statutes extending FBI jurisdiction in the case of abduction are known as the "Lindbergh law."

The conviction of Hauptmann came in December of 1935, more than three years after the commission of the outrage. Lindbergh bore the ransom payment, the investigation, and the eventual trial with stoicism. What he could not bear was the sensationalism of the press. The papers had already garnered his scorn for their reportage of the quest for the Orteig trans-Atlantic prize. But their behavior in sensationalizing the kidnapping of his child was to earn his contempt and loathing for the rest of his life. Distortions of the facts and invasion of his privacy were common elements of the press's quest for greater circulation, and a natural consequence of the press freedom guaranteed by our Constitution; nevertheless, Lindbergh was never able to live with these circumstances.

When the trial was over at last, Lindbergh was free of obligations tying him to New Jersey. Realizing that he and his family would have no hope of leading an ordinary life in the United States, he took up residence in England, moving later to France. He renewed his acquaintance

with Nobel Laureate Dr. Alexis Carrel, a biological researcher whom Lindbergh had met at the Rockefeller Institute (now the Rockefeller University) in New York in 1930. Drawing on his talent for engineering, Lindbergh designed a perfusion pump, sometimes referred to as the first artificial heart, that substantially advanced Carrel's researches.

## Controversy

Lindbergh had not yet reached the end of his fourth decade when he became involved in the controversy that was to shadow his reputation and affect the direction of the rest of his life. Lindbergh's move to Europe allowed him to escape the curiosity-seeking crowds of the United States that had made it impossible for him and his family to lead an undisturbed life, but his fame was recognized there as well, if not in so dramatic a fashion. While residing there, he became well acquainted with numerous European governmental and industrial leaders, not only because of his exploits as an aviation pioneer but also due to his brilliance as an engineer.

These acquaintanceships gave Lindbergh insight into the industrial strengths of the various European powers. In particular, the Germans under the Nazi regime were most eager to obtain world recognition for the new state they had built less than twenty years after their surrender at the end of the First World War. The 1936 Berlin Olympics, for example, were intended as a Nazi showpiece for rebuilt Berlin and the alleged superiority of the "Master Race" and the Nazi "superman" athletes. In the same way, the Nazis were keen to show off their new factories and aircraft designs to a notable like Lindbergh, who thus had first-hand contact with the underpinnings of what was to become the Nazi war machine.

Lindbergh was suitably impressed. So much so, in fact, that when World War II loomed in 1939, he was to return to the United States and travel widely to urge American non-involvement in no uncertain terms, even going so far as to resign his commission in the U.S. military when

President Roosevelt made thinly-veiled accusations of treasonous intent against him. What he had failed to realize was that the Nazis had hoodwinked him and used him as an element of propaganda, false intelligence, and psychological warfare. His views were to cost him dearly. He suffered the loss of much of his prestige before the American public, once the U.S. became involved in the war. The War Department refused to reinstate his commission or allow him to serve in the Army, despite his conciliatory recantation of his earlier stance. Some have ever since charged Lindbergh with having been a Nazi sympathizer or even an anti-Semite, basing the latter on Lindbergh's ill-chosen words regarding "Jewish influence" in the hated newspapers that he thought were seeking to drag America into the war. His long association with Alexis Carrel, a man of views we would now unquestionably condemn as racist, would not help him overcome these latter accusations, nor would Lindbergh's behavior after the war when he visited Germany as a consultant in evaluating their progress in aviation technology: At first, he avoided all contact with the concentration camps, being forced to confront that reality only when he visited an underground aircraft factory associated with the slave labor camp Dora. Even then, Lindbergh drew comparisons between the Nazi policy of extermination of civilians and incidents of American mistreatment of Japanese POWs in the Pacific, although one was governmentally sanctioned, while the others were isolated occurrences.

The anti-Lindbergh positions are easy to justify with the perspicacity of hindsight. It is now obvious what would have befallen the world had America continued to be uninvolved in the Second World War. But isolationism is deeply embedded in the American character; it is as American as George Washington, warning his fellow citizens to "beware of foreign entanglements." Even today, with most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century behind us, many would see American interests again detached from the rest of the world. There is significant feeling against the maintenance of U.S. troops in places like Germany and Korea: "Let those countries

shoulder the burden of their own defense," is a frequently-expressed sentiment. The unhappy conclusion of the Vietnam War was certainly due in large part to the home-front feeling that Asian conflicts were not our business. "America cannot be the world's policeman," was heard often in argument for bringing the troops home. Also in non-military areas such as trade, many domestic groups seek American detachment from the world system. Internationalism has always been suspect in American politics, as the controversy over the Trilateral Commission introduced into recent election campaigns illustrates.

The first half of this century was also a time of considerably lower social consciousness. Racial stereotypes were common in the public mind, and anti-Semitism was a casual fact of life. Henry Ford supported the publication and distribution of notorious anti-Semitic tracts. Tuning in the late movie when "Charlie Chan at the Olympics" is being broadcast will show how widely accepted these ideas were, and how Hollywood was quite willing to think well of the Hitler regime. It was some time before the movie industry was ready to produce "A Gentlemen's Agreement," presenting the other side of the question.

Lindbergh no more than reflected these ideas of the American public, perhaps amplifying them through his origins. Having grown up in the midsection of the country, far removed from the cosmopolitan East Coast, and more conscious than most, through his aviation experiences, of the enormous distances that separated North America from the European continent, he felt that there was little to gain from participation in the European conflict. The homogeneous population of the Midwest was conducive to phobias about ethnic groups not regularly encountered in daily life. Lindbergh's father had served as a Representative in Congress during the period before the First World War and had held and vigorously expressed the isolationist views of the times. It was then that Woodrow Wilson was re-elected on the slogan, "He kept us out of war." (Only when the war came, did the elder Lindbergh's position create political

difficulties for him, which he exacerbated with views seen as anti-Catholic; these brought an end to his political career in Minnesota.) In the 1930's, pro-German groups were many and powerful in the U.S. Nazism had not then been seen in its true light, at least in the popular mind. Winston Churchill was not yet in power in Great Britain, and his views were not popular in his own country; Neville Chamberlain returned from Munich with the message of "peace in our time." It was only when tanks rolled into Poland in that late summer of 1939 that opinions in the democracies of Europe changed decisively in favor of war with the Nazi Reich.

Similarly, Pearl Harbor changed American attitudes as abruptly as turning on a light switch. Nevertheless, had Hitler not declared war on the U.S. the next day, American participation in the European theatre of operations might still have been delayed for some time. President Roosevelt, who anxiously desired to provide aid to England, was given the opportunity he had sought for years. Lindbergh, accommodating himself to the alteration in the political climate, volunteered his assistance to the war effort. As mentioned, the War Department turned him down, citing his previously "disloyal" speeches, and the Roosevelt administration kept him from finding work with most aviation companies involved in the war effort. Later, Lindbergh served in the Pacific theatre in a civilian capacity, where he nevertheless saw combat, flying over sixty missions, downing one enemy aircraft, and ultimately receiving the Medal of Honor for his service to the country. Was this the "disloyal" Nazi sympathizer? Or was it just another one of the many Americans who would have responded in 1940 that the war in Europe was no concern of the U.S., but by 1945 had followed Eisenhower, Patton, Bradley, Clark, and MacArthur to the liberation of much of the world from the tyranny that threatened us all?

### **American**

Because we are prone to overlook the tragedies and difficulties that affected him, Lindbergh led the kind of life that most of us think of as the

American dream. Raised in small-town America of the turn of the century, he rose to fame and fortune because he was not content merely to dream. Instead, he took the risks and seized the opportunities to make his dreams real. Often referred to as "Lucky Lindy," it would not be amiss for him to have considered that an insult. Lindbergh did not depend on luck--he made his own.

As a hero of aviation, Lindbergh stood for all that the public thought of as essentially American: Independence, self-reliance, courage, and perseverance. At a time when the West had been won and most thought the frontier gone, Lindbergh showed there was another kind of frontier to explore through science and technology.

Lindbergh also exemplified that Yankee stubbornness so typical of us. Once he had formed an opinion, he was virtually unshakable. Vexed by the newspapers' superficial coverage of his aviation achievements, infuriated by their abuses in the kidnapping stories, he never again trusted them, even refusing to be photographed where he could avoid it, regardless of the many changes in the media in the post-war years. Despite having been deceived by the Nazis, who convinced him that the Luftwaffe and its industrial base were more than twice as strong as they actually were, he was unable ever to admit that his pre-war views had been in error. But it was also this stubbornness that allowed him to withstand the ordeal of the kidnapping and subsequent trial and that also became, in his chosen field of aviation, the tenacity that allowed him to persist in a course at which others had failed and thereby achieve the fame that lasted the rest of his life.

### **Synthesis**

The tragic flaw in Lindbergh's life was that he achieved fame and success too soon--before he acquired the discipline and judgment that a slower climb to influence and achievement would have given him. An edifice lacking the pillar of wisdom is not well built. In his struggles with President Roosevelt, he lacked

the savvy to deal with politicians, notably Harold Ickes, Roosevelt's Secretary of the Interior, who knew just how to discomfit Lindbergh and expose his weak points. Worse, Lindbergh often chose the wrong associates, despite the best of intentions. Accused of anti-Semitism (probably incorrectly, if he took seriously his responsibilities as a Mason), Lindbergh nevertheless was soon to associate himself even more closely with Henry Ford, whose hatred for Jews was widely known. The traditions of Masonry remind us that there may be serious consequences for us if we associate with others of poor character, even if we are not at fault ourselves. It was not a lesson Lindbergh took to heart.

But generally, if we are to find fault with Lindbergh, it is also to find fault with ourselves. Lindbergh's controversial views were in fact those of a large number of Americans of the time. The difference was that he was prominent, making him a target, and he was therefore penalized for expressing them when they no longer made sense. Americans have always had an ambiguous relationship with our heroes: We exaggerate their accomplishments, invade their privacy, and search for their flaws. When we find a suggestion of clay clinging to their feet, we are all too eager to see them brought down. Even Washington and Lincoln had their critics, and it is easy to remember how Eisenhower went from being the hero of Europe to an allegedly "do-nothing" president. This is not necessarily entirely bad; we have the example of what becomes of a society in which a Stalin, Mao, or Hitler can do no wrong. But Master Masons should need little reminding of how a small group of greedy men, lacking the power themselves to create greatness, can destroy the prominent and talented.

Like the river near whose banks he was reared, Lindbergh passed through many changes in his life. As the Mississippi separated East from West, yet joined many areas of the country in trade and travel, sometimes he united us all, sometimes he divided us, as he traveled over the obstructions and through the narrow passages, twists, and turns of the course of his life. When

the Mississippi reaches its mouth in Louisiana, it deposits the heavy load of silt acquired in its passage through the American heartland and flows quietly out to join the sea. The silt does not go to waste, however; it builds new land at the end of the Mississippi delta, while the waters rise again from the ocean to return to the source as the rain. In August of 1974, Charles A. Lindbergh, whose daring had demonstrated that it was possible to explore the new lands of aviation, put down his final burdens to rejoin the Source of all being. We will have a long wait before another single individual so captures the attention and imagination of the world. His life stands forever as an example of American leadership and achievement in the Twentieth Century.

### **Author's Note**

Like Lindbergh, I too grew up in Minnesota. My maternal grandfather became a Mason in St. Louis only a few years before Lindbergh did. And I have often visited Hunterdon County, NJ, where he lived during the first years of his married life. These connections have perhaps allowed me to create this brief survey of the important points in his life with a greater understanding of how they affected him. But I realize that after so much has been written about one of the most prominent men of our time, there is little new to say. I can only hope that I have said it differently.