



Life, Interpreted Lucely by Allan C. Carlson

"... where the pictures for the page atone."

—Alexander Pope

Life: The Second Decade 1946-1955; Photographs selected by Doris C. O'Neil; Little, Brown; Boston.

No contemporary could write promotion copy quite like Henry Luce. His 1936 prospectus for a new magazine featuring photographs, tentatively called *The Show-Book of the World*, still has few equals:

To see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud; to see strange things—machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see man's work—his paintings, towers and discoveries; to see things thousands of miles away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to; the women that men love and many children; to see and to take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed. . . . [This] is the mission now undertaken by a new kind of publication.

Under its more familiar name, *Life* did transform journalism in America. Prior to its appearance, photographs were still considered to be the vulgar and trivial side of the magazine trade. Luce, however, understood the magic of the still shot, its ability to arouse emotions, to convey immediacy, to tell a story. Employing new innovations in high-speed printing, he introduced the weekly magazine, price 10¢

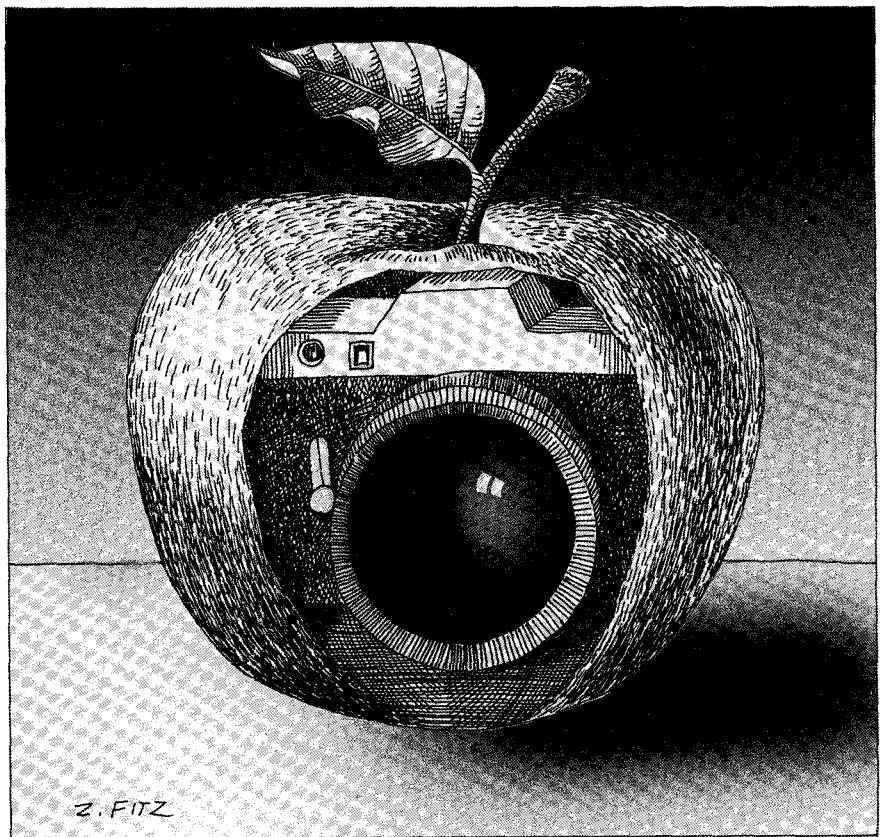
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a copy, that delivered the world in pictures to the American middle class.

With all of human existence as its subject, *Life* in the early years presented a jumbled mélange of news reports, features, shorts, and single photos, material that often blended into the sensationalistic, the mildly erotic, and the weird. Yet contrary to the predictions of the experts, the formula worked. For several years, demand for the new magazine exceeded supply. Circulation climbed rapidly, reaching five million by the early 1940's. During the war, the magazine actually seemed to be transformed into a symbol of America, becoming a

national institution as familiar as the baseball diamond.

Yet publishing success did not long satisfy Luce. Restlessly, he sought to turn the magazine into something more. An editorial page was added in 1941. His famed essay of the same year, "The American Century," hinted at a still broader thrust. The world of the 20th century, he wrote, "if it is to come to life in any nobility of health and vigor, must be to a significant degree an American Century." The fundamental trouble was that while America stood as the most powerful and vital nation on the globe, its citizens were unable to accommodate themselves spiritually and practically to that fact. The United States could not endure, Luce concluded, unless "there courses strongly through its



veins from Maine to California the blood of purpose and enterprise and high resolve."

Pearl Harbor did provide America, for a time, with a compelling sense of direction; and *Life* enlisted to defeat the Axis. Yet by 1944, Luce was again fretting about America's lack of purpose and the need to gird up this land for sustained adventure and influence overseas. "The American scene must have totally new expression after this war," he confided to his editorial colleagues in an internal memorandum. "If we win the war on the terms we are now fighting, America enters a new era." This new America, Luce concluded, would not be based on the old urban milieu, composed of ethnic neighborhoods, machine politics, and grimy factories. Rather, it would rise out of an acceleration of the vast movement of peoples into the suburbs. The old cities were emptying, he said, and the "mass movement of the new living after this war is going to give someone a great publishing opportunity."

Accordingly, *Life* was repositioned as the magazine of the "New America." A major 1947-48 publicity blitz described the significance of this phrase: "There are more people—12-1/2 million more than there were before the war. . . . There is more education . . . [and] a better educated public means a new widespread desire for the goods and services that go with a higher standard of living." A multimedia presentation under the same title and shown to hundreds of thousands of politicians, businessmen, and advertising executives described "the New America" as based on "our new found confidence, our awakening to the new and almost limitless opportunities which lie within our power." New wealth coursed through America, the script said. In 1946, 28 million families exceeded the \$2,000 income level, compared to only seven million a decade before. Americans were growing accustomed to the "good things of everyday living," and there was a "new and wider interest in the products of [a] higher standard of living."

In short, *Life* executives labeled the America of the late 1940's "a completely different world" from that of a mere decade before, a nation enjoying

an unprecedented cornucopia of goods and services. On many coffee tables, moreover, lay one special magazine. The 15 million *Life*-reading families represented 36 percent of all families in the country. As the promotional people concluded, *Life* was "the greatest advertising force . . . in the New America."

Luce was not content merely to report on and sell to these suburbanizing Americans, though. As he explained in a 1948 memo to *Life*'s managing editor, the magazine's purpose was "to interpret American life and in interpretation give leadership toward the promotion and defense of what we feel to be good and correction to that which is poor or bad." As a critical first step, he urged an editorial effort to instruct *Life* readers on their bonds to Western civilization. The drama of Western culture, Luce maintained, had culminated in the creation of the United States of America and this fact demanded that all Americans take stock of their civilization at the historical moment "when the U.S. has become the heir and chief guardian of the whole body of Western Civilization against the forces of reactionary neo-barbarism."

The second great task facing American civilization and *Life* magazine, he said, lay in reconciling universal opulence and material plenty with Christian morality and the Western tradition. Put another way, the inhabitants of the New America needed to be shown how to live the good *and* moral life. *Life*'s "modern living" section, Luce maintained, would serve as the nexus between the magazine's editorial content and its advertising. It would show that there was "nothing *per se* immoral or wrong with material goods," provided that their producers and consumers were "concerned with their use for 'good' rather than 'bad' ends."

The result was the *Life* magazine of the Second Decade, 1946-1955. In almost every issue, serious discussions of Medieval Christian philosophy or the Roman Catholic heritage were juxtaposed with resort fashions, brassiere ads, and photos of Hollywood starlets. Readers were taught that "civilization" wasn't just a word; as Luce put it, "it's a something that 'means you!'" They were also instructed on

how to consume within the bonds of this civilizational heritage. Today, the combinations of images found in *Life* from this era often seem silly, crass, ludicrous. Yet to Luce, his editors, and much of their readership, this linkage of the spiritual to the material had real purpose: to give definition and direction to "a nation destined to lead the world in education, in high standard of living, in commerce, and government and human relations."

Life: The Second Decade, 1946-1955 is a collection of 200 photographs culled from the 156,000 prints in the *Life* picture collection. In them, one finds the substance and the contradictions of the postwar American civilization that Luce sought to define and celebrate. One sees the seemingly endless expanses of tract houses on undulating streets in suburban California, the well-dressed audience with 3-D glasses watching *Bwana Devil*, the patterned components of a Lustron prefabricated house, and the beds, dishes, and food made, washed, and processed by Marjorie McWeeney of Rye, New York, the typical American housewife. One also sees the jarring clash between the different America existing alongside the "new" one: the austere facial lines and flowered hat of an Iowa farm woman presiding at a Presbyterian church supper set against fashion model Lily Carlson walking down Park Avenue; the wholesome winner of the 1949 Pillsbury Bake-Off set against the hard scowl of a woman in a Puerto Rico gambling salon; the blue-collar anger of white youth participating in a Cicero, Illinois, race riot set against the members of Sigma Chi fraternity singing of the girls of their dreams.

Many familiar photos are found in this compilation: Marilyn Monroe's legs revealed to a leering Tom Ewell; Roger Bannister breaking the four-minute mile; Hungarian rebels futilely throwing rocks at a Russian tank; a bemused Robert Taft holding a chicken; a high-stepping drum major followed by his youthful admirers; and two sweating, Black gold miners in a Johannesburg, South Africa mine. Also included are several moving photographic essays, an art form pioneered by *Life*. These include W. Eugene Smith's extraordinary works, "Country Doctor" and "Maude Collen, Nurse

Midwife." Found near the end of the volume are the more disturbing icons of the New America: a happy New York family, mother impeccably dressed, in their radiation shelter; and the pitted test mannequins wrenched out of shape by an atomic blast at Yucca Flat, Nevada.

Most of *Life's* photographers—among them Margaret Bourke-

White, David Duncan, Philippe Halsman, Alfred Eisenstadt, and Cornell Capa—probably shared little of Henry Luce's enthusiasm for the New American Civilization that he hoped to help shape through the pages of his magazine. Indeed, in introductory comments to this volume, Capa notes how "we are blessed with hindsight in our assessment of world history" and can

now recognize "that the editors of *Life* had their own conceptions and prejudices in selecting what they considered newsworthy, valid, interesting or trend-setting for a given week." Yet the photos in this volume transcend the politics and the visions of Luce and his co-workers. Here, we do see life and can take pleasure in the seeing. cc

REVISIONS

Resurrecting the Sixties

Nostalgia for the 60's may now be a tenure requirement at many of the country's leading universities, especially in California and New England. Arthur Stein is a case in point. In his new book *Seeds of the Seventies: Values, Work, and Commitment in Post-Vietnam America* (University Press of New England; Hanover, NH; \$18.00), Stein presents himself as one more academic revolutionary, pining for the "youthful idealism" of the 60's and looking desperately for manifestations of the same spirit in the 70's and 80's. Of course, he is not interested in the real legacy of the 60's—the plagues of illiteracy, drug addiction, and pornography that stunned so many POW's returning to America in the mid-70's. Stein remains convinced that if America is to regain a "renewed sense of purpose and direction" it must look not to those who answered the call of duty in Vietnam (they, after all, "still suffer the aftereffects of their traumatic experiences in the war"), but rather to those "directly involved in antiwar activity" in the Vietnam years.

Of course, these people are no longer capturing headlines by raising Vietcong flags over their campuses as they burn their American colors. No, after Richard Nixon betrayed them by ending the draft and taking away their issue, they disappeared "beneath the surface" of media visibility. But the excitement of public righteousness is hard to give up, so the same activists who had once dominated the news

broadcasts by denouncing American involvement in Indochina soon found they could achieve the same effect by denouncing American involvement in America. In the search for journalists' attention, the anti-Vietnam movement metamorphosed into what Stein sympathetically calls "new alternatives" crusades, including "participatory politics, women's and minority rights, concerns of children and senior citizens, producer and consumer cooperatives, peace conversion economics. . . ." The list is as long and as predictable as a William Sloan Coffin sermon.

Stein believes that only such movements can "keep the spark of idealism alive" in an age of "extreme individualism" such as ours. In applauding the crusade for "social justice and a more peaceful world order," he insists that the varieties of social activism that he surveys cannot be understood within "conservative or liberal labels." Perhaps some of those groups rejecting technological utilitarianism in favor of small-community agrarianism do not fit neatly in right/left categories. But no one who canonizes the Berrigan Brothers, Bella Abzug, Scott Nearing, Tom Hayden, and Barry Commoner, and who laments that "disorganization of the American left contributed to the right-wing victory of Ronald Reagan" is playing with an unmarked deck. Stein may not be a Soviet apologist of the *Nation* stripe, but he is clearly at home among the woolly leftists of *Mother Jones*. Don't look for Stein to suggest that anyone concerned with

"basic human rights" and protecting "endangered life forms" should be fighting communist tyranny, protesting abortion, or opposing illegitimacy.

Instead, the agenda calls for demonstrating against U.S. involvement in Central America, helping others achieve psychic "transformation" into "New Age" personalities, obstructing nuclear power projects, and fighting for "justice for women." Of even higher priority are protests against American militarism and attempts to find "common ground with the leaders and people of the USSR." Nonviolent protest at an American Trident base provides "living theater" that is "encouraging," "dramatic," and "provocative." (Stein reports no pacifist demonstrations being planned for Kabul or Warsaw, perhaps because Soviet tank drivers have such a boorish sense of staging or because TV coverage is devilishly hard to arrange.) As he contemplates the future, Stein is glad that many groups are learning to put to new uses the techniques of "nonviolent direct action" first employed in the May Day 1971 protest against the Vietnam War. The thousands of Vietnamese who drowned trying to escape from their "liberators" or who were imprisoned in reeducation camps or sent to Siberia to lay pipeline for the Soviet Empire might not share Stein's enthusiasm for this conceptual breakthrough. But the Politburo is probably still applauding. After all, May Day demonstrations are their specialty. cc

The American "Collective" (Day)Dream by Jay Mechling

"Some races increase, others are reduced, and in a short while the generations of living creatures are changed and like runners relay the torch of life."

—Lucretius

Kevin Starr: *Inventing the Dream: California Through the Progressive Era*; Oxford University Press; New York; \$19.95.

Reading student applications for scholarships, as I have done on and off now for a dozen years on the undergraduate scholarships committee of the University of California, Davis, has some of the qualities of watching a Frank Capra movie. It wasn't always so in the early 1970's, when the typical successful high school student was born into a comfortable suburban California middle-class home. But by the end of the decade, the "personal statement" essays by some of the students began to resemble 19th- and early-20th-century novels, autobiographies, and oral histories about the immigrant experience in America.

It was not unusual, by the early 1980's, to read a well-written statement explaining how the candidate had escaped Southeast Asia on a boat with a remnant of his or her family, how the student thankfully arrived in California to enter junior high school barely speaking any English, and how the student's hard work and family sacrifice led to the student's graduating as valedictorian of the high school class. Teachers' and counselors' recommendations confirmed that, if anything, the students were modest in writing their personal statements. By most accounts, these students do as well at the university as they did in high school.

When I remarked on this pattern to a group of colleagues, a friend in Asian-American studies cautioned me not to make too much of this. "We are seeing only the successful ones," he warns. "What about all those who don't 'make it'?" He caught me, of

course, in the positive stereotyping that is the mirror image of the negative sort, assuming that a handful of successful members of an immigrant or native racial group "proves" that they all could "make it" if only they tried.

Still, there is evidence that the "boat people" of the 1978 immigration, as opposed even to the more Westernized, better-educated, English-speaking Vietnamese immigrants after the 1975 fall of Saigon, combine strong work and education ethics that we white Americans like to think characterized our first-generation grandparents and great-grandparents. For example, a July 19, 1985, Associated Press story reported on the research project directed by Nathan Caplan at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. Caplan and his colleagues studied nearly 6,000 Southeast Asian refugees—Laotian, Vietnamese, and ethnic Chinese boat people—in 1,400 households in Boston, Chicago, Seattle, Houston, and Orange County, California. The success of these immigrants stunned the researchers. Nearly two-thirds had found jobs, over a quarter of their children were getting "straight A's" in school, and within four years of arriving in the United States the "average refugee family had achieved a steady income of nearly twice the poverty level."

There is a dark side to this story, as even Frank Capra would have seen and included in a film version of this story. The fact that these Indochinese children are "shattering grade school curves" (as the Associated Press put it) means that many of their fellow students come to resent their success, and the resentment easily becomes racist. The national news media earlier this year paid special attention to the rising tide of racist expressions and violence against Asians in America, but I see it in other forms in the ethnic jokes, folk beliefs, and graffiti I collect from my students in folklore classes. How ironic

is the American immigrant experience in discovering that success brings scorn and discrimination almost as surely as does failure.

If there were not a California, Americans would have to invent her. The state is the ideal testing ground for Americans' working out the sort of society that will emerge when the "new immigration" meets established American traditions and institutions. The July 8, 1985, issue of *Time* magazine devoted most of its space to articles exploring the dimensions of the "new immigration" and explaining (rather simplistically, as one might expect) the impact of this immigration upon the nation. The numbers of "new immigrants" admitted since 1961 under various refugee acts are surprising even to those who pay attention to these things, and these numbers do not even include the illegal immigrants.

California represents an intensified version of the cultural drama unfolding as these new immigrants settle in U.S. communities. California is rapidly becoming part of the Hispanic Americas; there are very large communities of Indochinese in both the north and south; and San Francisco's Chinese community has a steady influx of new immigrants. Bilingualism is a hot political and cultural issue, represented most dramatically last year by former Senator Hayakawa's ballot proposition to make English the official language of the state. The proposition fed on a panic born of a demographic reality—namely, that the "Anglos" in the state will soon be the minority population. America would be wise to watch California closely as we at the edge of the continent work by design or accident toward a modified American society.

California has a history of "new immigrants," in a sense, from the Spaniards to the present. And most Californians native to this country are only first or second-generation mi-

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