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# A MAN OF HIS TIME

HENRY LUCE FOREVER CHANGED THE WAY AMERICANS GET THEIR NEWS

BY ALAN H. FEILER



an era when a universe of communication rests at our fingertips, and live-streamed reporting flourishes, one can't help but wonder what Henry R. Luce would make of it all.

Luce, the founder of the *Time-Life* magazine empire who died in 1967, was one of the most influential private citizens in the America of his day. He was also known for his often heavy-handed methods of wielding power and influence.

And arguably, he's best-known as the man who, in his 1941 essay of the same name, coined the phrase "The American Century," alluding to what was quickly emerging as U.S. domination over, well, the whole world—militarily, economically, culturally, philosophically.

One strongly suspects that Luce, always a bit of an outsider with an insatiable curiosity, would have thrown himself into today's information technological revolution to a certain degree. But he probably would have retained his strong belief in journalism—and its credo of enhancing democracy and the public good with a solid base of well-coordinated news information.

"We tell the truth as we see it," Luce once said of his media kingdom, which famously included such groundbreaking ventures as *Time*, *Fortune*, *Life* and *Sports Illustrated*. "Show me a man who claims to be objective and I'll show you a man with illusions."

Luce was a man with no illusions.

## MAKING 'TIME'

Characterized by his colleagues and contemporaries as an insecure and taciturn figure, Luce maintained a missionary zeal for just about every enterprise he embarked upon. That likely came largely from his parentage. He was born in the Chinese city of Tengchow on April 3, 1898, as the son of a Presbyterian missionary, the Rev. Dr. Henry Winters Luce, and his wife, Elizabeth Middleton Luce, an ex-YWCA worker. The Yale-educated Rev. Luce aspired not only to bring Christianity to the turn-of-the-century Chinese but also to enlighten them with Western standards of education, civility and prosperity.

Luce the younger was greatly influenced by his father. The younger Luce's lifelong commitment to Christianity, evangelism (sectarian and nonsectarian), morality and

self-empowerment is a reflection on that.

Luce attended a strict British boarding school in Chefoo (where the disciplinary practice of caning was pervasive) and arrived in the United States at age 15 to attend the Hotchkiss School, a college preparatory boarding school in Lakeville, CT. At Hotchkiss, he edited the *Hotchkiss Literary Monthly* and worked closely there with fellow student Briton Hadden. Luce and Hadden both attended Yale and worked on the *Yale Daily News*, with Luce serving as managing editor and Hadden as chairman.

The two young men were not particularly close friends, but as allies and fellow journalists they were virtually inseparable and quite formidable. "Somehow, despite the greatest differences in temperaments and even in interests, we had to work together," Luce recalled. "We were an organization. At that point everything we had belonged to each other."

Luce and Hadden did part company for a while after graduating from Yale; after spending a year studying history at Oxford, Luce worked as a legman for Ben Hecht at the *Chicago Daily News*. But in



December 1921, Luce and Hadden joined forces again, as reporters for the *Baltimore News*.

Soon after, the two cub journalists—who shared a loathing for what they deemed an epidemic of anemic periodicals and newspapers—decided to create a new type of weekly magazine, one that synthesized the news of the day with lucid analyses and fresh perspectives. They quit their jobs, sold stocks for a while, attracted a bevy of Wall Street investors, rolled up their sleeves and got to work.

Initially intended to be called “Facts,” the magazine debuted as *Time* in March 1923 with a mission to cater to “the illiterate upper classes, the busy businessman, the tired debutante, to prepare them at least once a week for a table conversation. ... *Time* gives both sides but clearly indicates which side it believes to have the stronger position.”

Of the highly self-confident Luce and Hadden, Alan Brinkley, author of the 2010 biography *The Publisher, Henry Luce and His American Century*, writes, “They were nothing if not presumptuous—two 24-year-olds, with almost no money and less than two years of professional journalism experience between them, setting out to start a magazine at the tail end of a severe recession.”

By 1929, when Hadden suddenly died at age 31, *Time* was a major success and had reinvented the manner in which “middlebrow” journalism was delivered: fresh, concise and probing. Though frequently the butt of humor among its “highbrow” counterparts, such as *The New Yorker*, it became

life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud.” It was a tremendous success, spawning a slew of copycats.

“In an era blighted by Depression, prejudice, social turmoil and the shadow of war, *Life* offered the

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required reading among the middle-class and up-and-coming journalists and politicians.

Despite the loss of his brilliant partner, Luce proceeded in mapping out his empire, first by creating the business magazine *Fortune* in 1930. “Business is obviously the greatest single denominator of interest among the active leading citizens of the USA ... the distinctive expression of the American genius,” Luce said.

Six years later, he launched his most successful creation, the picture magazine *Life*. Its stated mission as a photojournalistic endeavor was “to see

comforting image of a nation united behind a shared, if contrived, vision of the ‘American Dream,’” writes Luce biographer Brinkley.

All three Luce publications featured the works of some of the finest writers of the time—Archibald MacLeish, John O’Hara, Stephen Vincent Benet, James Agee and Theodore White, to name but a few.

#### NO HOLDING BACK

With his rising success and stature, Luce—who served as editor-in-chief of his publications until 1964—became a force to be reckoned with





on the national political scene. He was a strong advocate of foreign policy imperialism and intervention (particularly when it came to China and its nationalist leader, Chiang Kai-shek), and a strong foe of communism (despite his aversion to Sen. Joseph McCarthy). He was also a defender of big business and a staunch critic of big labor, a bitter opponent of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and a devoted friend to all causes (and candidates) of a conservative hue. And he wasn't shy about using *Time* and his other publications as soapboxes for his political leanings and views, notably his support for U.S. military intervention in Vietnam in the 1960s.

"No restraint bound him in using his magazines to spread the message of his conscience," said one of Luce's correspondents.

In his autobiography *Name and Address*, T.S. Matthews, a former *Time* editor, described Luce as a publisher who could be challenged on his positions. But Matthews said Luce was not above pulling rank and embracing partisanship for a cause. A prime example was the 1952 presidential election between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson.

"In 1952, when it sniffed victory in the air at long last, there was no holding back *Time*," Matthews recalled. "The distortions, suppressions and slanting of its political 'news' seemed to me to pass the bounds of politics and to commit an offense against the ethics of journalism." A particular *Time* cover story about Stevenson, Matthews charged, was "a clumsy but malign [sic] and murderously meant attack."

Despite his limitless ambitions and agendas, Luce never quite acquired the brand of power and influence of which he dreamed. As Brinkley points out, Luce was often frustrated by his inability to turn public favor away from FDR, and Luce's virtual obsession with liberating China received little backing among American policymakers. Besides failing to push presidents and other lawmakers to adopt his viewpoints, he sporadically found it an uphill battle to convince his own editors and writers to tow his party line.

Nonetheless, David Halberstam dubbed Luce "the most powerful conservative publisher in America, and in the '50s at least as influential as the secretary of state."

Brinkley contends that Luce's true legacy lies in how he "helped transform the way many people experienced news and culture" in an

era before television and the Internet. Or as Luce himself called it, the creation of "journalism of information with a purpose." That, of course, often veered onto the slippery slope of propaganda, Luce's critics charged.

#### A ZEAL FOR NEW IDEAS

In the mid-1950s, picking up on America's growing obsession with sports, Luce created *Sports Illustrated*, with stories going beyond scores and surface statistics.

His second wife, the glamorous and occasionally controversial Clare Boothe Luce, was a force of nature unto herself. A playwright, she served two terms in the House of Representatives from Connecticut from 1943 to 1947. In 1953, President Eisenhower appointed her ambassador to Italy. (Later, she and Luce made headlines for publicly discussing their experiments with LSD, including one acid trip in which Henry Luce proclaimed that he chatted with God.)

At the time of his death in February 1967, at age 68, Henry Luce was said to be worth \$100 million in *Time* Inc. stock (about \$688 million in today's currency). Hedley Donovan, his successor as editor-in-chief at *Time*, said of Luce at the time of his passing, "He has an extraordinary zeal for new



Luce with second wife Clare Boothe Luce—playwright, politician and ambassador.

ideas, not only as inspiration for new modes and vehicles of journalism but as a subject matter for journalism. Far from being pained by new ideas, Henry Luce rejoices in them.”

Luce also left behind an impressive and considerable altruistic legacy. In particular, the Henry Luce Foundation was established in 1936 to encourage the advancement of education and innovative thinking, while promoting the virtues of service and leadership. A nonprofit organization based in New York, the foundation continues to contribute greatly to American life and global understanding, working diligently in the academic, public policy and arts communities. The foundation offers grant-making programs in such fields as higher education, theology, international affairs, the environment, and the arts.

When Luce died, the foundation became the major beneficiary of his estate. Over the years, it has made more than \$600 million in grants. And when Clare Boothe Luce passed away in October 1987, the foundation received a bequest totaling more than \$60 million “to encourage women to enter, study, graduate and teach in the natural sciences, in engineering, in computer science and in mathematics.” The Clare Boothe Luce Program has funded myriad scholarships, fellowships and professorships for female students and professors since its inception in 1989.

More than half of the grants have been allocated over the past decade, thus demonstrating that Luce’s vision and commitment to educational quality and innovation continue to this day. You could say that *Time* was indeed on Henry Luce’s side. ■

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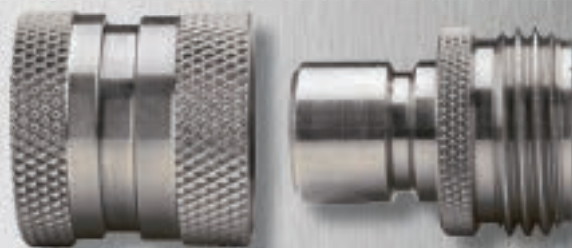
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