CULTURE AS HISTORY
THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN SOCIETY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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When Bruce Barton died at the age of 80 in 1967, it seemed almost inevitably and perfectly logical that at least one writer of his obituary should refer to his life story as “legendary in the best Horatio Alger sense.” Among the most prominent men of his time, Barton had come out of a small Tennessee town to become one of the most widely read and respected authors of his day. He would serve in the Congress of the United States, run for the Senate, and even be considered as a possible presidential candidate. He was to found one of the most important advertising agencies and to shape the development of the advertising business—so crucial itself in shaping the new mass society of the period—in significant ways. Barton’s success in managing his agency can in part be measured by the fact that when he retired in 1961 the company could boast of billings in excess of $230 million. While Barton himself was known to millions of Americans through his writings and public service, his company could, in a special memorandum on the occasion of his death, point to the special meaning of his vast “contacts.” “It meant contact with Presidents of the United States, with senators, with cabinet members, with leaders of industry. . . . Bruce could call anyone in the United States and time would be found for him.” But perhaps most significant, Barton’s life recalls Horatio Alger because, in a sense, he rewrote the American primer on success in a way that most effectively served the middle class of the 1920s. This revision provided a necessary kind of secular religion, a special vision of piety essential to the nation’s transformation into a modern industrial mass society. His version of the success story helped ease the transition from an older, more producer-centered system with its traditional value structure to the newer, more consumer-centered system with its changed value structure. Barton’s inspirational writings (and in a way this includes his brilliant advertising copy) found a way of bridging the gap between the demands of a Calvinistic producer ethic with its emphasis on hard work, self-denial, savings and the new, increasing demands of a hedonistic consumer ethic: spend, enjoy, use up.

Barton once explained his own success in a tongue-in-cheek article he published in 1919:

We preachers’ sons have an unfair advantage over the rest of the world. Out of about 12,000 names in one of the editions of Who’s Who, more than 1,000 were names of us. In England’s Dictionary of National Biography we appear 1,270 times, while the sons of lawyers are there only to the number of 510, and the sons of doctors score only 350 times. In fact, we show up so well that any unprejudiced man will agree that all the money given to the church would have been well invested if it had done nothing more than enable preachers to raise sons. . . . Not all of us make good, of course. A third of us go to the devil; another third float around in between; but another third rule the world.

A well-known authority on the American idea of success has provided a shrewd generalization: “Whenever Calvinism’s stern demands bit deep, as in Woodrow Wilson, Henry Luce, Norman Thomas, Robert Hutchins, Adolf A. Berle, Jr., DeWitt Wallace, or John Foster Dulles [all sons of preachers], there was a moral earnestness, a mission—and often a destiny.” William Eleazar Barton instilled this evangelical sense and moral purpose in his son. Bruce Barton, in his writings as in his life, provided convincing evidence of his deep dedication to and the profound influence of his Congregational minister-father.

William Barton, a descendant of a soldier in the American Revolution, was at the time of his son’s birth in 1886 a circuit rider working out of a small church in Robbins, Tennessee. Bruce Barton was the eldest of five children. His father’s missionary zeal led him to seek further education even after he had started his family. Moving on to Oberlin Theological Seminary, William Barton graduated at the top of his class when he was almost 30 years old. That same zeal plus a special flair for writing and preaching enabled him to move from one important church to another. At the same time, he lectured at seminaries, edited a magazine, wrote a series of books
Bruce Barton’s postgraduation plans, however, were not consonant with this formula for worldly success. He had decided that being a professor of history would be a sufficient goal and was delighted at the prospect of a fellowship from the exciting department at the University of Wisconsin. But 1907 was a depression year, and Bruce Barton felt the need to work. After weeks of job hunting in Chicago, one of his father’s parishioners found a position for him—as time-keeper in a western Montana construction camp. Working ten hours a day, he earned $65 a month; he valued the experience because it taught him to get along with tough men in a tough job.

Bruce Barton returned to Chicago at the age of 21 to sell advertising space for three magazines. He was soon working as a public relations counselor and as editor of a small religious paper. His paper was nearing bankruptcy, but the crisis, Barton’s biographers love to recall, did not lead to personal failure; rather it served to heighten his “enterprising spirit.” It also gave him his first opportunity to write an advertisement. He asked for, and received, permission to take back salary in advertising space and make arrangements with a friend who operated a travel agency. He would drum up customers for a Bavarian tour, this being the year of the Oberammergau Passion Play, and would receive a fee for every customer he secured. “Just a few dollars will take you to Europe to see the Passion Play” was typical ad copy, as salesmanship and religion united. The result: enough money to take Barton to New York City, where he settled in at the YMCA, first to work at Vogue magazine and then as managing editor of another religious weekly that soon folded. P. J. Collier and Son soon hired him as assistant sales manager. His flair for promotion and sales led to increased self-confidence and a firm belief in the value of salesmanship. His copy for Collier’s Five-Foot Shelf of Harvard Classics (sometimes known as Dr. Eliot’s Five-Foot Shelf of Books) helped lift that work to fame and played a significant role in the popularization of knowledge and culture so characteristic of this age. It was Bruce Barton who successfully urged countless readers to “let Dr. Eliot of Harvard give you the essentials of a liberal education in only 15 minutes a day.”

From 1914 to 1918, Barton served with the Collier company as editor of Every Week, a Sunday supplement with a format that presaged the modern picture magazine. His editorials and articles brought him a flourishing literary career, and one article in particular, about Billy Sunday, the evangelist, attracted the attention of an editor of the American Magazine. Invited to contribute to this journal, his articles, especially his interviews with famous people, stressed the inspirational and uplifting aspects of life and long remained popular. Indeed, these articles were so admired that they
were reproduced in a series of volumes during the 1920s; their titles suggest the over-all theme: More Power to You, It's a Good Old World, Better Days, On the Up and Up.

During World War I, the federal government asked Barton to coordinate fund drives of the YWCA and YMCA, Knights of Columbus, Salvation Army, and Jewish Welfare Board. Out of this experience two significant developments emerged. First, Barton's effort to help publicize the Salvation Army inspired one of his most famous slogans—indeed one of the most famous in an era of sloganeering—"A man may be down but he is never out." Second, the fund-raising campaign itself led him to enlist the aid of two advertising men, Alex Osborn of Buffalo and Roy Durstine of New York. That this campaign did not begin until Armistice Day failed to discourage the trio, since the funds were still needed. Their determination was justified: They topped their goal of $150,000,000 by some $50,000,000 more. Out of their successful team effort came the creation of a new advertising agency, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn, in January 1919. In 1928, the company merged with another agency, the George Batten Company, to become the highly publicized BBDO. Its fame was hardly limited to professional advertising men. The agency was well known to the general public and was very much the product of a transformed America, of a new era of the consumer-oriented mass society. Jokes, cartoons, and other popular references to its kind of activities made the agency's name a commonplace. By the time of Barton's retirement, it was the nation's fourth largest advertising firm. Its clients included many of the industrial giants—General Electric, General Motors, United States Steel. Founded on a $10,000 loan, the company had become a multimillion-dollar enterprise. Barton, who never seemed to seek money, attracted it with extraordinary ease. At the beginning, legend has it, he took a salary of only $5,000 a year from the agency, claiming that it was all anybody needed. He and his family obviously lived well (although never extravagantly) in later years, but it is probably true, as Barton delightedly used to insist, that "it would be a scandal if people knew how little I make as chairman of BBDO. I think it's almost a disgrace for a man to die rich." He was always equally generous with his contributions to charity and with the time he devoted to public service work.

Barton's original fame rested on his prolific and unsubtitle contributions to inspirational literature. Some found his work sentimental, even cloying, but there seemed to be a ceaseless public demand for it. Many of these qualities appeared in his most famous advertising copy. What Bruce Barton possessed was an insight into human nature, especially into the character of the American middle class in a period of transformation. He had a special sensitivity to its fears and hopes, yearnings and ideals. Richard M. Huber rightly finds him a man "with a knack for retailing simple homilies"—very much like the poet Edgar Guest. It seemed both easy and natural when "this leading retailer of values poured most of his energies into retailing products." But perhaps Alistair Cooke was most perceptive of all in seeing the meaning of Barton's career in advertising. Writing in his column for The Manchester Guardian on the occasion of Barton's death, Cooke stated: "He came as close as any one will to achieving a philosophy of advertising, because he saw the whole of human history as an exercise in persuasion."

Bruce Barton understood the power of communication in an era when new techniques of communications were remaking the social order. In a memorable piece immediately after World War I, "They Shall Beat Their Swords into Electrotypes," he pleaded for a new effort in the cause of international understanding. Each nation, he said, should pledge itself to spend at least one percent of its war costs in international advertising, "explaining to the rest of the world its own achievements and ideals; and seeking to eradicate from the character of its own people those characteristics which are a source of irritation to their neighbors." In the same article, he urged the international exchange of newspapermen, clergymen, professors—of every group that had "in its power the shaping of public opinion." And he continued, "In all these ways—plus the regular use of the printed word and motion picture—I would make the people of the world to know each other, knowing that ultimately they would come to like each other." These are ideas very much in harmony with so-called advanced thinking in an era fascinated by the power of new agencies of communication and mass culture. In the early 1930s, Barton's article "Let's Advertise This Hell" proposed an entirely new series of ads that would be offered to any publication that could be persuaded to print them as a way of keeping the United States out of another war. Late in 1929, he was busy proposing to Calvin Coolidge's political advisors a publicity campaign for the President's 1924 bid.

Barton's famous "Creed of an Advertising Man," first delivered as an address in 1927, is even more characteristic of his thinking and greatly contributed to an understanding of his 1920s vision of the importance of advertising in the social order. He writes:

I am in advertising because I believe in business and advertising is the voice of business. I recognize the waste and inefficiencies of business. I recognize
the cruelties of competition, and the dishonesty that still stains too many business operations. Yet I believe that in the larger development of business and the gradual evolution of its ideals lies the best hope of the world.

I am in advertising because advertising is the power which keeps business out in the open, which compels it to set up for itself public ideals of quality and service and to measure up to those ideals. Advertising is a creative force that has generated jobs, new ideas, has expanded our economy and has helped give us the highest standard of living in the world. Advertising is the spark plug on the cylinder of mass production, and essential to the continuance of the democratic process. Advertising sustains a system that has made us leaders of the free world: The American Way of Life.

If advertising sometimes encourages men and women to live beyond their means, so sometimes does matrimony. If advertising is too often tedious, garrulous and redundant, so is the U.S. Senate.

Advertising, then, was persuasion and persuasion could and would change the world; but advertising at the moment was doing its greatest and most necessary service in its special relationship to business—by publicizing products and urging consumers to buy them. (His method of dealing with Communism, stated later in life, is characteristic: “Give every Russian a copy of the latest Sears-Roebuck Catalogue and the address of the nearest Sears-Roebuck outlet.”) The genius of Barton’s own advertising copy was based on the assumption that the use of products advertised effectively contributed to growth and progress, sometimes of the nation but more often of the individual himself. The most successful ads would seek to employ the products of a business in the service of the sanctity or betterment of human life. Witness, for instance, one General Electric ad: “Any woman who is doing any household task that a little electric motor can do is working for three cents an hour. Human life is too precious to be sold at the price of three cents an hour.” Or that ad for the Alexander Hamilton Institute (a two-year correspondence course): “A wonderful two years’ trip at full pay. But only men with imagination can take it. Only one man in ten has imagination, and imagination rules the world.” Or that for General Foods: the creation of Betty Crocker as “the kitchen familiar of every lonely American housewife.” The ad shaped for each situation sought to provide everyone with a simple way to understand a rapidly standardizing and mechanizing way of life. In a world of increased complexities, mass technology, and fearful changes, such advertisements offered a chance to retain human dignity as well as individual meaning and development. Bruce Barton, the great master of the uplift essay, without doubt had put uplift at the service of American business enterprise; without doubt he did so largely be-

cause of that learning he had received as a young boy at his father’s table.

Bruce Barton, it is clear, had been fascinated by ideas about salesmanship and religion many years before writing his 1925 best seller *The Man Nobody Knows*. He had often commented, in writing and conversation, what a great textbook the Bible could be for an advertising man. Barton’s writings delighted in Biblical-like parables and even his advertising copy had a Biblical quality to its prose. But it was only in 1925, the year of the Scopes Trial and William Jennings Bryan’s fundamentalist interpretation of the Old Testament, that the Republican business-oriented Barton finally provided his important and widely read interpretation of the New Testament, which especially emphasized the life of Jesus.

Ever since the nineteenth century had sought and found a historical Christ, it had become increasingly popular to see him in ways that suited the historical needs of a given moment. Jesus had been recreated as a fairly respectable Christian socialist or a not-so-respectable proletarian revolutionary. Now, in the 1920s, Barton claimed him for yet another historical role. He set out specifically, we might argue today, to give Christ a new image. In the process he provided a new vision of Christianity. Such a vision was consistent both with the tough demands of a more difficult and rigorously ordered mass society and with a new religious glow destined, not as a simple justification of capitalism and the virtues necessary to sustain it, but as a means of sanctifying the new order of modern business—one organized through the instrumentality of salesmanship to serve the newly emerging consumer-based mass society. In a society where the older ideal of the stewardship of wealth could no longer serve, a new idea evolved: business—all business—as service to others and something fundamental to the development of self. Barton, Richard Huber observed, “soaked the idea of success in the sanctity of the New Testament.” He moved American Puritanism, in a profound sense, from a more traditional dependence on the God of the Old Testament to a greater reliance on a carefully reexamined and reconstructed vision of the New Testament.

The initial task at hand was to develop a necessary new view of the personality of Jesus and the basic values that went with it. Barton took particular aim at the Sunday School image of Jesus: a weaking, a killjoy, a failure, a sissy, meek and full of grief. In its place there was a new Jesus: the physically strong carpenter, a healthy and vigorous outdoors man, a sociable companion, a strong and effective leader. “A killjoy! He was the most popular dinner guest in Jerusalem!... A failure! He picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization
that conquered the world." Barton insisted on Jesus' masculinity, suggesting his attractiveness to women, stressing his role as a father figure, even emphasizing the role of Jesus' own "historical" father, Joseph. Jesus emerges, as it were, a consumer himself, enjoying life and parties, turning water into wine. His methods are those of advertising; he is the founder of "modern business" and modern entrepreneurial tactics. Barton's understanding of what Jesus meant by his "Father's business" is the key to his own analysis. God seeks, Barton tells us, to develop perfect human beings, superior to circumstance, victorious over Fate. No single kind of human talent or effort can be spared if the experiment is to succeed. The race must be fed and clothed and housed and transported, as well as preached to, and taught and healed. Thus all business is his Father's business. All work is worship; all useful service prayer. And whoever works wholeheartedly at any worthy calling is a co-worker with the Almighty in the great enterprise which He has initiated but which he can never finish without the help of men.

The Man Nobody Knows first appeared in serial form in the Woman's Home Companion and then for several years in the late 1920s continued to ride high on the best-seller lists. Barton followed it in 1927 with The Book Nobody Knows, a study of the Bible. These works have never been without an audience since they were first published, but they remain peculiarly documents of the 1920s and in a sense the high points of Barton's career.

Barton, of course, continued with his agency and his writing. He was elected to Congress from Manhattan's East Side Silk Stocking District in 1937 and easily reelected in 1938. Earning a considerable reputation, among reporters at least, for his ability and service in the House, he was a vigorous opponent of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. He lost a bid for the Senate in 1940 and retired from politics—only after the President borrowed something from Barton's book with a little sloganeering of his own. His jocular condemnation of three outstanding GOP House critics with the repeated phrase "Martin, Barton, and Fish" delighted his audience and gave Bruce Barton still another claim to national fame.

But it is fair to say that the major impact of Barton's life and ideas rests in the 1920s. Somehow his special vision of the world served these pre-Depression years in a special way. Barton's optimism, his defense of business, and especially his often profound sense of the importance of communications, of techniques of persuasion, of the significant role played by salesmanship and advertising in the new order of things served this period most particularly. Of no less service to the 1920s was his basic and old-fashioned evangelism, which he carried with him from the nineteenth century and which was transformed in a way that coincided with the needs of millions of middle-class Americans living in a time of clashing values and sharp institutional change. Much of Barton, of course, today seems camp, unsophisticated, self-serving, unreal. We know that most of his ardent beliefs were being attacked or mocked even during the period in which he wrote. Yet Barton tried to accept the new order as well as redefine older values without abandoning what he deemed best in the latter—ideals of self-development and individual human dignity in an era of mass technology, mass organization, mass society. He tried to redefine Christianity and made it again a potent moral force.

Barton's salesman as hero replaced William Graham Sumner's savings bank depositor as hero for the conservative sons of American Puritan ministers—much as though one age of social order were in effect replacing another. At a time in which the values of a producer society dominated, Sumner, the Yale sociologist, could claim that the man who saved his money and practiced self-denial was the hero of civilization; in an age of increasing consumer orientation stressing sales and spending and joy rather than self-denial, Barton, the advertising man, glorified the salesman-businessman. The type, of course, was subject to Sinclair Lewis' bitter satire at almost the instant Barton was creating him. Later, by 1935, novelist Thornton Wilder would present his extraordinary study of both modern salesmanship and modern Protestantism in Heaven's My Destination. And during the 1940s and 1950s, the images of the salesman that emerged from works like Eugene O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh and Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman have the appearance of tragedy and perhaps even symbolize the whole tragedy of American life. Only in the mid-1960s, with the Mayesles brothers' documentary film Salesman, does the salesman image evoke neither heroism nor tragedy; rather pathos and perhaps a touch of comedy. But these are other times.

To return to the 1920s, however, it is apparent that we will not understand this decade until we understand Bruce Barton's life and contribution to it—or better yet, why so many Americans responded to Barton's message in quite the way they did. A successful salesman best served the world, Barton firmly believed, and in the 1920s he was perhaps the best salesman of all. A secular piety and a new priesthood. Preachers' sons might indeed rule the world.

By the time of Henry Ford's death in 1947, at least one of the crucial ideas in Bruce Barton's life and work—the proposition that business was service—was firmly fixed in American thought. Notwithstanding-
ing depression and World War, the idea of business success had also become sharply identified with the business of being American. Maybe Calvin Coolidge had said it crudely in the 1920s, but the overwhelming majority of the public opinion makers in 1947 seemed to agree: the business of America was business. This identification was so complete that Ford himself as well as his achievements seemed to be, as The New York Times declared, the very "embodiment of America in an era of industrial revolution." Yet Ford's career had been made possible because of the American system itself; he was the product of our "free enterprise" way while also serving as the living symbol of its achievement and success.

This account of the relationship between Ford and America produced a series of complex intellectual problems. First, the portrait of Ford was that of a simple man who sought neither a vast fortune nor luxuries, whose constant concern was for "the great multitude," for the "common man." Second, his great accomplishments, possible "only in America," were ultimately based on a "single-minded devotion to fundamentals as he saw them: hard work, the simple virtues, self-reliance, the good earth. He profited by providing what was new, but he also treasured that which was by-gone." None of this enables us to come to grips with the essentially radical, if not revolutionary, consequences of Ford's achievement. Nor do we necessarily understand why, even outside America and indeed in the very heart of socialist Europe, Ford and his system—Fordismus, the Europeans often called it—was hailed in the 1920s as a major contribution to the twentieth-century revolution by Marxists as imposing as Vladimir Lenin. Indeed, it was not at all unusual to find Ford's portrait hanging alongside that of Lenin in Soviet factories. (Nor was Ford himself unappreciative of the achievement of Soviet engineers and factories.) Ford's favorite authors may have been Horatio Alger and Ralph Waldo Emerson; he may have repeatedly quoted homilies from the McGuffey Readers, which appear to be his only source of formal education, but he was nonetheless considered a major architect of the new social order that came into being during the first two decades of the twentieth century and must be understood if we are to grasp the nature of the 1920s.

Biography, then, includes both the subject's achievements and the way these provide for continuity and/or change in society. It also tells us, by the use some elements in society make of a man's life, something about that society as well. The Ford as Horatio Alger hero—simple mechanic to industrial giant; the Ford as living evidence of the success and meaning of the American way; the Ford as villainous autocrat, brutally exemplifying the worst features of class warfare; the Ford as genius whose wisdom gives him the right if not the responsibility to speak with authority on all human and social problems; the Ford as revolutionary who remade the modern world in his own vision—the "legends" of Henry Ford are in many ways as significant to an understanding of history as is any study of the "true" achievements of a life's work, properly assessed.

Ford was 57 years old in 1920 (Bruce Barton was 34, and Babe Ruth 25). The decade saw the culmination of his major work and witnessed even the beginning of the decline of the system he had dreamed and dreamed to create. Like Barton, he was a man with a mission and the story of that mission and what happened to it in the 1920s dominates this discussion. Roger Burlingame has insisted, "It is hard to deny that Henry Ford was ridden by two obsessions: mechanical perfection and the 'common man.' " Those obsessions, the way they often conflicted and the attempts to achieve some kind of effective balance between them, are important here. They are explored not only because such an approach helps us to understand more fully the life of Ford himself but because in a profound sense their story is the central theme of our century, a theme that reached a peak of sorts in the 1920s.

Henry Ford did not worship his father. William Ford was a prosperous farmer of pioneer Scots-Irish stock, well established on a largely self-sufficient and profitable farm near Dearborn, Michigan, when Henry was born in July 1863. The farm had its own sawmill and gristmill and machinery for making homespun of wool that was sheared from William Ford's own sheep. There were, of course, many chores for a farm boy, but Henry from earliest childhood seemed to loathe such work. From the outset, however, he seemed attracted to and useful in dealing with the machinery on the place. By all local accounts, he had a special mechanical aptitude and a kind of intuitive mechanical logic. At an early age, for instance, he developed a passion for timepieces and spent considerable time fixing things; that is, "tinkering"—a fine old Yankee tradition. Mechanization even in the years of Henry's boyhood, had become important to Midwest farm life, especially in more prosperous regions. Significant, too, was the increasing industrialization occurring around the Ford farm in Wayne County. But the boy's fascination with the machine and with mechanics did not please his father, who not only disliked the new industrial and urbanized world growing up around him but also had other needs for the boy's labor. When the boy was sixteen the arguments between the two proved too much: Ford's dislike of farming, his disagreements with his father, and the attraction of work in a machine shop led
him to Detroit. It was around this time, Ford himself tells us, that his dream of making something in quantity without reduction in quality began to take hold of his imagination.

Evidence indicates not only little formal education in Henry Ford's life, but also almost no use at all for books; further, there seems to be no sense of any religious training or commitment. Even before Ford left home for the first time in 1879, and though he was unaware of it, George Selden had already applied for his celebrated patent for a gasoline-motoried car. (It would later play a significant role in the development of Ford's company.) Clearly, then, people—both in the United States and abroad—were responding to the possibilities inherent in new sources of energy. Ford himself experimented with steam engines before he began to study the internal-combustion engine. But from a very early age his commitment was to engines and to production in quantity, not to the manufacture of luxury items for the few.

Ford did return to the farm for a period. His father, hoping to give him a worthwhile occupation that would provide independence and a livelihood, bequeathed forty acres of timberland to Henry. Ford used the opportunity to get married, to build himself a house as well as a machine shop—and to avoid any farming whatsoever! By 1891 he had left the rural homestead for good for a position as an engineer with the Edison Illuminating Company. He advanced rapidly and became chief engineer. In his spare time, he worked at home on a small motor-driven vehicle of his own design. By 1893 the Duryea brothers successfully had demonstrated the first American gasoline automobile. Two years later, a meeting with Thomas A. Edison, perhaps Ford's only hero, encouraged him to continue work on his engine. By 1896 he had demonstrated his own first car; by 1899 the company asked him to choose between his hobby and his job. Ford made his decision: a full dedication of his future to the automobile.

Detroit was taking young Ford seriously as a builder of automobiles, and the nation as a whole was increasingly fascinated by the possibilities of the “horseless carriage.” Yet Ford's first corporate venture, the Detroit Automobile Company, was short-lived; within a year a new firm had been formed, the Henry Ford Automobile Company. But it, too, did not survive. Such detail is significant only because it documents Ford's intense difficulties in working under conditions in which he lacked complete control, and he vowed never again to be in a position where others could give him orders. Meanwhile, between 1899 and 1902, Ford had used his time well. He was becoming famous. He knew that one of the central propositions of the new age was self-advertisement and publicity, and that car speed was the way to it in the automobile business. Ford himself did not believe that high speed added to a car's value, but he was aware that breaking speed records made one a celebrity in the social world at large. Furthermore, such records cornered the attention of the rich and, notwithstanding his growing dream, they alone could afford this new toy—expensive as such handmade objects inevitably had to be. And when Ford began to win races at fashionable tracks such as that at Grosse Pointe, Michigan—at one event he reached the speed of 70 miles an hour—international publicity came to him. Finally, the famous driver Barney Oldfield broke all records at the Grosse Pointe course in the “999,” a car Ford had built.

By 1903 the Ford Motor Company was a reality. Incorporated with basic capital investment of only $28,000 provided by a Detroit coal dealer (most of that in the form of shop, machinery, patents, contracts), the company managed to assemble an extraordinary group of businessmen, engineers, etc. Within five years it had become one of the leading automobile manufacturers. There was little to distinguish the company's product. Ransom E. Olds had already pioneered in producing inexpensive cars. “Mass production” methods were available to all manufacturers. But, as Roger Burlingame tells us, the automobile of 1903 was still in an early experimental stage:

No detail of engine or transmission was settled, no design of any part frozen; there was no standardization of tools or processes, and it was not until four years later that true interchangeability of parts even among supposedly identical cars made in a single factory was demonstrated... In 1903 there were more than 25 American manufacturers of passenger cars and, with the exception of Olds, no manufacturer sold more than a few hundred cars each year. The automobile, therefore, was for the most part a strictly handmade article.

Meanwhile, the famous public fancy was increasingly captured by the possibilities of the automobile. There was clearly a rising demand although obviously most cars remained too expensive for the wide and hungering middle-class market. Woodrow Wilson actually feared the motorcar mania because, he suggested in 1906, the automobile might very well bring socialism to America by inciting the poor to envy the rich!

In 1907, against “sound” advice, Ford announced his mission and his dream:
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I will build a motor car for the great multitude. It will be large enough for the family but small enough for the individual to run and care for. It will be constructed of the best materials, by the best men to be hired, after the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise. But it will be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one—and enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces.

From the vantage point of the time it was issued, this extraordinarily simple statement is breathtaking in its implications. It is, in fact, a prediction of a new social order, an introduction to the world that was to be in the 1920s. It had enormous significance for the individual, the family, the mass society—and perhaps even in a sense proposed a serious redefinition of each. It hinted at a new definition of work and of production. It projected the likelihood of a new lifestyle. It implied a new kind of possible egalitarianism unheard of in the world's history—and it did all of this not in the name of needs, but in terms of possible pleasure: here, indeed, was a consumer vision of the world.

The creation of the Model T—the Tin Lizzie, or the flivver, as "she" was also called—is the climax of the story, the final convergence of Ford and history. It called for a series of key decisions, each Ford's fundamental responsibility no matter where the original idea came from. First, there was the matter of the huge new plant covering over 65 acres at Highland Park and the start of a major effort to cut back on dividends to stockholders, to plow some of the profits into new production. Second, there was the decision to make one car and only one car: "The way to make automobiles is to make one automobile like another automobile, to make them all alike, to make them come from the factory just alike—just like one pin is like another pin when it comes from the pin factory." In this decision, of course, Ford simply followed the well-established tradition of mass production as developed in the United States but never applied to the automobile industry. It meant the search for a car design suitable for mass use rather than one simply for cheap manufacture. Third, there was the need for low-cost production techniques. It resulted in the introduction of the famous moving assembly line, which involved an enormous financial commitment in terms of tools. The idea of continuous movement seemed simple enough, and it rested on two seemingly simple principles: (1) the work must be brought to the worker and not the worker to the work, and (2) the work must be brought waist high so no worker would have to stoop. Taking almost seven years to perfect, the system at Highland Park was an established fact by 1914, and the production revolution had been wrought. Men and machine, through the central conveyor belt, had been in effect merged into one gigantic machine. It made possible a dramatic reduction in the time required to produce a car. By 1920 one completed Model T rolled off the line every minute; by 1925 one every ten seconds. Production rose from 39,640 in 1911 to 740,770 in 1917. In 1920, every other car in the world was a Model T Ford.

By the early 1920s, Ford commanded over 60 percent of the American output. Never before had such a complex mechanical process been devised or such production been possible. The achievement required a spectacular degree of synchronization, precision, and specialization. Yet this in itself created newer problems that led to still further revolutionary consequences. For instance, such mechanization meant that little real skill was required by any particular worker. Only the top engineers and designers had to know anything about the total process. It suggested the possibility of an easily obtainable work force, but it had inherent drawbacks—in the form of the sheer monotony of the work, which led to an alarming turnover in the labor force.

With production methods already radically altered by 1914, Ford announced yet another daring step. He proposed a new wage scheme, a kind of profit sharing (in advance of actual profits) in which the minimum for any class of work would be (under certain conditions) five dollars a day. At the same time, he reduced the working day from nine to eight hours. The key fact here was that in no sense was pay tied into productivity. There were conditions attached to the minimum-pay stipulation: certain minimum standards of conduct and behavior as outlined by the company; that is, standards by which the company judged men to be "good workers." Ford, in effect, doubled the wages of those "who could pass his sociology examination on the clean and wholesome life," stated John R. Commons, who reported on the operation of Ford's plan with considerable enthusiasm. Not only did the resultant stable work force please Ford, but he was able to show an increase in profits as well. And, as he was well aware, he had also made every workman a potential customer.

There was still one more remaining piece in the mosaic of a new order of work and life, production and consumption. Ford established a "Sociological Department" (later called the "Education Department"), initially under the direction of an Episcopal minister. Its aim was paternalistic: to teach Ford's workers how to live the exemplary life, how to budget their newfound high wages, to encourage them to refrain from liquor or tobacco, to provide elemental lessons in hygiene and home management, to suggest steps
helpful in the “Americanization” of the huge numbers of foreign-born in the company’s work force. Under pressure from those who opposed such paternalism and charged Ford with spying or a special kind of tyranny, the scheme was eventually given up. But it was in effect replaced by the company’s extraordinary trade school, with perhaps more lasting effects. Nonetheless, it is important to see the social aspects of Ford’s thinking about his world and to see how the whole dream finally produced a totally new order, the object of Ford’s mission and dream, whether or not he fully realized it.

By the 1920s, then, Ford and his new system were being widely hailed as the American System. The miracles he had wrought in production and consumption made his name synonymous with American success. A national figure, his advice sought on all kinds of issues, Ford began to yield to pressures to go beyond the world of automobile manufacture. With war raging in Europe, he sailed off in 1915 on his famous and much maligned “peace ship,” a venture in personal diplomacy by which he hoped to dramatize the crusade for peace. In 1918, at the urging of Woodrow Wilson, he ran for the Senate from Michigan and lost in a close contest in which voter fraud was later established. Ford’s writings grew more voluminous on many subjects; he owned his own newspaper, The Dearborn Independent, in which he conducted “his own” column (it was obvious that he increasingly relied on ghostwriters for much of his published work, although this dependence, of course, did not relieve him of responsibility for what was said in his name). The blatantly anti-Semitic material published in the paper, for example, was one of the worst mistakes of his career. It cost him countless followers and threatened him with court action as well.

Ford’s national dreams in the 1920s led him to propose the development of Muscle Shoals (site of the later TVA) under his own auspices. It was a grand scheme to bring industry to the countryside and to decentralize industrial concentration while offering the advantages of industrial life to isolated rural areas. George Norris and others in the Senate blocked this private takeover. Ford continued to remain a much-sought-after man politically. There was even talk of his running for the Presidency in 1924, but he finally decided against encouraging such a move.

Meanwhile, in Ford’s immediate world, potential disaster turned almost literally to gold. He had lost a stockholders’ suit to compel the payment of special dividends. Company stockholders were more and more frightened by his apparent lack of interest in profits; the “socialism” of his Five-Dollar-a-Day wage scheme and the Sociological Department; the idea of profit-sharing; and the projected society of the common man. Ford was now determined to obtain complete control to carry out his plans. Taking a daring chance, he bought out all the stockholders. But he hated banks and bankers, and refused to borrow from them to achieve his goal of complete family ownership (something unique for an industrial corporation of that size and wealth). To obtain increased operating capital, he put a squeeze play on Ford dealerships. He pushed through a production speed-up, forced cars on unwilling dealers, threatened franchise losses if they didn’t pay for cars, ordered or not, and forced them to go to their banks, leaving Ford free and clear and, finally in the 1920s, his own master.

The 1920s initially seemed to bring increased growth. Ford’s organization weathered the 1921 depression better than any other company in the industry. Meanwhile, he continued his struggle for full integration in production. He sought to make his enterprise completely self-sufficient, acquiring raw materials and methods of transportation to achieve an even flow of raw materials into the process of production and then an even flow of finished goods coming off the production line—a kind of universal and unceasing procession of the universal car, the Model T.

Ford was unable to create the final realization of his vision on either the technological side (with the system of complete integration) or the social or human side (with the reshaping of human lives by means of the Sociological Department) any more than he had been able to transcend Highland Park and later River Rouge. The wider regional or national dreams remained unfulfilled. But the impact of Ford’s revolutionary mission continued to unfold in the United States and through the rest of the world. Fordismus had created a 1920s different from what the decade would have been without it. Nevertheless, other forces had begun to threaten the basic assumptions on which Ford’s radical revision of things had been partly based.

In 1927, the Ford Motor Company made its crucial decision to end production of the great Tin Lizzie, the Model T, and to begin work on the replacement Model A. Ford had perhaps belatedly learned a fundamental fact about the new and affluent mass society he had done so much to shape, if not to create: price and efficiency alone would not dictate consumer choice. Many of his competitors already knew as much. This new world of mass consumption was also a new world of mass communications in which national advertising and newer forms of national media (radio, film, the new journalism) helped play upon human needs and desires, hopes and fears. Ford was not familiar with the world of Bruce Barton; he did
not sense the need for individual and even private fulfillment; he had not perceived that the common man did not want to feel common; mechanical perfection, although often desirable, was not enough.

Ironically, of course, it was profits (or lack of them) that forced Ford's move. He himself was clearly uninterested in simply making money for its own sake; his whole career is a testament to that observation; his own simple and sometimes even austere way of life are sufficient evidence. But the company did exist as part of a capitalist order and survival meant coming to grips with competition—no matter how much Ford might wish to rely on internal strengths and isolate himself from external dangers, and no matter how "false" for him were the values that led to the rejection of the cheap, ugly, durable, efficient, simple, and black Model T. Having in a sense created the 1920s, he failed to see what else had also been created.

The retreat of 1927—with the decision to end the Model T—was a fateful one. Except for some of the production miracles he contributed to during World War II, Ford's life was increasingly given over to a bitter series of struggles—within management and with labor, the latter often being bloody affairs. To 1927, the seemingly progressive Henry Ford of 1907 seemed unable even to understand the world of the 1930s. The Ford of the Five-Dollar-a-Day and the Sociological Department could not believe that workers really wanted unions and that strikes could ever achieve a real purpose.

Even in terms of the day-to-day operation of the business, Ford could admit in 1933 that the new plant at River Rouge "is so big that it isn't any fun any more." Increasingly (again, ironically for the man who "made" the twentieth century), he continued to turn to the past: new interest in rediscovered folk dancing; republication of McGuffey's Readers; historical collecting for his special museum or for Greenfield Village, which was a kind of sentimental reconstruction of his own past, that past that he had run away from so many years ago. We face a strange portrait: the man who invented the future now carefully rediscovering the past.

Was there an answer to the fundamental problem his life so startlingly posed? Could the ideals projected by the phrases "mechanical perfection" and "common man" ever really be reconciled? Would even a totalitarian regime be able to achieve the perfect reconciliation? Ford tried and we have seen the outcome in the America of the 1920s. Yet the question continues to haunt us—partly because of how far Ford went, because we are still feeling the consequences of that accomplishment, because we still respond to the experiences of the 1920s with a continued sense of hope and fear.

When George Herman Ruth, Jr., died in 1947, The New York Times devoted more than two of its large eight-column pages to him. While each column clearly supplemented the other, they were vastly different in tone and method of presentation. The headline on the first read:

Ruth, Baseball's Great Star and Idol of Children, Had a Career Both Dramatic and Bizarre/World-Wide Fame Won on Diamond/Even in Lands Where Game is Unknown, Baseball's Star Player Was Admired

There followed a traditional and detailed obituary, rich in sentiment of recalled moments of sorrow and joy as well as prosaic biographical fact, with strenuous effort to recount both significant achievements and recapture an extraordinary personality. The second headline presented something else:

Ruth Set Fifty-four Major League Records and Ten Additional Marks in American Circuit/Slugger Starred in 10 World Series/Ruth Set Major League Homer Mark on Total of 714—Hit Over 40 Eleven Seasons/Had Most Walks in 1923/All-Time Batting Great also Struck Out Most Times in Career Lasting 22 Years

The page itself had no prose story. It was simply a serial listing of all kinds of records, a careful selection of complete box scores of games important in Ruth's career, a carefully outlined and specially headed box that listed his yearly salary from the first days in Baltimore ($600) in 1914 to the final year in Brooklyn ($15,000), for a lifetime total of $925,900.

In these two descriptions of the career of one of the great sports heroes of the 1920s (so often called "The Golden Age of American Sports"), it is perhaps possible to see two aspects of the enormous appeal spectator sports held for this decade. The mechanism of life generally, when combined with the mounting effort to rationalize all aspects of man's activities, produced a particular middle-class delight in what could be measured and counted. (How fitting, then, were statistics on the "home run," with both numbers hit and distances traveled by the ball.) Americans could delight in the data that Ruth and other players provided. Athletic records provided a means of measuring achievement—success—in sports
as such statistics did in other aspects of the mechanized and rationally life. Most especially, salary figures also assisted in judging success.

But no matter how fascinated a society may be with this mechanized aspect of the life that its athletes lead (which naturally transfers to the games people play or watch), it apparently was not enough. "Star," "Idol," "Dramatic," "Bizarre" were words featured in Ruth's official obituary, suggesting that the public demands something more. Perhaps in an increasingly mechanized world more was called for. Grantland Rice, the sports writer, once wrote this about the great sports figures like Ruth:

They had something more than mere skill or competitive ability. They also had in record quality and quantity that indescribable asset known as color, personality, crowd appeal, or whatever you may care to call it.

And if our sports mirror other aspects of our lives in a significant way, it might not be inappropriate to propose that what Rice suggests about sports figures was the lesson Ford had bitterly learned by 1927 when he discovered that his "common man" was no longer willing to settle for record-book cheapness, mechanical efficiency, and the like. People, he discovered, also wanted "style" (a favorite subject of Henry's son Edsel, with whom old Henry constantly fought) in their cars; that is, "color, personality, crowd appeal."

Also in 1927, another major American corporation was enjoying huge success. Colonel Jacob Ruppert's New York Yankees was the best baseball team in the world; there are those that claim it was the greatest baseball team of all time. Ruth hit 60 home runs that season, Lou Gehrig drove in 175 runs, the Yankees won the pennant by 19 games and swept the World Series against the Pittsburgh Pirates in four straight games. Babe Ruth earned $70,000 in 1927 for simply playing under contract with the Colonel. And Ruth was worth every penny to Ruppert's corporation, which owned a gigantic stadium (often known as "The House that Ruth Built") with 70,000 seats to fill. This was big business for the Colonel and the Yankee organization—and seeing the Babe perform and produce was something big and special for the fans. It was more than a question of team loyalties, more than winning or losing the game. The New York Times account of one 1927 World Series game perhaps captures a little of this sentiment:

His majesty the Babe had sent 64,000 folks in a paroxysm of glee by clubbing a screaming liner into the right field bleachers. . . . The big time came in the seventh. The Yanks had the game safely stowed away and the sus-

pense was over . . . but the fans still stood up and demanded that Mr. Ruth get busy and do something for home and country. . . . "A homer, Babe! Give us a homer!" ran the burden of the plea, and the big fellow pulled his cap on tighter, took a reef in his belt, dug spikes into the ground and grimly faced (the pitcher). . . . Upward and onward, gaining speed and height with every foot, the little white ball winged with terrific speed until it dashed itself against the seat of the right-field bleachers, more than a quarter of the way up the peopled slope. And now the populace had its homer and it stood up and gave the glad joyous howl that must have rang out in the Roman arena of old. . . .

This description is revealing evidence of another pertinent aspect of the world of George Herman Ruth, Jr., perhaps an aspect helping to "make" him into the heroic Babe he would become. The new mechanized era of mass society was one of mass communications as well, and the media demanded suitable material for copy. A new group of reporters and writers—Ring Lardner, Grantland Rice, Heywood Broun, John Kiernan among them—were ready exploiters of achievement and personalities, anxious to expand the traditional meaning of "news" for a whole series of publications, radio broadcasts, sometimes even films, that constantly demanded copy to feed a growing number of hungry consumers of this kind of news. They invented along the way an often brilliantly different and always special kind of rhetoric and style. Their unique prose delighted readers, sold more copies, appealed to more advertising agencies with products to sell—which was done through buying space in publications or time on the radio. "The Ruth is mighty and shall prevail," Haywood Broun wrote in 1929. It is still quoted by enthusiasts of the special sportswriting prose of this golden age of sports and of sports promotion.

The "mighty Ruth" of 1923 was born among the most lowly in a poor, third-floor apartment over a saloon in the waterfront section of Baltimore, Maryland, in 1895. His parents, both children of immigrants, constantly struggled with poverty in a home described as an "angry, violent, desperately poor place, tense with all the frustrations of extreme poverty and shabbiness." Ruth confessed that he hardly knew them, and the major recollections of his father seem to be those of repeated and brutal beatings. "I was a bad kid," Ruth tells us in his autobiography. Unable to take care of their 7-year-old son and describing him as "incorrigible," his parents put Ruth in St. Mary's Industrial School in Baltimore. He would remain there—with occasional returns to the parental home—until he was 19.

The story of Ruth's upbringing reads like a stereotype of Victorian childhood among the lowest urban poor, a kind of Dickensian horror tale without any cheerful relief, without any sentimental
moments of escape from nightmare. The school stressed order and discipline; it tried to educate but clearly did little in the case of Ruth: he could barely read and write. There was no privacy. And there were few if any friends for Ruth, who was the object of unkind verbal abuse because of his size and shape. After leaving school, he continued to have—and to retain almost until the end of his life—the most primitive of personal habits and the crudest of manners. There is little evidence that the strict Catholicism administered at St. Mary’s had any significant effect on him. Ruth’s excessive and obsessive interest in gambling, sex, and drinking appear to be schoolboy products he carried throughout his life. When at home, he lived near the harsh waterfront, mixing with rough sailors and bums. In effect he was an abandoned child. “I had a rotten start,” he tells us, “and it took me a long time to get my bearings.” St. Mary’s appears to have been of little help in getting those “bearings,” and Ruth’s life story leads one to wonder whether he ever really got them. Perhaps this upbringing accounts for what appears to be his genuine fondness for the countless number of children who idolized him during his great career and for his willingness to visit children in hospitals and homes throughout these later years.

St. Mary’s did try to give Ruth a vocation. He was assigned to the shirt factory to learn the tailor’s trade, and the assignment indicates that the brothers noted no special potential or skills during his many years with them. But two positive things did emerge from his life at St. Mary’s. First, he appeared to learn (as Ken Sobol, his ablest biographer tells us) that his “personal crudities” became “uproarious crowd-pleasers” in the presence of an audience. This was certainly important preparation for the “colorful” personality and always willing performer Ruth was to become. He would be eager to provide “good copy” and to delight fans off the field as well as on. (The shy, educated, craftsmanlike Lou Gehrig, for example, never learned to be a showman and never earned the kind of vast following or the money that Ruth did.) Yet St. Mary’s most important gift was not any special training but a special opportunity. Baseball was about the only recreational outlet given to the boys at St. Mary’s. So it was here that Ruth learned to play the game and to develop the enormous native skills, the coordination and power, that would make him the most spectacular ballplayer of his time.

Baseball had been a successful professional activity since the 1870s, and by 1903 it had become sufficiently developed and well organized to create the beginnings of a mass audience and the source of significant careers for many young men. For Ruth—a man without learning, traditional skills, or alternate route—it offered a miraculous escape from the treadmill of poverty. Baseball could provide him with effective social mobility. Ruth was certainly neither the first nor the last of the children of fairly recent immigration and urban poverty to find their way to national status and success. Yet in many ways his career was among the most spectacular. One of St. Mary’s brothers recommended Ruth to the owner of the Baltimore club, and he signed his first professional contract in 1914. That same year, his contract was sold for $2,900 to the Boston Red Sox, and with that organization he soon matured into a pitcher of rare ability.

While at Boston, Ruth also began to show remarkable prowess as a hitter. Baseball fans started to talk of his home runs, and by 1919 he was more often in the outfield than on the pitching mound. The following year was a turning point in both Ruth’s career and in the game itself. The Yankees purchased his contract for $100,000 and also guaranteed the $350,000 mortgage on the financially shaky Red Sox stadium. It was a record sum—but the Babe delivered with a record number of home runs and enthusiastic fan response. The winter of 1920–1921, however, produced a scandal that rocked the entire structure of professional baseball. Gamblers had managed to buy the services of several members of the Chicago White Sox (subsequently labeled “Black Sox”) to “throw” the 1919 World Series. The owners then reorganized baseball’s business structure and appointed a stern federal judge, James Kenesaw Mountain Landis, as new high commissioner with unlimited power to assure the sanctity of the sport, though they still worried whether this reform would be enough, whether the fans would return. Many historians of the game attribute Ruth’s brilliant performance during the following season as the most important factor in reviving spectator enthusiasm. Nine to ten million fans annually paid to see major league baseball in the 1920s.

By the end of the 1921 season (again to quote Sobol), more words were written about Ruth “than had ever been devoted to any other athlete in any single year. More people had watched him play than any other player. And more citizens of America, young and old, knew his name and could even recognize his homely round face than ever heard of Ty Cobb or John J. McGraw.” Sportswriters vied with one another to provide him with appropriate nicknames (“Sultan of Swat”), but somehow he always remained “Babe” or “Bambino” (a change from “Nigger-lips,” which he was often called at St. Mary’s). He was the nation’s great boy child, and Americans loved their big boy who often did so many childish things.
Whatever his achievements on the field, his growing contributions to the record books, the Babe also delighted millions of his countrymen by the sheer bigness of his affable personality and even by his awesome inability to curb his overwhelming appetites. Most Americans seemed to tolerate at least some of the indulgences of their big boy. No Ford or Barton, Ruth enjoyed spending money as well as earning it. An incorrigible gambler, and for large sums, he never seemed concerned about winning or losing. He loved expensive and fancy clothes. His interest in sex seemed limitless, and he frequented the better brothels even while in training or on tour with the ball club. His gluttony became equally legendary; he often overate and overdrank to the point of actual severe physical illness. Like so many celebrities in our modern mechanized age, Ruth's frequent illness, physical collapse, even hospitalization became almost routine. The Babe's most publicized collapse and hospitalization occurred during spring training in 1925, and the public apparently accepted the official explanation that his illness was the result of influenza and indigestion; the real cause, it appears, was a serious case of syphilis. A much concerned public watched intensely for reports of Ruth's condition. One well-known sportswriter called it "the stomach ache heard round the world."

Ruth was a heroic producer in the mechanized world of play. He was also an ideal hero for the world of consumption. Americans enjoyed the Babe's excess; they took comfort in the life of apparently enormous pleasures that Ruth enjoyed. Seldom if ever (even in this age of the rising popularity of Freudian thought) did they seem aware of what might exist behind this pattern of excess and illness. "Babe Ruth," Bill McGeehan said in 1925, "is our national exaggeration.... He has lightened the cares of the world and kept us from becoming overserious by his sheer exuberance."

Ruth found a way of making all of this pay; he made himself into a marketable product. In 1921 he hired an agent—perhaps Christy Walsh snared Ruth. Walsh saw the vast possibilities in this extraordinary era of communications. He originally developed a ghostwriting syndicate especially in the sports field: writers who would sell articles and books under the name of a contracted sports figure. Increasingly the ghostwriter was becoming important in the public relations field. More and more distinguished Americans who wished to be heard or read (for example, Henry Ford), or from whom the public would like to hear (for example, Babe Ruth) contracted with professional writers to do the job. Soon there was no field without such literary talent, and the number and range of such ventures increased markedly in the 1920s. Walsh provided Ruth with a great deal more than ghostwriting: as agent he worked out product endorsements for advertising; he solicited special assignments in movies (Ruth made a few but was never very successful in this field); he arranged and booked barnstorming tours during the off-season or even tours on the vaudeville circuits. In 1926, for example, Ruth played 12 weeks in vaudeville—in effect, just appearing on stage so that fans in dozens of small towns could see their hero close up—for over $8,000 a week. This sum was considerably more than many notable show business people with special talents for entertaining were earning. Barnstorming around the country in 1927 and playing with hastily arranged teams of local citizens, Ruth added over $30,000 to his already sizable income. Press agent activity was hardly new; neither was Walsh's. He served as a kind of business manager, arranging investments, bank accounts, and the like in an effort to keep Ruth from squandering all his money. But what he did for Ruth added in a special 1920s way to the ballyhoo that promoted a professional athlete into a celebrity of ever-exaggerated proportions.

The year 1925 marked a low point in Babe Ruth's career and few believed he could recover. His "stomach ache heard round the world" was followed later the same season by failures to maintain training and to perform effectively. Manager Miller Huggins, in exasperation, fined him $5,000 for "misconduct off the ball field," and his decision was upheld by Colonel Jacob Ruppert, the Yankee owner. Ruth, with his own special arrogance, had originally taken the whole thing as a joke but now began to pay greater attention to his work, the management of his affairs, and possibly even to his image. His exceptional comeback in the 1926 season became, according to Sobol, a "symbol of continuity." Ruth was 30 and no longer a boy; he had suffered a kind of depression, and the fact that he could recover gave the whole country a sense of hope. Increasingly, the writers waxed sentimental over him and his generosity to the kids. (Ruth himself may have begun to believe the new image the writers had projected of him; he even began to color his days at St. Mary's in terms of kindnesses done him by some of the brothers.) Increasingly, the press transformed him into an older, less boyish "idol of the American boy." They began to forget the excesses and the crudities. His relationship with Mrs. Claire Hodgson may have also contributed to the change in his life. He married her in 1929 after the death of his estranged first wife. He paid greater attention to training, developing a shrewder interest in investments. The new Mrs. Ruth provided structure and order in his life: a tighter rein and necessary stability. It is difficult to avoid
speculating on whether she was not providing as well the kind of love that Ruth never received from his mother so long ago in Baltimore.

But the Bambino of the 1930s and 1940s—the sentimentalized and reformed "idol" of American youth—is not the hero of the 1920s. Historian William E. Leuchtenberg may be somewhat unkind in describing Ruth in 1934 as "a pathetic figure, tightly corseted, a cruel lampoon of his former greatness" when he took off his Yankee uniform for the last time. For Ruth by then was out of place and out of time. He might be transformed into a sentimental figure by sentimental writers. Perhaps the times called for that kind of hero. But for the 1920s he was the perfect creation for an increasingly mechanized world that still hungered for the extraordinary personality, that tired of the Model T automobiles and yet was also appreciative of their virtues—wanting only something more, something bigger than life.

What kind of personality did Ruth bring to the era he so aptly characterized? And what was the price to himself and to the kind of society that enjoyed and admired "our national exaggeration?" What does it say about our values and his values, about the tragic set of conditions and circumstances that may lurk beneath the surface of his life and as well as of the life of his nation in the 1920s?

One series of probing questions, at least, is suggested in a passage from the work of a great Dutch historian who made a significant effort to come to an understanding of American history and especially the current American culture during the First World War. He is writing, in effect, about the onset of the 1920s and is considering what will follow. I do not know whether or not he saw Ruth during his own visit to this country during the Babe's comeback year (1926), but I most certainly must have heard about him. It would be interesting to listen to him discuss this view with special reference to Ruth's career. Perhaps we can do it for him:

One of the preeminent elements of modern civilization is sport, in which intellectual and physical culture meet. In it too mechanization seems to attain the opposite of its purposes. Gregarious modern man tries to save his individualism, as it were, in sport. But sport is not just the strictly physical development of skills and strength; it is also the giving of form, the stylizing of the very feeling of youth, strength, and life, a spiritual value of enormous weight. Play is culture. Play can pass over into art and rite, as in the dance and in sacred stage presentations. Play is rhythm and struggle. The competitive ideal itself is a cultural value of high importance. Play also means organization. But now, as a result of the modern capacity for very far-reaching organization and the possibilities created by modern transportation, an element of mechanization enters sport. In the immense sport organizations like those of football and baseball, we see free youthful forces and courage reduced to normality and uniformity in the service of the machinery of rules of play and the competitive system. If we compare the tense athlete in his competitive harness with the pioneer hunter and the Indian fighter, then the loss of true personality is obvious.

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