



San Diego Air & Space Museum

Commemorative postcard

THE “PHENOMENON OF LINDBERGH”

Published just two months after his prize-winning solo transatlantic flight in May 1927, Lindbergh’s memoir “We” provided its expectant audience with more technical detail and less human drama than they had expected. Young, quiet, and shy, Lindbergh went into his adventure as a steady U.S. Air Mail Service pilot, not manifesting the bravado of showmen aviators (although as “Daredevil Lindy” he had briefly worked as a barnstorming wingwalker and skydiver). “His mind works without embroidery,” wrote a *New York Times* book critic. “He thinks and speaks in condensed terms suitable to his purpose.”¹ So when the publisher of “We” wanted to include Lindbergh’s impressions of his instant global fame, Lindbergh assigned this task to his aide, the writer and naval officer Fitzhugh Green, who had accompanied Lindbergh on his celebratory tours in Europe and America through mid June 1927. “Whatever the reason for it all,” wrote Green, “the fact remains that there was a definite ‘phenomenon of Lindbergh’ quite the like of which the world had never seen.” Consider the 21st-century phenomenon of instant celebrity while reading these selections from Green’s laudatory piece, published as an appendix in “We.”

FITZHUGH GREEN, “A LITTLE OF WHAT THE WORLD THOUGHT OF LINDBERGH,” 1927: EXCERPTS

The first man over was bound to be recognized as an audacious pioneer. Without regard for his character, creed, or aspirations, the world was going to come forward and say “Well done!”

The first man to fly from New York to Paris was bound to be fêted and decorated. He would tell the story of his flight and there would be ephemeral [short-lived] discussion of its bearing on the future of aviation. Wild speculation about the world being on the brink of a great air age would follow.

The first man to fly from New York to Paris was bound to excite the admiration of his own countrymen. He would be met on his return by committees, have to make some speeches at banquets, and receive appropriate decorations for his valor.

The first man to fly from New York to Paris would write several magazine articles and a book. He might make some money by lecturing. He would be offered contracts for moving pictures, jobs as

National Humanities Center: AMERICA IN CLASS, © 2012: americainclass.org/. Charles Lindbergh, “We” (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1927); permission requests submitted to the estate of Charles Lindbergh. Punctuation and spelling modernized for clarity. Images added (not from original publication); complete image credits at americainclass.org/sources/becomingmodern/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Horace Green, “‘We’ Reveals Lindy as More Careful than Lucky,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 1927.

manager of something or other, and honorary memberships in a hundred organizations of more or less doubtful value.

Then someone would break a home run record or commit a murder, whereupon the world would forget with pitiless promptness the first man to fly the broad Atlantic.

Who, by the way, can name the dauntless pilots that circled the globe by air not so many months ago?

The reason Lindbergh's story is different is that when his plane came to a halt on Le Bourget field that black night in Paris, Lindbergh the man kept on going.

The phenomenon of Lindbergh took its start with his flight across the ocean, but in its entirety it was almost as distinct from that flight as though he had never flown at all.

It is probable that in the three ensuing weeks Lindbergh loosed the greatest torrent of mass emotion ever witnessed in human history.

This narrative is a record of events, not an analysis. It therefore cannot pretend to explain the "phenomenon of Lindbergh." Whether it was his modesty or his looks or his refusal to be tempted by money or by fame that won him such a following we cannot say. Perhaps the world was ripe for a youth with a winning smile to flash across its horizon and by the brilliance of his achievement momentarily dim the ugliness of routine business, politics, and crime. Many said that his sudden meteor-like appearance from obscurity was an act of Providence.

Whatever the reason for it all, the fact remains that there was a definite "phenomenon of Lindbergh" quite the like of which the world had never seen. This strange phenomenon is the opening fact of our simple narrative of events culled from a list far too long to include in the space allowed.

[Green recounts the wildly enthusiastic receptions for Lindbergh in Paris, Brussels, and London, after which Lindbergh sailed home to the U.S., arriving in Washington, DC, on June 11, 1927, where thousands of wellwishers greeted him in a celebratory parade.]

It is probable that when Lindbergh reached America he got the greatest welcome any man in history has ever received, certainly the greatest when judged by numbers, and by far the greatest in its freedom from that unkind emotion which in such cases usually springs from one people's triumph over another.

Lindbergh's victory was all victory; for it was not internecine,² but that of our human species over the elements against which for thousands of centuries man's weakness has been pitted.

The striking part of it all was that a composite picture of past homecoming heroes wouldn't look any more like Charles Lindbergh did that day of his arrival in Washington than a hitching post looks like a green bay tree.

Caesar was glum when he came back from Gaul; Napoleon grim; Paul Jones defiant; Peary blunt; Roosevelt abrupt; Dewey deferential; Wilson brooding; Pershing imposing.³ Lindbergh was none of these. He was a plain citizen dressed in the garments of an everyday man. He looked thoroughly pleased, just a little surprised, and about as full of health and spirits as any normal man of his age [twenty-five] should be. If there was any wild emotion or bewilderment in the

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New York Public Library The New York Times, June 12, 1927
["It" at beginning of headline cut off from clipping]

² *Internecine*: involving deadly or highly destructive conflict within a group (in this case, within the human race).

³ Julius Caesar returning to Rome in 49 B.C.E. after conquering Gaul [France]; Napoleon returning to Paris after escaping exile in Elba in 1815; Capt. John Paul Jones to the U.S. from Europe in 1781 during the American Revolution; Commander Robert Peary to the U.S. in 1909 after his Arctic expedition; Col. Theodore Roosevelt to the U.S. from Cuba in 1898 after the Spanish-American War; Adm. George Dewey to the U.S. from the Philippines in 1899 after the Spanish-American War; Pres. Woodrow Wilson to the U.S. from France in 1919 after WWI treaty negotiations; Gen. John J. Pershing to the U.S. from France in 1919 after WWI.

occasion it lay in the welcoming crowds, and not in the air pilot they were saluting.

...
Here for the first time Lindbergh saw the spirit in which his people were to greet him. They were curious, yes; crowds always are on such occasions. And they

were gay with their handclapping and flag-waving, shouting and confetti throwing. But there was a note of enthusiasm everywhere that transcended just a chorus of holiday seekers witnessing a new form of circus. There was something deeper and finer in the way people voiced their acclaim. Many of them wiped their eyes while they laughed; many stood with expressionless faces, their looks glued upon the face of the lad who had achieved so great a thing and yet seemed to take it all so calmly.

[At the Washington Monument, President Coolidge presented Lindbergh with the Distinguished Flying Cross and, in his remarks, praised the young man's modest response to the whirlwind of instant celebrity.]

“The absence of self-acclaim, the refusal to become commercialized, which has marked the conduct of this sincere and genuine exemplar of fine and noble virtues, has endeared him to everyone. He has returned unspoiled.

“Particularly has it been delightful to have him refer to his airplane as somehow possessing a personality and being equally entitled to credit with himself, for we are proud that in every particular this silent partner represented American genius and industry. I am told that more than one hundred separate companies furnished materials, parts, or service in its construction.

“And now, my fellow citizens, this young man has returned. He is here. He has brought his unsullied fame home. It is our great privilege to welcome back to his native land, on behalf of his own people, who have a deep affection for him and have been thrilled by his splendid achievement, a Colonel of the United States Officers' Reserve Corps, an illustrious citizen of our Republic, a conqueror of the air and strengthener of the ties which bind us to our sister nations across the sea.”

[After a White House dinner with President and Mrs. Coolidge and Cabinet members, Lindbergh attended a National Press Club program at which *New York Times* Washington correspondent Richard V. Oulahan delivered remarks from the perspective of the press.]

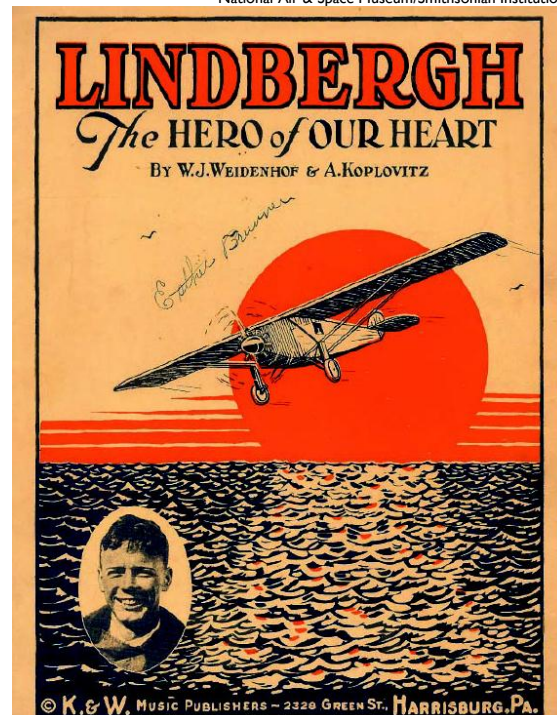
“We of the press rub elbows with all manner of mankind. We see much of good but we see much of self-seeking, of sordid motive, as we sit in the wings watching the world's procession pass across the stage. If it is true that through our contacts we are sprinkled with a coating of the dry dust of cynicism, that dust was blown away in a breath, as it were, when our professional brethren who greeted you overseas broadcast the news of your peerless exploit. To Americans it brought a spontaneous feeling of pride that you were of their nationality. . . .

“The press should be proud then, if in telling the story of this later phase in the career of the American boy, it brought to the peoples of the world a new realization that clean living, clean thinking, fair play and sportsmanship, modesty of speech and manner, faith in a mother's prayers, have a front-page news

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Pres. Calvin Coolidge, welcoming address, Washington, DC, June 11, 1927

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sheet music cover, 1927

value intriguing imagination and inviting emulation, and are still potent as fundamentals of success.”

[After a triumphal parade in New York City and the mayor's presentation of the Medal of Valor, Lindbergh was honored at a dinner at the Hotel Commodore, at which former and future Supreme Court justice Charles Evans Hughes delivered a tribute.]

“For the time being, he has lifted us into the freer and upper air that is his home. He has displaced everything that is petty, that is sordid, that is vulgar. What is money in the presence of Charles A. Lindbergh? What is the pleasure of the idler in the presence of this supreme victor of intelligence and industry? He has driven the sensation mongers out of the temples of our thought.⁴ He has kindled anew the fires on the eight ancient altars of that temple. Where are the stories of crime, of divorce, of the triangles that are never equilateral? For the moment we have forgotten. This is the happiest day, the happiest day of all days for America, and as one mind she is now intent upon the noblest and the best. America is picturing to herself youth with the highest aims, with courage unsurpassed, science victorious. Last and not least, motherhood, with her loveliest crown. . . .

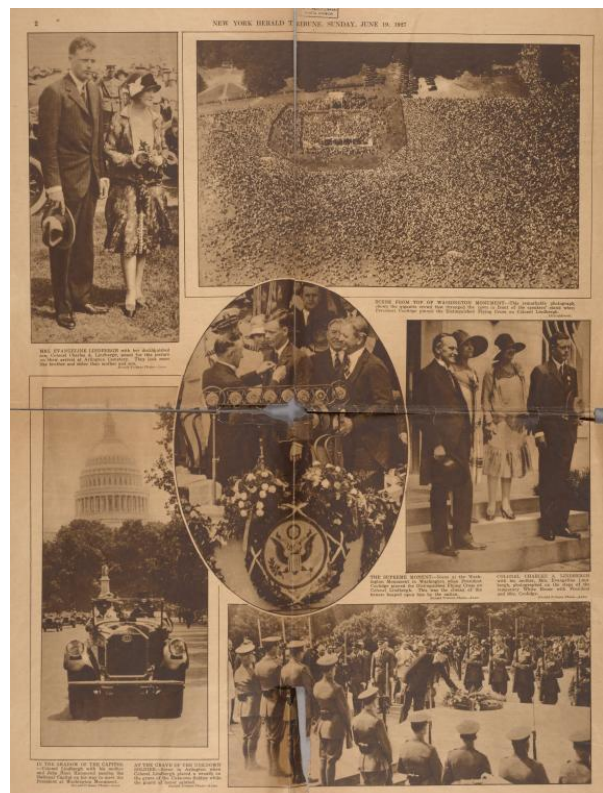
“There is again revealed to us, with a startling suddenness, the inexhaustible resources of our national wealth. From an unspoiled home, with its traditions of industry, frugality and honor, steps swiftly into our gaze this young man, showing us the unmeasured treasures in our mines of American character. America is fortunate in her heroes; her soul feeds upon their deeds, her imagination revels in their achievements. There are those who would rob them of something of their luster, but no one can debunk Lindbergh, for there is no bunk about him. He represents to us, fellow Americans, all that we wish—a young American at his best.”

[On June 17 Lindbergh flew to St. Louis, Missouri, the city that had served as his home base during his air mail service.]

About 5 P.M. he approached St. Louis in a wet fog. He dropped lower and circled the city. As at New York the sky was dotted with planes. Streets and house tops were massed with people. As he landed at Lambert Field a cordon of troops protected him from the eager crowds.



Welcoming ceremonies for Lindbergh in New York City and Washington, DC, *New York Herald Tribune*, June 19, 1927



⁴ Referring to Jesus Christ driving the money changers from the temple in Jerusalem [Matthew 21: 12-15].

For the evening he managed to escape to the home of a friend where he got a little much-needed rest, though reporters and business solicitors still swarmed about him. Saturday morning came the huge city parade with luncheon and banquet to follow. Sunday he gave an exhibition flight over the old World's Fair grounds. Not an hour, scarcely a waking minute, was he free from demands upon his time and attention.

By this time his mail had exceeded the wildest imagination. It was estimated that more than 2,000,000 letters and several hundred thousand telegrams were sent him. He gave out the following statement:

To the Press: As an air mail pilot I deeply appreciate the sentiment which actuated my countrymen to welcome me home by "airmail," and regret only that I have no way in which to acknowledge individually every one of the tens of thousands of "air mail" greetings I have received, for my heart is in the "air mail" service, and I would like to help keep alive the air-consciousness of America which my good fortune may have helped to awaken.

By this time statisticians began to get busy. One official association estimated that the tremendous increase of interest in flying developed by Lindbergh's feat caused publications in the United States to use 25,000 tons of newsprint in addition to their usual consumption.

Roughly 5,000 poems were believed to have been written to commemorate the first New York to Paris flight. A town was named "Lindbergh." Scores of babies were reported christened after the flier. An enormous impetus was given the use of air mail.

Inspired editorials were written in every part of the civilized world. The following from the *New York Times*⁵ suitably completes this very superficial record of the early Lindbergh welcome by mankind:

Such a man is one in a host. In treating of the psychology of those who adore Lindbergh it must first be set down that he has the qualities of heart and head that all of us would like to possess. When he left Newfoundland behind, the dauntless fellow seemed to have a rendezvous with Death, but his point of view was that he had an engagement in Paris. Two gallant Frenchmen had lost their lives, it was believed, in an attempt to fly across the Atlantic to the United States.⁶ An American, unknown to fame, in whom no one but himself believed, made the passage smoothly, swiftly, and surely, traveling alone and almost unheralded. From New York to Paris, without a hand to clasp or a face to look into, was a deed to lose one's head over. And that's what everybody in France, Belgium, and England proceeded to do.

After all, the greater was behind—the young fellow's keeping his own head when millions hailed him as hero, when all the women lost their hearts to him, and when decorations were pinned on his coat by admiring Governments. Lindbergh had the world at his feet, and he blushed like a girl! A more modest bearing, a more unaffected presence, a manlier, kindlier, simpler character no idol of the multitude ever displayed. Never was America prouder of a son.

__The End__

⁵ "New York's Welcome," editorial, *The New York Times*, June 13, 1927.

⁶ Two weeks before Lindbergh's flight, the French pilots Charles Nungesser and François Coli had disappeared during their attempt to fly nonstop from Paris to New York.