

THE DAWN OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY 1919–1944

UNDER THE RED,
WHITE AND BLUE

MÉMORIAL DE CAEN
Flammarion

"Things are always beginning in America;
we are always on the verge of great
adventures. History seems to lie in front
of us instead of behind."

Edmund Wilson

Night Thoughts in Paris (1922).

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Text

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JOËL BRUNEAU

Mayor of Caen and President of the Mémorial de Caen

Few people here in France really know the story told by the Mémorial de Caen's exhibition *The Dawn of the American Century: Under the Red, White and Blue*. Or rather most people only know bits of it. We have all seen Charlie Chaplin movies and Walt Disney cartoons; we have all heard of the Great Depression and the New Deal; and we all know what Franklin Roosevelt and Al Capone looked like. It all sounds so familiar. What is there left to learn? The answer to that is: quite a lot.

This is why the goal of this exhibition is to take these images, people and episodes of history that exist in our collective memory and place them in the context of interwar America—a period that has generated formidable attention from scholars and academics not only in America, but also here in France. Their works show that the more we delve into the history of these interwar years, the more we discover. We are constantly forced to see this period through a different lens, and even what we thought we knew best turns out to be worth a second look.

The central purpose of a leading museum of history like the Mémorial de Caen is to bridge the gap between research and the general public, serving as a reminder that all of history is contemporary history. As a consequence, it must speak to the widest audience possible without any distortion.

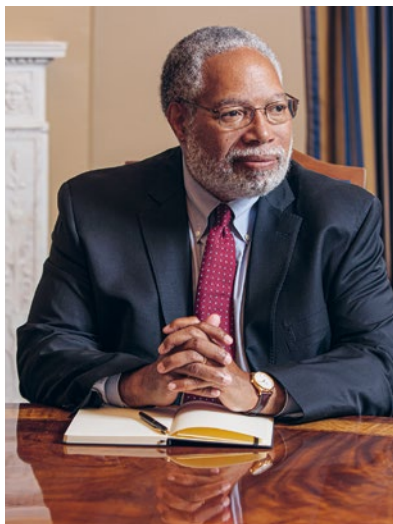
There could be no better tribute to the soldiers who stormed Utah Beach and Omaha Beach at 6:30 a.m. on June 6, 1944, than to show the extent to which their story, the story of the America where they grew up, remains more than ever relevant today.

For nearly one thousand years, the city of Caen has been a hub for connecting ideas, trade, and people. Throughout her one thousand years of existence, Caen has continued to build on her awareness of the past to look towards the future. Even at the peak of the Allied bombing in June 1944, Caen stood tall, her eyes turned towards a better tomorrow, while tending to both her visible and invisible wounds of war.

History is what binds us together and makes life in society possible. In this regard, the celebrations of Caen's one thousandth anniversary in 2025 commemorating the founding of the city will be a substantial opportunity for all of us to remember our shared past.

I would like to express my warmest thanks to everyone who made this exhibition possible, with a special thank you to the individuals and institutions on both sides of the Atlantic who loaned items from their collections.

This exhibition will serve as a platform to celebrate the unwavering friendship between France and America; it gives me great pleasure to know that throughout 2024 the Mémorial de Caen will serve as a cultural bridge between our two nations.



LONNIE G. BUNCH

Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

I n the minds of many, D-Day is fading from memory. Many people from what we call “the greatest generation” are no longer here, some of their children are no longer here, and it is of paramount importance that we keep it from falling into oblivion. D-Day is one of those moments that transformed the world; allowing the forces of democracy to begin to take Europe back from the Nazis. That was a time of great bravery and great sacrifice. It also finalizes a break from American isolationism. After World War I, America was concerned about European affairs. People were convinced that somehow the Atlantic and Pacific oceans protected America from international considerations, and the war changed all that. D-Day was that moment that underscored America’s recognition of its international role. That is crucially important today. It raises fundamental debates today about America’s role, not so much as the world’s police, but as a collaborator, making sure that issues of fairness and freedom are at the heart of as many places as can be. What D-Day reminds us is that isolationism is no longer a wise foreign policy.

What excites me most about this exhibition is being able to understand the period from where these men and women came. What you had was an amazing group of people that were shaped by so many things. They were shaped by the fact that many of them were the sons of immigrants, who came to America in the early twentieth century. And they were also shaped by the Great Depression. These men had invisible scars: they knew about loss, they knew about poverty, they knew about pain. And they brought all of that with them. This is precisely what the exhibition *The Dawn of the American Century: Under the Red, White and Blue* allows visitors to realize. Traditionally, we celebrate major historical events by looking forward, by showcasing the consequences they had. What is unique about this exhibition is to celebrate D-Day by looking back and highlighting the history that shaped the men and women who took part in it. In some ways, people today recognize that their life is shaped by the DNA of their ancestors. But they rarely understand that there is another kind of DNA: the kind of history, that has shaped their choices, their expectations, their hopes and their fears. By looking at this period from 1919 to 1944, by showing what it took for these men and women to be there, to be part of D-Day, this exhibition gives people an opportunity to understand the heart of who they are, not just the framework of who they are.

For the Smithsonian Institution, it makes all the more sense to be a partner in this wonderful exhibition as it is taking place at the Mémorial de Caen in Normandy. It is naturally a way of paying tribute to the sacrifices of the soldiers who lost their lives on the Normandy beaches. But it is also a way of acknowledging that American history matters not just to Americans, but to the world as a whole.



KLÉBER ARHOUL

Chief Executive Director of the Mémorial de Caen

Deciding to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Normandy landings was a natural thing for us to do at the Mémorial de Caen, but it was also decidedly challenging. Natural, because this museum was founded on France's feeling of gratitude towards the soldiers who stormed the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944. Challenging, because our permanent exhibition already pays tribute to that defining moment of the twentieth century—what is there to say on the occasion of this 80th anniversary that has not been said before?

The answer for us was to tell the story of the America where these soldiers grew up; the story that came with them from America to the Normandy beaches. The answer was to go beyond the military history of the Normandy landings to explore this moment in history when we all became Americans. This exhibition is first and foremost a tribute to honor the GIs who gave their lives on D-Day. But because they chose to make the ultimate sacrifice, their collective heroism is what put the history of America at the forefront of the world stage—it directly contributed to the Americanization of world history.

This is why this exhibition is also dedicated to understanding the series of events that defined the decades that led up to the Normandy landings. America in the period 1919–1940 was already global—she exported her movies, music, architecture, and consumer goods to the rest of the world and her authors, like F. Scott Fitzgerald, were almost as Parisian as they were American. This is the story of this creative and vibrant America that we chose to tell, the story of a dizzyingly big country that is bigger still for having opened up to the world. This is a human-scale story about individuals, men and women, and the diversity of their everyday lives. An ambiguous story, certainly, with a dark side to it that interwar America is all the greater for having overcome despite the odds. We would be failing in our duty as a museum of history if we were to conceal this ambivalence, not least because to ‘sanitize’ history would be to insult the memory of the GIs of June 6 whose story deserves to be told unabridged to the widest audience possible.

Our efforts to prepare this exhibition have enjoyed the invaluable support of the American and French diplomatic corps, but also and most notably of the Smithsonian Institution together with several other museums, libraries, archival centers, and private and public collections on both sides of the Atlantic, not forgetting to mention the collections of the Hollywood studios. We have the privilege to present for the first time to the public a number of items that have never been seen before outside of America. It is by virtue of these exceptional partnerships that we are able to bring to life together the enduring story of the French-American friendship in the Lafayette tradition. There can surely be no finer tribute to the soldiers of June 6, 1944, than to keep the friendship between our two nations alive—a friendship that their story and sacrifice did so much to establish.

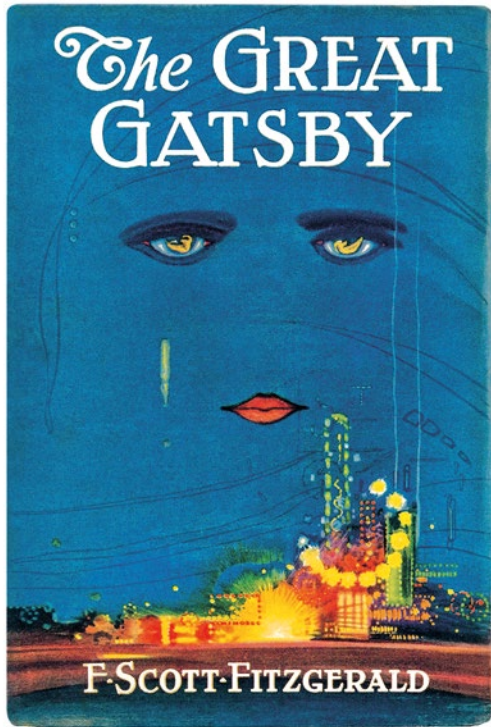




THE MANY FACES OF 1920s AMERICA

On the one hand, prosperity, jazz, automobiles, flappers, skyscrapers and household appliances; on the other hand, race riots, Prohibition, the mob, the Red Scare and the Ku Klux Klan. Caught between World War I and the Crash of '29, 1920s America was strikingly diverse. From the carefree California beaches to the massacre of the Osage Indians, and from the cultural ferment of the Harlem Renaissance to Al Capone's Chicago, we invite you to take a stroll through the ebullience, contrasts and contradictions of the Roaring Twenties.

NINETEEN-NINETEEN



Roaring Twenties, Prosperity Decade, Jazz Age, Golden Twenties: the 1920s, the decade between the end of World War I and the Great Depression, is known by a variety of names that were only coined after the event—as is always the case with words denoting a specific time period. It was only in the thick of the great crash that America looked back nostalgically at its carefree, prosperous yesterdays. Not that everything was rosy in 1920s America. It too had its dark side, as depicted in John Dos Passos' revealing trilogy, *USA*. Written in the years 1930-1936 by Dos Passos—who Jean Paul Sartre described as “the greatest writer of our time”—*USA* bucked the nostalgia trend, showing the 1920s to be anything but a lost Golden Age. The second volume in particular, *Nineteen Nineteen* (published in French under the title *L'An premier du siècle*) captures all the complexity of this dawn of the American Century.

The Great Gatsby, published in 1925, played a large part in painting the Roaring Twenties as a time of jazz, parties and fun.

The War is over

Nineteen-nineteen was first and foremost the year the war ended, a war joined by the USA in 1917 fighting alongside the Allied Powers; it was a time of euphoric parades to welcome home America's victorious troops, captured forever in photographs of smiling soldiers and ecstatic crowds. But as penned by Dos Passos, in a montage straight out of a movie that juxtaposes real and imagined life stories, autobiographic threads and newspaper cuttings, that very euphoria already smacks of something darker.

"NEWSREEL XXIX

[...] The soldiers and sailors gave the only touch of color to the celebration. They went in wholeheartedly for having a good time, getting plenty to drink despite the fact that they were in uniform. Some of these returned fighters nearly caused a riot when they took an armful of stones and attempted to break an electric sign at Broadway and Forty second Street reading: WELCOME HOME TO OUR HEROES."

Nineteen-nineteen also marked the beginning of an economic boom driven by Allied borrowing to prosecute the war. In fact, though the war cost the United States \$22 billion in just nineteen months, the war economy saw the US GDP double, the while increasing European borrowing from America to the tune of \$10 billion dollars. The sudden end of the war plunged the USA into a crisis that albeit temporary was enough to trigger a nationwide wave of strikes, and send prices rocketing.

"NEWSREEL XXXVIII

[...] À qui la Fautne se le Beurre est Cher? [*sic*]
GAINS RUN HIGH IN WALL STREET"

With the Bolshevik Revolution stoking fears of revolution spreading, this wave of strikes led to the repression and persecution of communists, socialists, anarchists and unionists, especially the *Wobblies*, members of the anarcho-revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) union, who appear everywhere in Dos Passos' work.

"To be a red in the summer of 1919 was worse than being a Hun in the summer of 1917."

Aggravated by a wave of anarchist bombings in the period 1919–1920, the Red Scare brought the thirty-six States to adopt anti-Red measures. January 2 1920 meanwhile saw the most spectacular of the Palmer Raids: a series of raids led by Attorney General A Mitchell Palmer in thirty-three towns in twenty-three States, directed at four thousand individuals suspected of fomenting the spread of international Communism, with five hundred and fifty-six foreigners deported.



Crowds gathering
at the site of the
Wall Street bombing
on September 16, 1920.

Who were those American soldiers who gave up their lives on June 6, 1944, to land on the beaches of Normandy? What were their thoughts, what was their story and what was their background?

The Dawn of the American Century 1919–1944 draws on a wealth of documents provided by major American and European institutions to explore the multiple faces of the country where these men grew up. Men who fought for freedom, shaped by a country that for all its vibrant creativity was no stranger to crisis and unrest—an America destined to become the leader of the free world despite its tendency to isolationism.

Roaring Twenties, Depression, Recovery: this book plunges the reader into the heart of the tumultuous Twenties, packed with literary and movie references that shed new light on a pivotal period in American history.

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