

THE MEN WHO MAKE UP YOUR MIND

An eminent historian names 61 leaders, some famous and some forgotten, who have shaped American thought

By **HENRY STEELE COMMAGER**

IN '47 September, John Gunther proposed an interesting list of the men who run America. Quite properly this list searchlighted those who happen at the moment to be in power. Twenty-five years from now a new compilation will be necessary, for time and the obituary column will have got in their licks.

It is possible, however, to make a list of the men—and women—who *really* control America, who control it through the influence they exercise on our minds and characters. They are the men behind the men who run the country. They make up the American mind.

Such a list must concentrate upon the permanent rather than the transient; upon those who have supplied, rather than merely applied, the philosophy to which we subscribe; upon those who, in one way or another, have laid the foundations of our thought and feeling. No two students, to be sure, would agree upon the list,

but that makes its compilation all the more attractive an exercise.

Who are the men who have supplied us with our symbols, our values, our ideas and ideals? The list is a long one, and necessarily somewhat arbitrary. Yet a study of it is not unprofitable. For it will bring home to us how deep-struck are our roots, how stubborn are those traits of character and those ways of thinking that we call American. It will suggest, too, something of our debt to the thinkers of the Old World, many of whom have become naturalized citizens of our mental universe.

Let us take for granted certain names from the more remote past—such as Jesus, preeminently, and Plato, and Shakespeare, and Newton, and others of the great. We shall see, however, that even for the more modern period we cannot wholly ignore non-Americans.

We might lead off, not with the systematic thinkers, but with those who have formed our nonintellectual

tual culture—the fountainheads of our folkways.

1. *Benjamin Franklin*: Whose aphorisms are part of us; who has stamped his character on our humor; whose genius for moderation, whose ingenuity and inventiveness, whose practical talent for serving ideal ends with material means, are part of the American character at its finest.

2. *William McGuffey*: Whose *Readers* were absorbed by generations of American children who in turn bequeathed us a common stock of stories, legends, allusions, poems, and moral precepts.

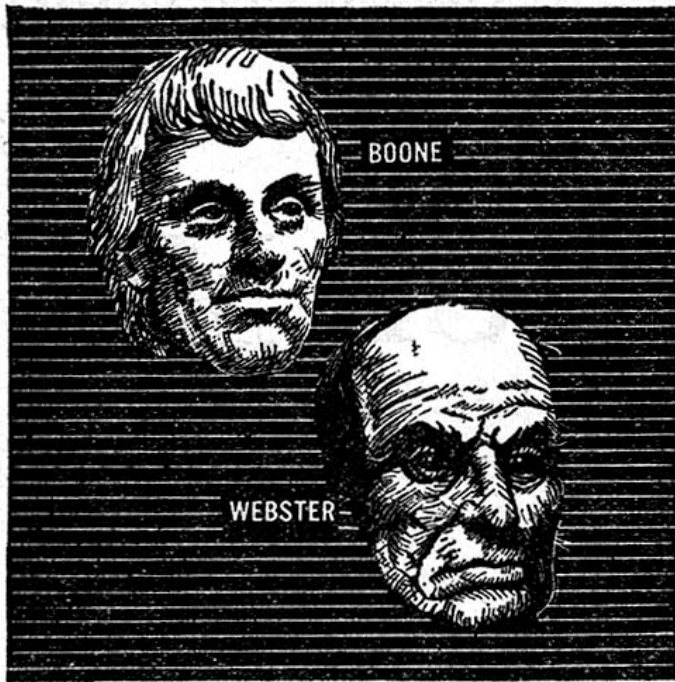
3. *Louisa May Alcott*: Because *Little Women* is one of the great American novels, cherished from generation to generation and never more than today—witness the popularity of the movie version. If it did not precisely fix a pattern for American girls, it did create something of a stereotype for the American family.

4. *Mark Twain*: Probably the greatest, certainly the most popular, of American novelists, he created in *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* an imperishable picture of the American boy—and man—during what we may call the pastoral period of our history. His humor came to be the prototype of American humor; his character, more nearly than that of any nineteenth century American except Lincoln, came to be the embodi-



Many of our current novelists—Hemingway, for example—confess to his influence.

5. *Stephen Foster*: Because his songs are the most beloved, the most widely sung, of all American songs, and because through them



he gave Americans stereotypes of life in the Old South, of rural pleasures and virtues, and of the Negro, that have had enormous influence upon our imagination.

6. *Horatio Alger*: Important for what he symbolized. He is no longer widely read, but a generation ago every boy was familiar with the Alger tales—which told with tireless monotony the story of the rise from rags to riches, from log cabin to White House. Myths, no less than ideas, form our minds—witness today's comic strips.

7. *Bishop John H. Vincent*: Who was largely responsible for the creation of Chautauqua—an institution that President Theodore Roosevelt called “the most American thing in America.” Today's adult popular education stems from the Chautauqua lecturers of the turn of the century.

8. *Sinclair Lewis*: Who mirrored the Babbitt in us all, and delineated the Main Street on which we all live.

9. *H. L. Mencken*: Whose *prejudices* and skepticisms blew the genteel tradition away, who showed what could be done with the American language and how genuine and native a thing it was, and who created an image of the *boobus Americanus* that lingered on for two decades and still influences American thought.

For a second category I give you the American hero, the pattern of

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so much of our behavior. Who are our heroes? Here are four:

10. *George Washington*: But not so much the Washington of history, as Washington who is first in the hearts of his countrymen, who chopped down the cherry tree, crossed the Delaware, prayed at Valley Forge, retired to Mt. Vernon like some Cincinnatus, and became, as General and as President, the Father of His Country.

11. *Abraham Lincoln*: Again as symbol and legend rather than historical figure: Lincoln the very apotheosis of America, the rail splitter, the great emancipator; Lincoln who read Blackstone by the light of a log fire, who loved Ann Rutledge, who saved the Union and freed the slaves, who died while the lilacs bloomed.

12. *Daniel Boone*: Epitome of pioneer virtues, the pathfinder and the Indian fighter, the man who symbolizes the conquest of the wilderness.

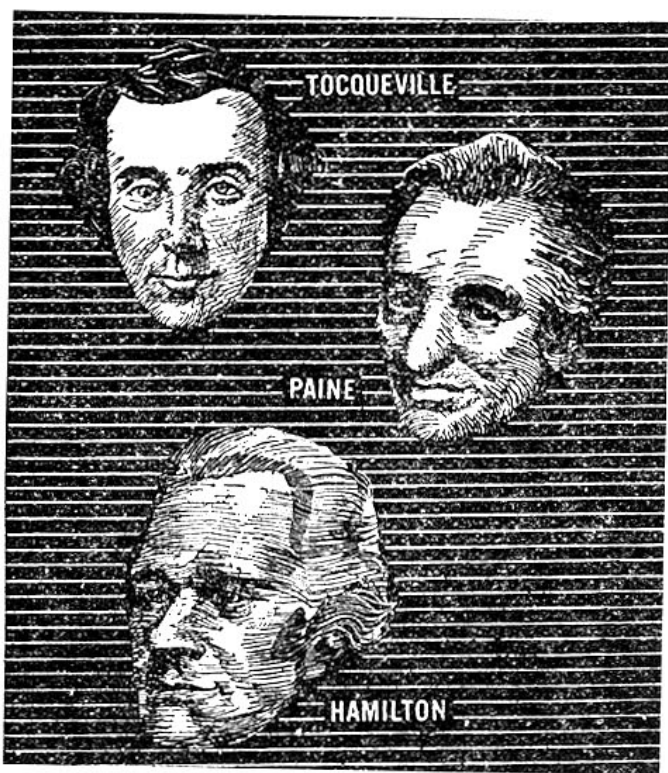
13. *Daniel Webster*: Symbol of the Union, and (it should be added) of the instinct for compromise, whose eloquent tribute to the Union and the flag has long been familiar to school children.

A third category—and one closely connected with the second—comprises those who have formed our political ideas and fashioned our political institutions. The list could be made a long one, but need not be, for American politi-

cal ideas have been remarkably stable over the years.

14. First, of course, comes *Thomas Jefferson*, the most influential, most permanent, and most pervasive of all our political philosophers, Jefferson whose long shadow stretches over the whole of our history. Both of our major parties derive from him, at least in name. Author of the great Declaration, champion of religious liberty, ceaseless advocate of public education, founder of the Democratic Party, the President who sent Lewis and Clark to Oregon and bought Louisiana, he, more than any other, formulated the American political philosophy.

15. *Thomas Paine*: Now belatedly coming into his own, he was next to Jefferson the greatest penman of the Revolution. His *Common Sense* was one of the



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bibles of the patriots, as his *Age of Reason* later became the bible of the agnostics.

16. *Alexander Hamilton*: With Jefferson he still largely dominates American political thought. The first—and last—great conservative thinker in American politics, from him has come the philosophy which calls for the alliance of government and business for the creation of a powerful state.

17. *Theodore Roosevelt*: Because he, first of the major politicians of the post-civil war years, made liberalism and reform respectable, because—again first—he inaugurated a program for saving our natural resources from dissipation, and because he was the first major figure to accept the responsibility of America as a world power.

18. *Woodrow Wilson*: His program of domestic reform, remarkable as it was, is largely forgotten, or overshadowed by the New Deal. But the League of Nations was in large part his creation, and he is the spiritual father of the United Nations. It was Wilson who aroused the nation to a realization of its responsibilities as a leader in world affairs and who first contrived a mechanism for the maintenance of world peace.

19. *Franklin D. Roosevelt*: His program of domestic reform is now written into American history; his leadership in World War II

is part of world history. No other man of the twentieth century has so effectively shaped the destiny of our nation—or of any nation—or imposed his personality and his philosophy so profoundly upon the American people.

Two non-Americans should, perhaps, be included in this category:

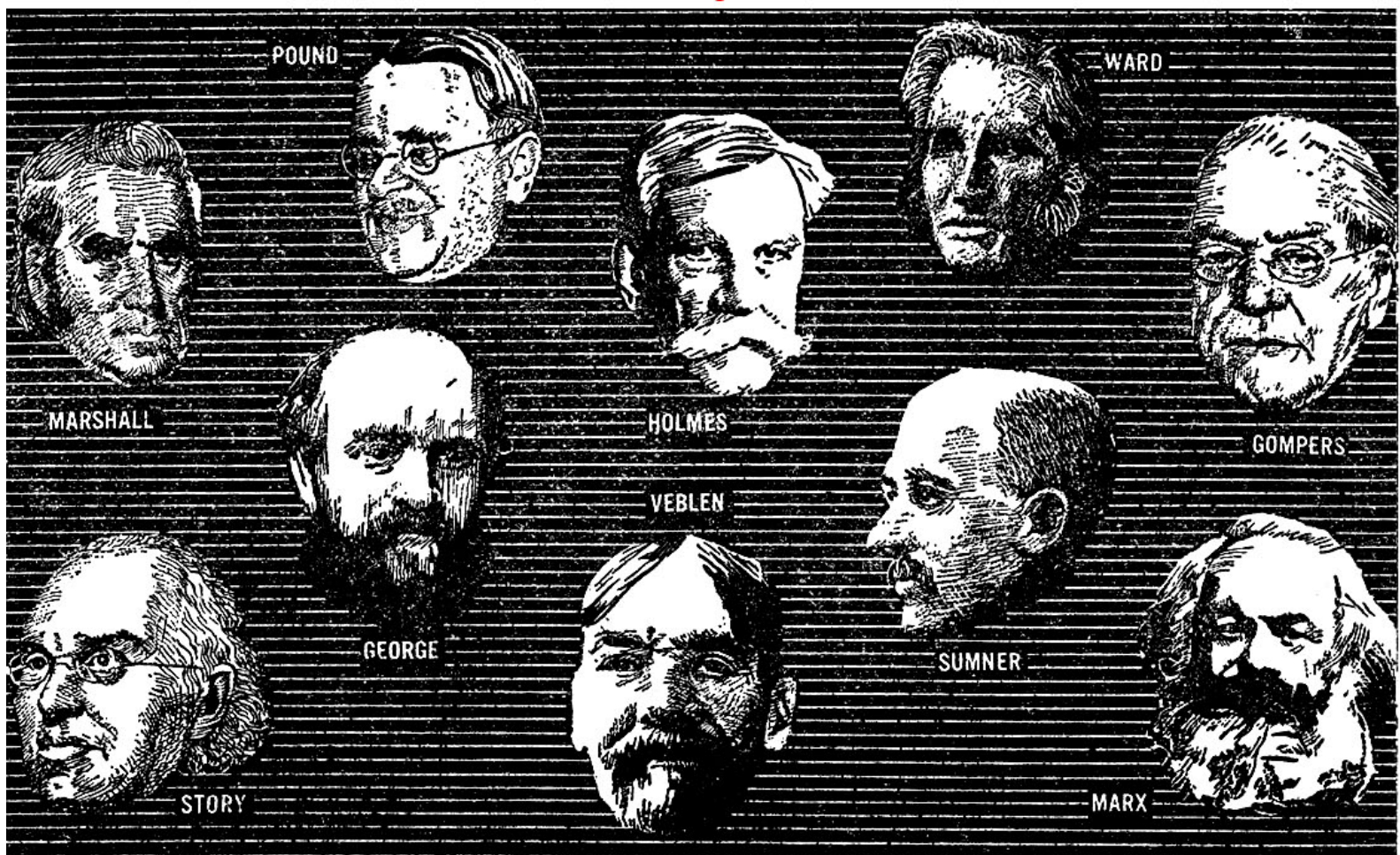
20. *John Locke*: Whose *Second Treatise on Government* furnished a large part of the philosophy of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, and whose doctrines that men make government and that government is limited are basic to our political philosophy.

21. *Alexis de Tocqueville*: Whose masterly *Democracy in America* has influenced generations of critics, interpreters, and political thinkers. More clearly and elaborately than any other publicist who has written on the American character, Tocqueville saw that the principle of equality permeated and conditioned every aspect of American life.

A fourth group, closely connected with the preceding one, includes those men who have formed our legal—and through them influenced our political—institutions. And first, of course, is:

22. *John Marshall*: One of the true fathers of the American constitutional system. It was Marshall who made the Supreme Court the great institution that it is, who

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wrote a nationalist interpretation into the Constitution, and who established the doctrine and practice of judicial review.

23. *Joseph Story*: Marshall's colleague on the Court, he influenced our constitutional system not merely through great judicial opinions, but through the Harvard Law School, so largely his creation, and through his famous *Commentaries on the Constitution*.

24. *Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.*: Probably the greatest jurist ever to sit on the United States Supreme Court, he was also the first great legal pragmatist, the man who through his writings and his opinions rescued American law from the absolutes which made it unrealistic and put it to work serving the interests of society.

25. *Roscoe Pound*: The most

learned of American jurists, he is the father of sociological jurisprudence, leader of legal reforms in a dozen fields, teacher of scores of judges and jurists who have carried his open-minded experimental attitude into the legal and political arena.

A fifth group embraces those who have molded our economic, and consequently, our social and political thinking.

26. *William Graham Sumner*: Important not so much for the originality of his thought as for the success with which he translated Herbert Spencer's free enterprise economics into the American vernacular. The champion of the "forgotten man"—by which he meant the middle-class business and professional man—he was the sworn enemy of all government in-

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terference in business and even in the ordinary affairs of social life, including education.

27. **Lester Ward:** Spencer's—and Sumner's—most formidable opponent, the father of American sociology, the man whose teachings largely anticipated if they did not actually inspire such programs of government reform as Wilson's New Freedom and F.D.R.'s New Deal.

28. **Thorstein Veblen:** Whose *Theory of the Leisure Class* and *Theory of Business Enterprise* introduced a new realism into American economic thinking, and whose pragmatic approach to the whole study of man's livelihood has profoundly influenced contemporary economic and social theory.

29. **Henry George:** Neither a formal philosopher nor a formal economist, nor for that matter a professional politician, he is to be reckoned with in each of these

fields. Although he converted relatively few to the single-tax idea, his *Progress and Poverty* was one of the bibles of the reform movement, and his challenging criticisms of the economic institutions of the late nineteenth century deeply influenced many diverse figures.

30. **Samuel Gompers:** Perhaps more important as a symbol than as a force. He, better than any other trade unionist, represents our modern labor movement in its opportunism, its rejection of the doctrinaire and the abstract, its repudiation of class warfare, its essential conservatism, its robust concern for such practical things as wages and hours and legal rights.

31. **Karl Marx:** Not because he has made many converts to communism or even because *Das Kapital* is widely read, but because of the indirect influence of his economic doctrines and his theory of class warfare on our politics, economics, philosophy, and literature.

Nothing is more typically American than our system of universal free education, and those responsible for our educational principles and institutions are clearly among the makers of the American mind. A sixth group therefore includes the great educators.

32. **Horace Mann:** The father of the public school—and of teacher training—in the United States, and the most effective educational reformer in our history.



33. **Emma Willard:** Who developed in the Troy Female Seminary one of the earliest, and best, advanced schools for girls, proved that girls were as capable as boys of profiting from higher education, and championed coeducation in the public school system.

34. **Charles W. Eliot:** The famous president of Harvard University who inaugurated the modern era of higher education in the United States, placed professional schools on a sound basis, sponsored, whether for good or ill—or both—the elective system whereby students may choose their own courses, organized the widely-read Harvard Classics, and was something of a mentor and conscience to the American people for more than a quarter of a century.

A seventh group includes those who have formed the American view of its own past and of its place in history. From the many who have been influential here, we may select five:

35. **George Bancroft:** Because, as historian and public figure, his passionate nationalism and equally passionate faith in democracy made a permanent impact on American public opinion and historical thought.

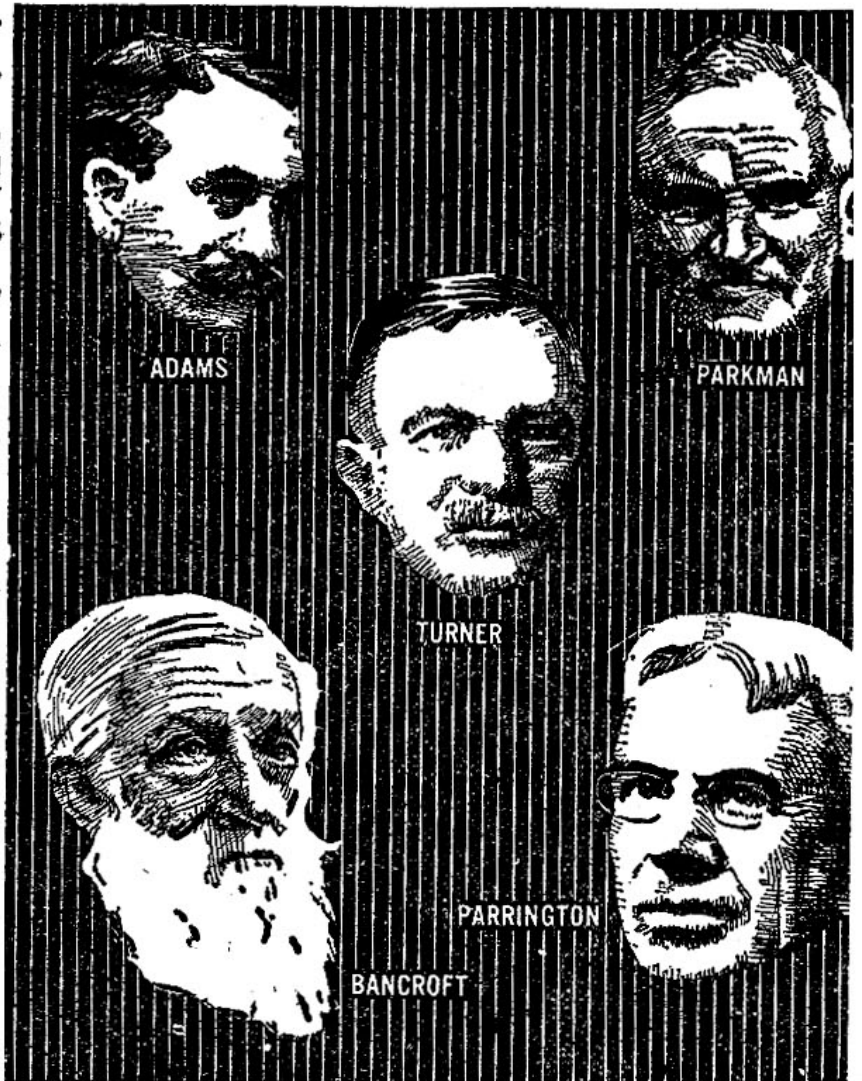
36. **Francis Parkman:** Whose study of France and England in North America remains the greatest single historical achievement in our literature. It did more to ally

history with literature and to direct attention to the story of the West than any other book.

37. **Frederick J. Turner:** Whose *Frontier in American History* directed the attention of two generations of students to the study of this “most American” part of America.

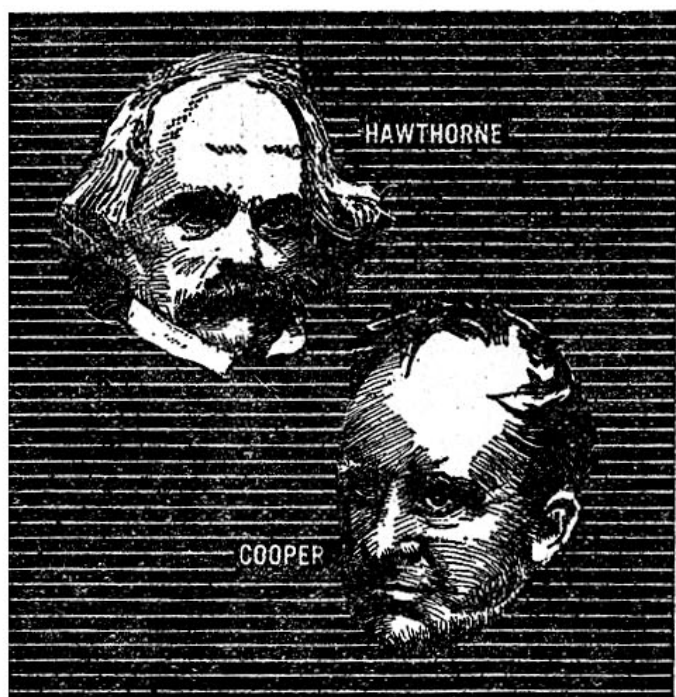
38. **Henry Adams:** Equally influential, on different levels, through his memorable *Education*, his great *History* of the administrations of Jefferson and Madison, and his prolonged search for a law of history.

39. **Vernon Louis Parrington:** Whose glowing *Main Currents in*



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American Thought exerted a greater influence on both historical and literary scholarship than any work of our generation, and who was the ablest champion of Jeffersonian democracy in contemporary American letters.

Along with these we might mention two novelists who have supplied stereotypes about our past:

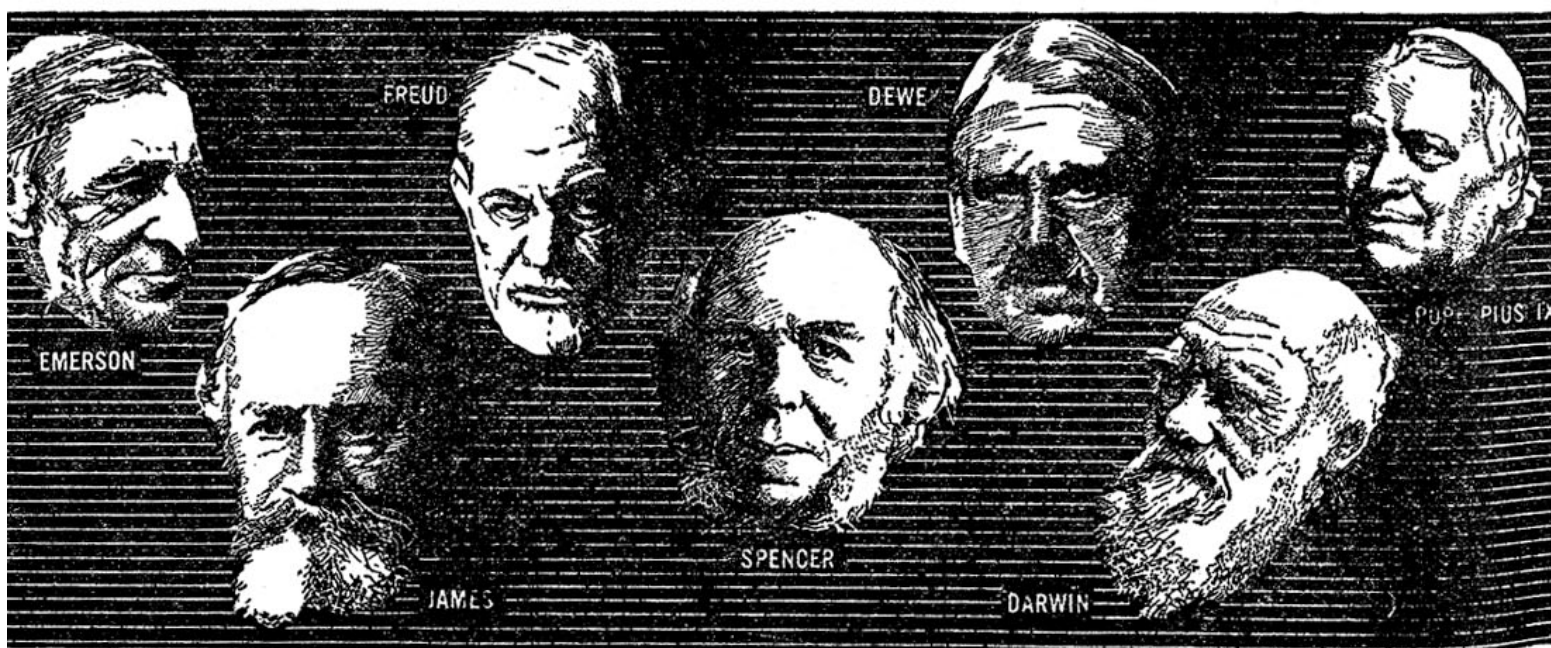
40. **James Fenimore Cooper:** Who created our image, shared by

the world, of the American Indian.

41. **Nathaniel Hawthorne:** Who created our image of the Puritan.

Possibly more important than any of these categories is the small band of those who, though perhaps studied seriously only by a minority, have given us our fundamental ideas of the world about us and within us, the spokesmen of philosophy, religion, and ethics. This eighth group might include:

42. **Ralph Waldo Emerson:** Because he formulated our first native idealistic and optimistic philosophy; because though hardly the first to announce American intellectual independence, he did so most effectively; and because he inspired generations of young men and women to place ideals before mere material gains. Almost as an alternative to Emerson is *Henry David Thoreau*, professor of the simple life, whose works are still widely read and admired.



43. *Charles Darwin*: Who established the validity of the evolutionary theory and who may be said, without exaggeration, to exercise sovereignty over all minds, American as well as European.

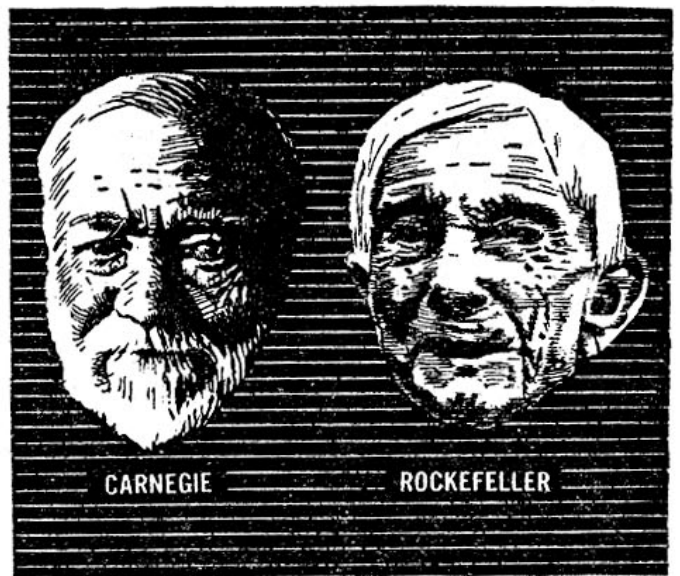
44. *Herbert Spencer*: Who attempted, successfully in his own generation, to apply the evolutionary thesis to human society, and whose antithesis of Man vs. the State made a lasting impression upon American political and economic thought.

45. *William James*: No more than Emerson a systematic philosopher, he formulated that way of thinking, and of acting, known as pragmatism, the most authentically American of philosophies. Pragmatism, which rejects all absolutes, holds all truths and virtues to be in the making, and tests all ideas by their ultimate use, has become not only the most characteristic form of American thought but has profoundly influenced every field of social science—law, economics, sociology, history, and even art.

46. *John Dewey*: The successor to William James as the spokesman of pragmatism, he has given that philosophy a social emphasis which it originally lacked, applied it to such diverse fields as education, art, and politics, and by his tireless championship of every liberal cause has exercised a greater influence on contemporary

thought than any living American.

47. *Sigmund Freud*: No history of American literature, or society, in the twentieth century can be written without reference to the great Austrian psychologist who first and most effectively revealed the role of the unconscious in our conduct; who emphasized, perhaps overmuch, the importance of sex in character; who gave us such terms as inhibition, repression, libido, fixation, and others that



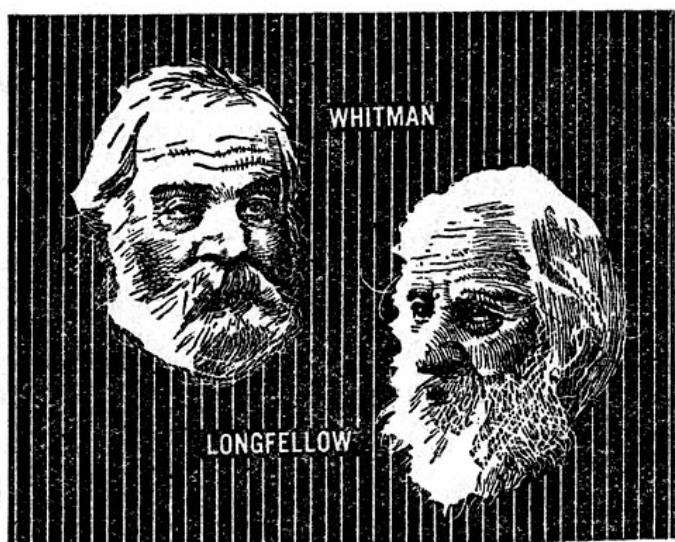
have entered into our vocabulary and our habits of thought.

48. *Pope Pius IX*: Who established the doctrine of papal infallibility and by successfully opposing every trace of modernism in the Catholic Church prevented the development of what might be called an American Catholicism.

THE BUSINESS of America, said President Coolidge, is business. A ninth group, therefore, would include some of those who have

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given us our ideal of business and furnished the American economic model. Yet it is perhaps evidence of American idealism that there are relatively few businessmen of whom we can say with assurance that they helped mold the American mind. Three must, of course, be in any list:

49. *Andrew Carnegie*: The great steelmaster is important also as philanthropist and the prime mover of our public library system.

50. *John D. Rockefeller, Sr.*: Not only the greatest organizer in American business history, the very symbol of the policy of concentration of control, but the best example of that organized philanthropy which distinguishes the American scene.

51. *Henry Ford*: The most successful exponent of the principle of mass production and distribution in our economy.

To these must be added:

52. *Thomas A. Edison*: Not only as the endlessly ingenious inventor

who gave us electric lights, movies, phonographs, and a hundred other conveniences and gadgets, but as a symbol of American mechanical genius.

IT IS SOMETHING of a tribute to the American character that, on the whole, poets and novelists have had more influence than businessmen. It is sufficient, perhaps, merely to list two literary figures who have been, not necessarily the best, but the most influential.

53. *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*: Most beloved of all American poets. *John Greenleaf Whittier* and *James Whitcomb Riley* are two others second only to Longfellow in the affection of Americans.

54. *Walt Whitman*: The poet, above all, of democracy, and the spiritual father of much of what we call "modern" poetry.

There remains a miscellaneous group, some earlier, some contemporary, without which no list of the makers of the American mind would be complete. It would embrace such journalists as:

55. *Joseph Pulitzer*: In many ways the father of modern journalism, of the sensational—and of the popular—press, and

56. *William Randolph Hearst*: Whose papers have probably been read by more people—and done more harm—than any others in history, and

57. *Adolph Ochs*: Founder of

the modern *New York Times*, who showed that a paper could be a great institution.

It would also include such publicists as:

58. **Edwin Lawrence Godkin:** Founder of the *Nation*, which long set the standard for critical journalism in the United States.

59. **Walter Lippmann:** Because he more than any other contemporary publicist influences American views of foreign affairs.

Finally, no list of those who have helped form the American mind can exclude two great leaders of the Negro race who have been the spokesmen for the Negro to the white, and who still contest dominion over the Negro mind:

60. **Booker T. Washington:** The first great national leader of the Negro race, and

61. **William Edward Burghardt Du Bois:** Who early challenged Washington's leadership, and who

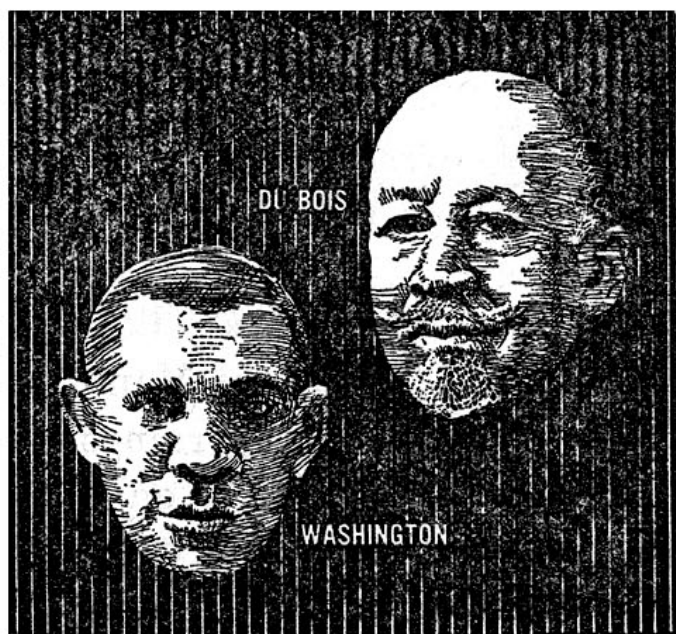
today perhaps best represents the aspirations of the American Negro.

Have I omitted any? Yes, many. Are some of the names questionable? Beyond a doubt. Have I stressed those who have influenced the best side of the American character rather than those who have encouraged its weaknesses? Perhaps. But remember, my pur-



pose was not to supply a rigid list from which no appeal could be made. It was rather to indicate that Americans, like all peoples, are influenced more powerfully by the great dead and by men of intellect than by the ephemeral notables who fill the headlines of our newspapers; to mark the fact that we are moved, though often unconsciously, by large and permanent ideas, as well as by the passions of the moment; and, finally, to suggest that while Mr. Gunther's sixty-four may "run" America, they themselves, like you and me, are "run" by others, some of whose names, I think, are to be found on this list.

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