

The Cloud Over Lindbergh

By John T. Correll

The main damage to Lindbergh's reputation was from what he said and wrote himself.

In the years following his epic flight from New York to Paris in 1927, Charles A. Lindbergh had been America's most popular hero. By 1941, however, the public's admiration for him was mostly gone, swept away by his inflammatory political speeches.

Like many others, Lindbergh was opposed to American involvement in the war in Europe, but he could not let it go at that. He had visited Germany several times and found much to like. "If England and France had offered a hand to the struggling republic of Germany, there would be no war today," he said in 1939.

Lindbergh declared in 1941 he had no preference for which side won the war but later said he would rather see the United States allied with Germany than with the Soviet Union. He told an America First committee rally that "the three most important groups who have been pressing this country toward war are the British, the Jewish, and the Roosevelt Administration."

Streets that had been named for Lindbergh were renamed. Libraries took his books off the shelves. His hometown, Little Falls, Minn., repainted its water tower to remove his name as its favorite son.

Lindbergh, angered by harsh criticism from the administration, resigned his commission in the Air Corps Reserve.

When the United States entered the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he wanted to take an active part but President Franklin D. Roosevelt declined to reinstate him.

Lindbergh's wartime service was as a civilian in the aircraft industry. He managed to fly almost 50 combat missions in the South Pacific in an advisory capacity as a tech rep evaluating Marine Corps F4U fighters and Army Air Corps P-38s.

Lindbergh had many supporters in and out of government who thought the President had treated him unfairly, and he kept a comparatively low profile until Roosevelt died. Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon brought him back into official favor.

Even today, a cloud lingers over Lindbergh, kept there by his own words preserved in the historical record.

DRIVEN AWAY

After Lindbergh came home from Paris in 1927, he toured all 48 states in his monoplane, *Spirit of St. Louis*, and was greeted by enthusiastic crowds. His appeal rose again in 1929 when he married Anne Morrow, daughter of a prominent New Jersey family. She became his copilot, navigator, and radio operator. Newspapers called them "the first couple of the skies."

Lindbergh was unprepared for the trappings of fame. He was pursued

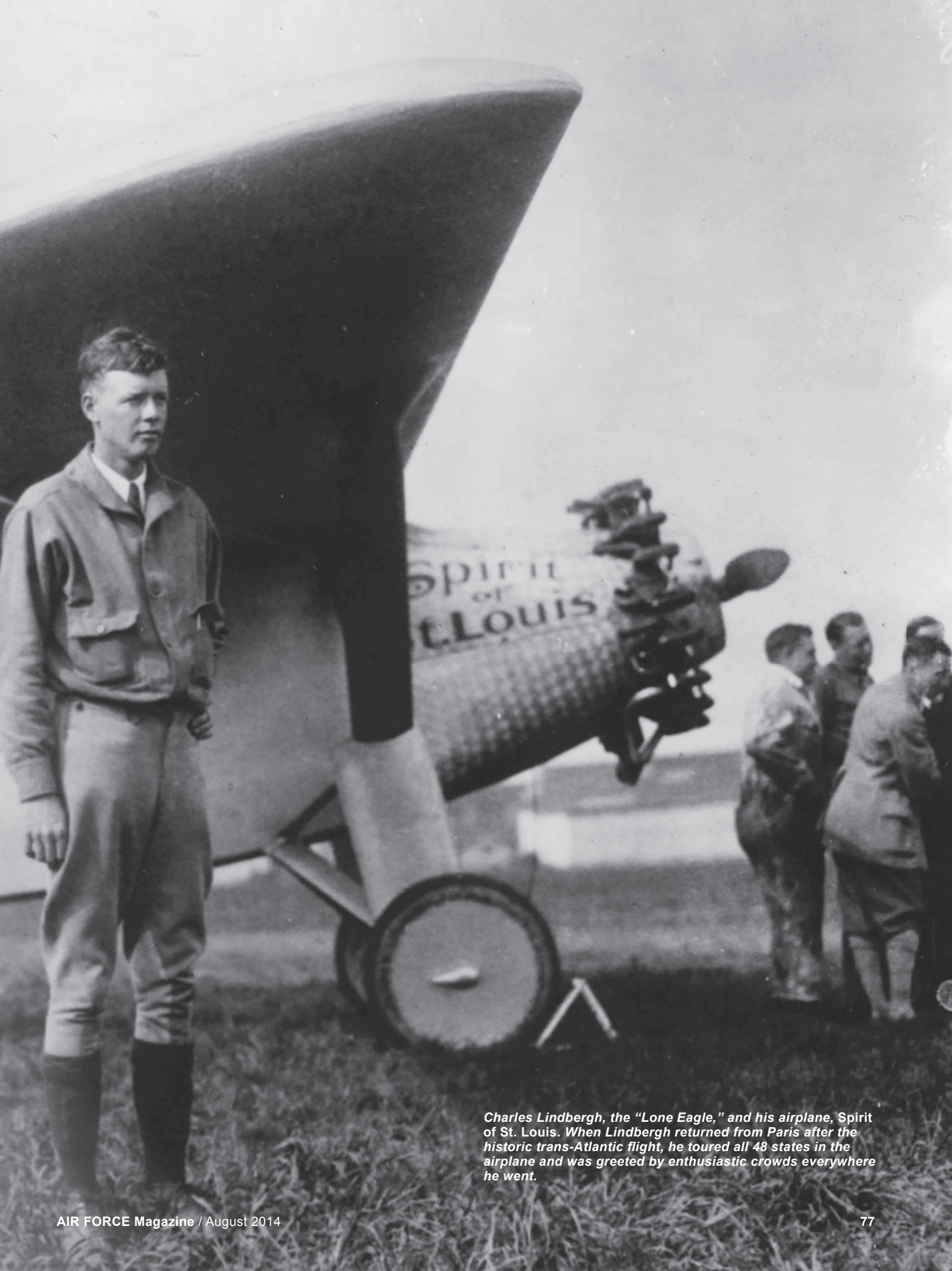
relentlessly by gawkers, autograph seekers, and reporters. Letters poured in by the thousands, some of them making demands or threats.

In 1932, the Lindberghs' 18-month-old son, Charles, was kidnapped and killed. Newspapers treated the trial in 1935 of Bruno Richard Hauptman for the abduction and murder as the story of the century. The intense publicity and constant intrusion by reporters and crackpots "made life close to impossible" for the family, Lindbergh said.

In one notorious incident, press photographers from a New York tabloid forced a car carrying the Lindberghs' second-born son, Jon, off the road and took pictures, popping flashbulbs in the face of the terrified child.

Desperate for privacy, the Lindberghs fled to England in December 1935. The *New York Times* said the nation was shamed. The *New York Herald Tribune* condemned the "vast vulgarity" of the "sensationalists, publicity-seekers, petty politicians, and yellow newspapers."

The Lindberghs found the seclusion they sought, first in England and then in France, but they were drawn back into the spotlight by a request in 1936 from Maj. Truman Smith, the US military attaché in Berlin, for Lindbergh to visit Germany. Smith knew little about aviation and had been unable to obtain much information about the growing



Charles Lindbergh, the "Lone Eagle," and his airplane, Spirit of St. Louis. When Lindbergh returned from Paris after the historic trans-Atlantic flight, he toured all 48 states in the airplane and was greeted by enthusiastic crowds everywhere he went.

strength of the Luftwaffe. He guessed accurately that the Germans would show off for Lindbergh.

Lindbergh went to Germany six times between 1936 and 1938, inspected the various new aircraft in development or production, and was allowed to fly several of them, including the Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter. Maj. Gen. H. H. "Hap" Arnold, Chief of the Air Corps, said that Lindbergh provided "badly needed information about the size and strength of the Luftwaffe."

Lindbergh concentrated on German airplanes and took scant notice of whatever else was happening around him. "Because of his hatred of the press, he did not believe a word that Western newspapermen in Berlin were saying about the brutish persecution and evil motivations of the regime," said Lindbergh biographer Leonard Mosley.

THE NAZI MEDAL

In October 1938, on his third trip to Germany, Lindbergh was awarded the Service Cross of the German Eagle. The medal was presented by Luftwaffe chief Hermann Goering on behalf of Hitler.

The US ambassador was present and saw no problem in Lindbergh's accepting the award but Anne Lindbergh immediately dubbed it "the Albatross." She was right. The medal subsequently became a burning issue, but Lindbergh stubbornly refused to return it to the Germans. He said the "fuss about it" was "a teapot tempest."

Lindbergh's regard for Germany took several forms and is documented many times over in his letters, reports, and

journals. Part of it was his judgment that the German armed forces could not be beaten and that Britain and France were foolish to try.

"Without doubt the German air fleet is now stronger than that of any other country in the world," Lindbergh said in a report to Joseph Kennedy, US ambassador to Britain. "We must recognize that the Germans are a great and able people. Their military strength now makes them inseparable from the welfare of European civilization, for they have the power either to preserve or destroy it."

In addition, the Germans made a favorable impression on him. "I cannot help liking the Germans," he wrote in his journal in 1939. "They are like our own people. We should be working with them and not constantly crossing swords."

"Of all the European countries, I found the most personal freedom in Germany," he said elsewhere in his journal. Recalling the press and the crowds in the United States, he added that, "in comparison to America, we move freely in any country over here."

Lindbergh was not blind to what Hitler and the Nazis were doing, but he did not condemn them outright. Writing about Hitler to a friend in 1937, he said, "Much as I disagree with some of the things which have been done, I can understand his popularity. He has done much for Germany."

After *Kristallnacht* in November 1938—a nationwide series of Nazi attacks on Jews with widespread killing and destruction—Lindbergh's journal entry said: "I do not understand these riots on the part of the Germans. It seems so contrary to their sense of order and their intelligence. They undoubtedly have a difficult Jewish problem, but why is it necessary to handle it so unreasonably? My admiration for the Germans is constantly being dashed against some rock such as this."

That was not the only time he referred to the "Jewish problem" in his journal, and he regularly found some rationale for German actions. In his journal entry for April 25,

Left: Lindbergh's popularity increased when he married Anne Morrow in 1929. Newspapers called them "the first couple of the sky." Below: Lindbergh gives a speech at an America First rally in New York. He became the foremost spokesman for isolationism in 1939, and inflammatory speeches at such rallies eventually destroyed most of the public's admiration for him.



1941, Lindbergh said, “No one, not even Germany, was more responsible for the conditions which caused the war than England and France.”

PREOCCUPATION WITH RACE

To the end of his life, Lindbergh denied angrily that he was either racist or anti-Semitic, but a preoccupation with race permeates his journal entries and writings, continuing through the publication of *An Autobiography of Values* in 1977.

In the 1930s, Lindbergh became an advocate of eugenics, a pseudo-science that had a considerable following at the time. Eugenics promoted the improvement of human heredity by selective breeding.

Lindbergh’s thoughts on race influenced his views about World War II. In “Aviation, Geography, and Race,” written for *Reader’s Digest* in 1939, Lindbergh said, “We, the heirs of European culture, are on the verge of a disastrous war, a war within our own family of nations, a war which will reduce the strength and destroy the treasures of the White Race.”

In the same article he said, “We can have peace and security only so long as we band together to preserve that most priceless possession, our inheritance of European blood, only so long as we guard ourselves against attack by foreign armies and dilution by foreign races.”

Lindbergh seems to have been genuinely astounded that anyone could believe him to be anti-Jewish. Yet his journal entry for April 10, 1939—left out of the version published some 25 years later but available to researchers consulting Lindbergh’s papers—said that “a few Jews add strength and character to a country, but too many create chaos. And we are getting too many.”

Race was a constant theme. “If I had no alternative I could merge with a people of Asia, just as men of Asia had merged with people of European stock,” he said in his autobiography, “but my mind and instincts were so bound to my race and to its culture that I would not join another by free choice.”

RIFT WITH ROOSEVELT

The Lindberghs returned to the United States in April 1939, just before the war in Europe began. On his first full day back, Lindbergh had a long meeting with Hap Arnold about developments in the Luftwaffe.

The clash with Roosevelt was not long in coming. Roosevelt was fighting a strong isolationist trend in Congress and among

the public at large. He saw the need to prepare for war but it was not politically possible for him to oppose the isolationists openly and directly. In an election campaign speech in October 1940, he assured parents that “your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars.”

Nevertheless, when Germany invaded Czechoslovakia, Roosevelt persuaded Congress to repeal the arms embargo that had been imposed by a series of neutrality acts and to approve several programs to assist the British.

In a radio address in September 1939, Lindbergh said the European war was “simply one more of those age-old struggles within our own family of nations” and that the United States should stay out of it. This instantly established him as the foremost spokesman for isolationism.

“Our bond with Europe is a bond of race and not of political ideology,” he said in an Oct. 13, 1939, broadcast. “It is the European race we must preserve; political progress will follow.”



Top right: The Lindberghs meet with Reichsmarshal Hermann Goering at his residence. Goering bestowed the Service Cross of the German Eagle on Lindbergh. Right: Roosevelt said privately that he regarded Lindbergh as a Nazi. Harold Ickes (right), secretary of the interior and the Administration’s political hit man, made the accusation publicly.

Corbis-Bettmann photo

“Regardless of which side wins this war, there is no reason, aside from our own actions, to prevent a continuation of peaceful relationships between America and the countries of Europe,” Lindbergh said in a radio address May 19, 1940. “The only reason that we are in danger of becoming involved in this war is because there are powerful elements in America who desire us to take part.”

In a moment of fury, Roosevelt told Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr., “If I should die tomorrow, I want you to know this. I am convinced that Lindbergh is a Nazi.”

In the next speech, Lindbergh asked, “Shall we continue this suicidal conflict between Western nations and white races, or shall we learn from history as well as from modern Europe that a civilization cannot be preserved by conflict among its own peoples, regardless of how different their ideologies may be?”

Roosevelt did not call Lindbergh a Nazi publicly, but Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior and the Administration’s political hit man, did. Among other things, Ickes said Lindbergh was the “No. 1 Nazi fellow traveler” and “the Knight of the German Eagle.” World War I hero Army Sgt. Alvin York labeled Lindbergh “an appeaser of Adolf Hitler.”

Lindbergh, at the time a colonel in the US Air Corps Reserve, resigned his commission in April 1941, stung by criticism from Roosevelt and the Administration. He lamented that he was keeping company with pacifists when he was not one himself. “If only the United States could be on the right side of an intelligent war!” he wrote in his journal.

AMERICA FIRST

The “Committee to Defend America First” was created in 1940 by students at Yale, devoted to stopping the United States from going to war. Early members included future President Gerald R. Ford and future Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart. John F. Kennedy sent a \$100 donation. Within a few months, though, the committee was taken over by hard-core isolationist politicians and the name was bobtailed to “America First.” Ford and others dropped out.

Lindbergh joined America First in April 1941, was appointed to the national board, and spoke at rallies coast to coast. His appearances attracted new members in large numbers. The speech that lit the firestorm was in Des Moines, Iowa, Sept. 11, 1941, where Lindbergh said the nation was being led into war by the British, the Jews, and the Roosevelt Administration.

“No person with a sense of the dignity of mankind can condone the persecution of the Jewish race in Germany,” he said. “But no person of honesty and vision can look on their pro-war policy here today without seeing the dangers involved in such a policy both for us and for them. Instead of agitating for war, the Jewish groups in this country should be opposing it in every possible way for they will be the first to feel its consequences.

“The leaders of both the British and Jewish races, for reasons which are as understandable from their viewpoint as they are inadvisable from ours, for reasons which are not American, wish to involve us in the war,” he said.



Left: In 1942, Lindbergh volunteered as a test subject in Mayo Clinic studies on effects of flight at high altitudes. Below: At Biak Island in 1944, off the coast of New Guinea, Lindbergh confers with Maj. Thomas McGuire, second leading AAF ace in World War II and recipient of the Medal of Honor. Below right: In his later years, Lindbergh became an ardent conservationist. He helped save the monkey-eating eagle, a specimen of which he examines here on Mindanao in the Philippines.



Every major newspaper in the country, including the isolationist newspapers, denounced the speech, as did Wendell L. Willkie, the Republican candidate who had opposed Roosevelt in the 1940 election and Thomas E. Dewey, who would be the Republican candidate next time. Lindbergh was greeted with boos as well as cheers when he spoke. The America First committee, shaken, discussed whether to “adjourn.” Three months later, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, America First was dissolved.

Lindbergh’s reaction to Pearl Harbor, entered in his journal Dec. 8, 1941, was: “I am not surprised the Japs attacked. We have been prodding them into war for weeks. They have simply beaten us to the gun.”

Lindbergh considered writing to Roosevelt to offer his services but did not, figuring FDR would make political use of it. Instead, he volunteered for service with the Air Corps. Meeting with War Department and Air Corps leaders, Lindbergh refused to retract anything he had said and it was agreed by all that he should not return to military service.

LINDBERGH’S WAR

At first, Lindbergh was a consultant for the Ford Motor Co., which was building B-24 bombers on contract. With aircraft flying higher than ever before, hypoxia and other effects of high altitude were of great concern. In 1942, Lindbergh volunteered as a subject in strenuous tests in the altitude chambers at the Mayo Clinic.

He took on an additional consultancy with the Vought-Sikorsky division of United Aircraft Corp. to work on the Navy F4U Corsair and related fighter requirements and designs. At the instigation of the Navy Bureau of Aeronautics—the White House and the Secretary of the Navy were not told—Lindbergh went to the South Pacific as a tech rep in April 1944 to study fighters under combat conditions.

Lindbergh got a warm welcome from airmen in the Pacific and during his five-month stay flew 50 combat missions,

half of them in Marine Corps F4Us from Guadalcanal and the other half in Air Corps P-38s in New Guinea. Part of his charter was to evaluate the P-38 in comparison to the F4U. On July 28, he shot down a Japanese Mitsubishi 51 Sonia off the northwestern coast of New Guinea.

Roosevelt died April 12, 1945. “The passing of Franklin Roosevelt did not affect Washington’s official attitude toward Lindbergh overnight,” said A. Scott Berg, whose 1998 biography of Lindbergh won a Pulitzer Prize. “It took a week.”

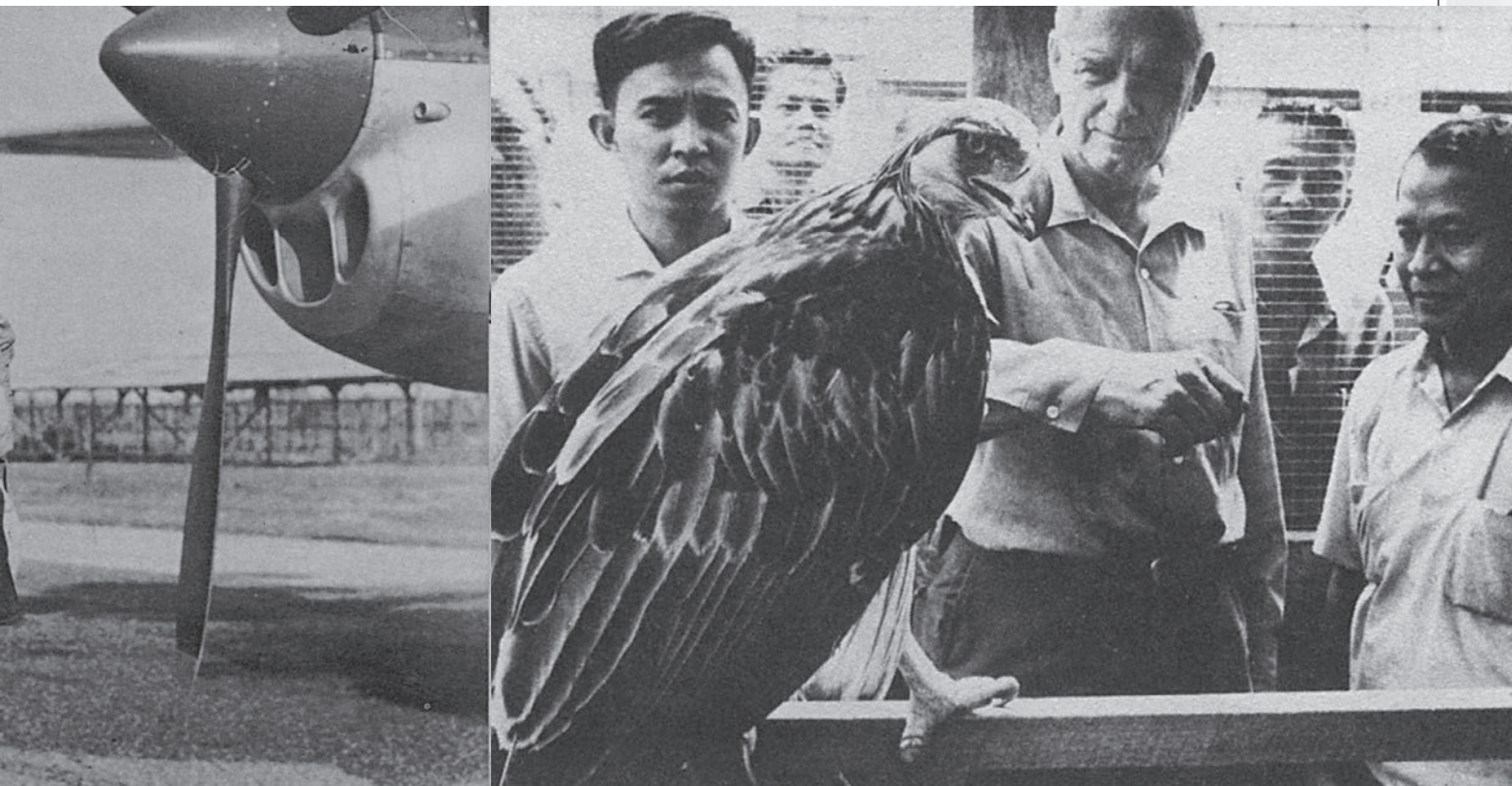
In May, again as a United Aircraft tech rep and under the auspices of the Navy Technical Mission to Europe, Lindbergh went to Germany with a team looking into developments in German aircraft and missiles. While there, he went to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where he saw a pit still filled with human bone chips and ashes from the two large cremating furnaces.

Lindbergh was appalled, but his main thought when he logged his journal entry that evening was the parallel he saw with US offenses.

“We, who claimed that the German was defiling humanity in his treatment of the Jew, were doing the same thing in our treatment of the Jap,” he wrote. “This, I realize, is not a thing confined to any nation or any people. What the German has done to the Jews in Europe, we are doing to the Jap in the Pacific.”

Lindbergh’s perception of US atrocities, as described in his journals, was based completely on hearsay from his tour in the South Pacific. His examples were either isolated incidents or generalities. His comparison with the Holocaust was preposterous, one of the worst instances of his recurring tendency to offset or mitigate whatever the Nazis did.

Commenting years later, Lindbergh said, “We won the war in a military sense, but in a broader sense we lost it, for our Western civilization is less respected and secure than it was before. ... Much of our Western culture was destroyed.



JAMES STEWART

in his role of roles as Charles A. Lindbergh

THE SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS

BASED ON THE PULITZER PRIZE WINNING BOOK BY CHARLES A. LINDBERGH



IN CINEMASCOPE AND WARNERCOLOR SCREEN PLAY BY BILLY WILDER AND WENDELL MAYES
MUSIC EMPLOYED AND CONDUCTED BY FRANK MARSH PRODUCED BY LELAND HAYWARD DIRECTED BY BILLY WILDER PRESENTED BY WARNER BROS.

Air Force Association founding member Jimmy Stewart, shown here in a movie poster, played Lindbergh in a film about the trans-Atlantic crossing.

We lost the genetic heredity formed through eons in many million lives.”

RETURN AND REHABILITATION

After the war, Lindbergh generally avoided the public eye, but was heard from occasionally. “I have not changed my belief that World War II could have been avoided, but the issue between the so-called interventionists and isolationists is past except from an academic standpoint,” he told the Associated Press.

Lindbergh’s longtime antipathy for the Soviet Union was in tune with US policy as the Cold War began and he was a staunch advocate for a strong national defense. He served without pay as a special consultant to the Air Force on aircraft and equipment design. He had no need for compensation, already well off from his work with the airlines and industry and his book revenues.

His first account of his famed trans-Atlantic flight was *We* (referring to himself and his airplane), published in 1927, but he told the story in a more substantial way in *The Spirit of St. Louis* in 1953. It won a Pulitzer Prize and was made into a movie. Jimmy Stewart, 49, was convincing in his portrayal of the 25-year-old Lindbergh.

President Eisenhower restored Lindbergh’s commission and promoted him to Air Force brigadier general in 1954. The Lindberghs were guests of President Kennedy at the White House in 1962 and were invited back by President Johnson in 1968 and President Nixon in 1972.

In his later years, Lindbergh became an ardent conservationist. In 1964 he came to the conclusion that

“airplanes depend upon an advanced civilization, and that where civilization is most advanced, few birds exist. I realized that if I had to choose, I would rather have birds than airplanes.”

FINAL DISCLOSURES

Lindbergh left a huge amount of commentary on the public record: speeches, articles, correspondence, statements to the press, and six autobiographical books. Many of the words that weigh most heavily on his reputation are from the last two, *The Wartime Journals of Charles A. Lindbergh*, published in 1970, and the posthumous *Autobiography of Values* in 1977.

The journals, kept in handwritten form from 1938 to 1945, were reduced by a third to enable publication in a single volume, which ran anyway to 1,038 pages. The cuts were said to be for the purpose of shortening only, with nothing of substance left out. Lindbergh still believed that he had been right and saw no reason to hold back. Complete copies of the journals, archived at several universities, have been made available to researchers.

Eric Goldman, reviewing *Journals* for the *New York Times*, said they showed that “Lindbergh had considerable compassion for the German Jews. But much more than his public charge, it attacks the ‘Jewish influence’ in bringing war to the United States, particularly as a result of Jewish ‘control’ of a ‘huge part’ of the mass media. A good deal of space is given to describing brutalities by US troops against Japanese soldiers; the atrocities of individual Americans are equated with the official policy of the Third Reich. Not a sentence excoriates Nazism as a general credo or poses it as a menace to civilization in any tenable definition of the word, including Lindbergh’s own. Entry after entry bespeaks a preoccupation, almost an obsession, with the ‘race problem,’ those ‘northern peoples’ versus all the others.”

In the autobiography, Lindbergh stopped short of unequivocal denunciation of Hitler. “Adolf Hitler! Such a strange mixture of blindness and vision, patriotism and hatred, ignorance and knowledge,” Lindbergh wrote. “Some irrational quality of the man, his actions, and his oratory enticed the entire German nation to support his ideas.”

When Lindbergh died Aug. 26, 1974, President Ford said, “For a generation of Americans and for millions of other people around the world, the ‘Lone Eagle’ represented all that was best in our country—honesty, courage, and the will to greatness. In later years, his life was darkened by tragedy and colored by political controversy. But in both public and private, General Lindbergh remained a brave and sincere patriot.”

Lindbergh’s statements and writings are too clear and consistent to leave much room for misunderstanding. The best conclusion that can be reached is that some things about him were heroic and admirable and some things were not.

The *New York Times* reported his death as the “passing of a hero” and said that “in the years leading up to World War II, Lindbergh was unfortunately to prove once more how wrong it is to expect oracular wisdom from popular heroes.”

The *Washington Post* pointed out “his triumphs, his tragedies, and his humiliations were all on a grand scale. And they were all borne with a grand courage.” ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent articles, “Short Fuze to the Great War” and “The Geneva Conventions Evolve,” appeared in the July issue.