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A Time to Remember

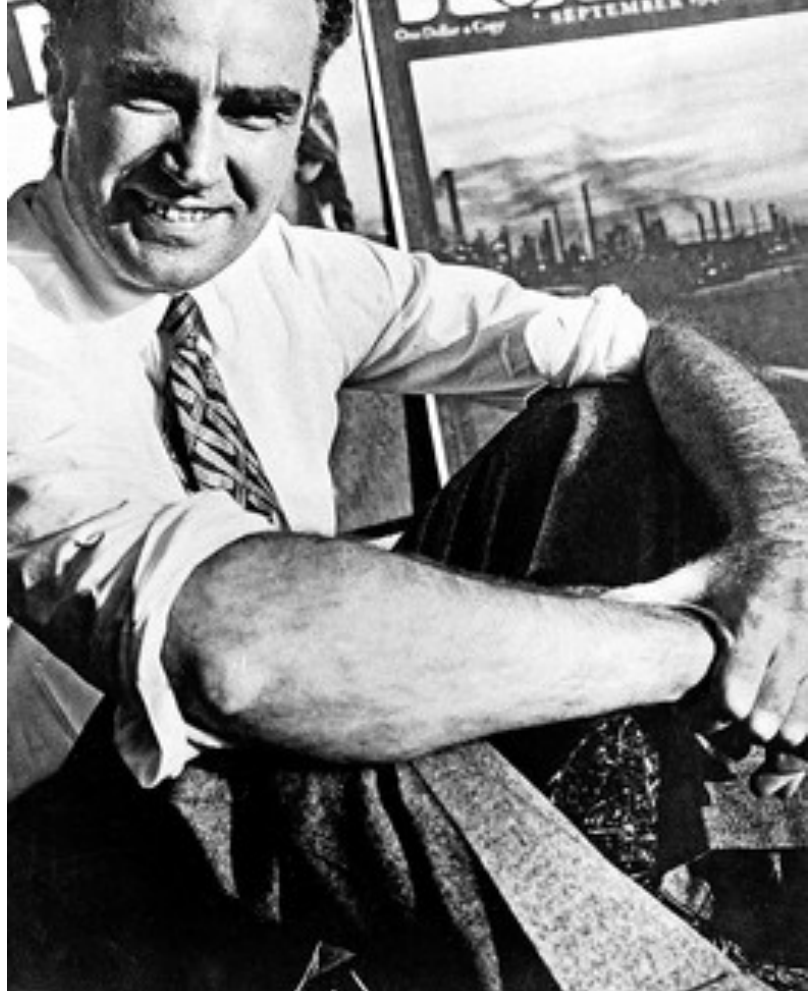
How Henry Luce founded a magazine empire that became his bully pulpit

By *Edward Kosner*

Updated April 17, 2010 12:01 am ET

Impossible today is it to imagine the power and the glory that hard-driving, messianic magazine mogul Henry Robinson Luce enjoyed in the midst of his self-proclaimed American Century.

Indeed, Luce the media tycoon seems as quaint now as the infamous backward-running, adjective-crammed *Time* magazine inflicted on readers during its heyday. And it's sobering to realize that the patriarch's beloved *Time* Inc.—hatched on the playing fields of Hotchkiss and in the Skull and Bones bastion at Yale—is now the stepchild of the entertainment conglomerate Time Warner after its disastrous affair with AOL.



In 1948, Henry Luce sits in front of reproductions of *Life* and *Fortune* magazine covers.

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Alan Brinkley's "The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century" marshals all the material for a devastating portrait of Luce as a bombastic, autocratic press lord who was full of idolatry for "Great Men" like Chiang Kai-shek and Gen. Douglas MacArthur and who made his magazines mouthpieces for his own ideology and obsessions. Instead, Mr. Brinkley has told Luce's saga with scrupulous fairness, compelling detail and more than a tinge of affection for his vast ambitions and vexing frailties. The author chronicles how Luce built the spindly *Time* into the world's greatest media empire of its era, with influence unmatched by any other American magazine. Still, Luce emerges as a man of manic energies and enthusiasms who, for all his fervent yearning to do good, bent the journalism of his magazines to propagandize for dubious crusades, most famously urging the "unleashing" of Chiang in the late 1940s to recapture a China lost to communism.

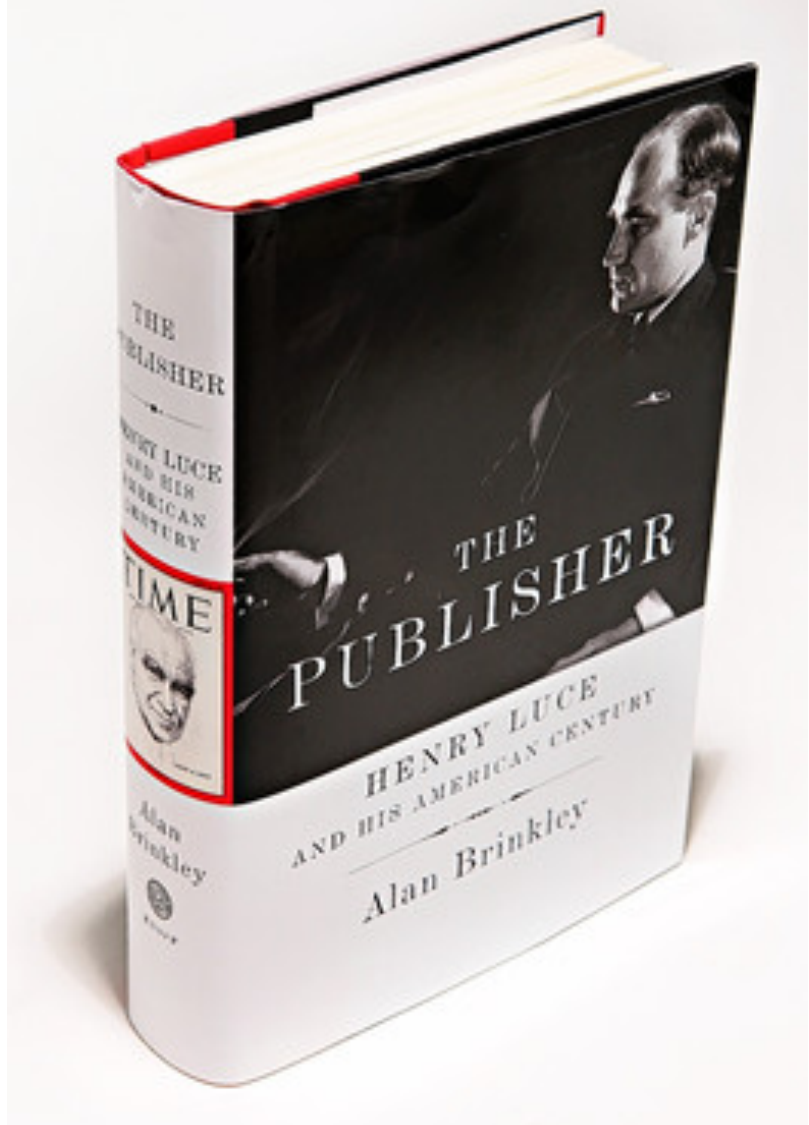
Luce's life turned on fraught relationships. The first was with Briton Hadden, his classmate at Hotchkiss and Yale, rich, brash and iconoclastic—everything Luce, the lonely, stammering son of Protestant missionaries in China, wasn't. It was Hadden who really invented *Time*, ginning it up in the early days mostly from *New York Times* clips and imbuing the magazine with its cocky attitude and theatrical language inspired, Mr. Brinkley says, by "The Iliad." Introducing the 1925 Scopes trial, *Time* intoned: "Even righteous contumely hushed its clamor, as when, having striven manfully in single combat, a high-helmed champion is stricken by Jove's bolt." But Hadden drank himself to death just six years after *Time*'s debut in 1923, leaving Luce essentially on his own.

Luce's grandiosity grew as he added *Fortune* to his realm, roved the world chatting up other Great Men, and bombarded his shell-shocked editors with brainstorm, memos and directives to shape up the magazines and the country itself. Then, at a "Turkish ball" at the Waldorf-Astoria in 1934, he met Clare Boothe, the bright, beautiful daughter of a kept woman, and Luce had a *coup de foudre*.

For all his righteous scruples, he dumped his wife of more than a decade and mother of his children, embarking on a tempestuous marriage with Clare that lasted until his death in 1967. They competed with each other, cheated on each other, tormented each other and nearly divorced a dozen times.

Mr. Brinkley, who teaches American history at Columbia University, neatly captures the tone of the couple's skyscraper-in-the-clouds idyll. Luce once bragged to Clare, the author of "The Women" and onetime U.S. ambassador to Italy, that he couldn't think of anyone who was his intellectual superior. Clare replied: What about Einstein? Well, countered Harry, Einstein was "a specialist."

Clare's glamour helped make Luce not only rich but famous. They were, as Harry wrote to Clare, "the Luces, the Magnificent." The lustrous marriage was childless and nearly sexless. But it did produce the most popular and successful magazine in history. As it happened, Clare had proposed a picture magazine called *Life* to Condé Nast—the man, not his company—when she worked as the managing editor of his *Vanity Fair* in the early 1930s. Luce had the same idea, and the triumph of *Life* gave him an unmatched pulpit where he could preach his increasingly right-wing vision for the U.S. and the world.



THE PUBLISHER

By Alan Brinkley
Knopf, 531 pages, \$35

Luce's lasting infatuation was with his abstract notion of America—a country he first saw at age 7. "America to him," writes Mr. Brinkley, "began not as a physical place, not as the diverse and contentious culture it actually was, but as a model and an ideal." That never really changed. He knew that the nation's destiny was essentially to run the world. Determined that the U.S. must intervene in World War II to save Western civilization (and China, too), Luce proclaimed "The American Century" in *Life* magazine in February 1941. He was still at it nearly two decades later, when he periodically assembled a group of Big Thinkers (among them, Adlai Stevenson, Archibald MacLeish and Walter Lippmann) to define and propagate "The National Purpose" in meetings and in articles for *Life* (a project that we at *Newsweek* used to deride as Flipper, The National Porpoise).

It was Luce's impatience with Franklin Roosevelt's tip-toeing into the war before Pearl Harbor that spurred him to take an active role in presidential politics. He fell hard for the Republican Wendell Willkie in 1940 and made

his magazines such partisans of every successive GOP candidate for the White House that many of his editors despaired. *Time* Inc. magazines not only liked Ike, they slobbered over him. Luce did respect John F. Kennedy (although he backed Nixon) and succumbed to Lyndon Johnson's transparent flattery. An old-school anti-communist, Luce had "a strong distaste" for Joseph McCarthy, Mr. Brinkley writes, as a "crude and coarse man" whose "excesses threatened to discredit more legitimate anti-Communist activities," and the publisher never warmed up to Barry Goldwater's frontier conservatism.

Despite Luce's ideological fervor, his magazines recruited some stellar journalists and writers, including John Hersey, James Agee and Theodore H. White, all of whom left *Time* Inc. or were driven away. Luce forced out Teddy White in 1946 because he was too critical of Chiang Kai-shek's corrupt regime—although White was back in Luce's good graces by November 1963, when he delivered to *Life* his famous "Camelot" interview with the widowed Jacqueline Kennedy. During Vietnam, *Time* notoriously attacked the American reporters (including its own correspondents) who were warning that the war was being lost.

As it must to all men—a pet *Time* locution—death came to Henry Robinson Luce at 67 of a massive heart attack on Feb. 27, 1967, "forty-four years almost to the day," as Mr. Brinkley writes, "since he had sat in the shabby little office he shared with [Briton Hadden] in downtown New York, holding the first issue of *Time* magazine and having 'this sort of

surprising feeling that it was pretty good.'"

Mr. Brinkley has told the cautionary tale of the Luce Half-Century with the rigor, honesty and generosity that Luce's own magazines too often sacrificed to the proprietor's enormous ego and will to power.

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of *Newsweek*, *New York* magazine, *Esquire* and the *New York Daily News*. His memoir, "It's News to Me," has been reissued in paperback.

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