

CHAPTER
16

Section 4

AMERICAN LIVES **Charles A. Lindbergh**
Private Man, Public Figure

"We must not be misguided by this foreign propaganda that our frontiers lie in Europe. What more could we ask than the Atlantic Ocean on the east, the Pacific on the west? An ocean is a formidable barrier, even for modern aircraft."
— Charles A. Lindbergh, radio speech (1939)

Charles A. Lindbergh (1902–1974) was a private man whose daring flight in 1927 made him a public figure. However, fame brought personal tragedy, and his popularity declined when he spoke against U.S. involvement in World War II.

Lindbergh became a stunt pilot in his early twenties and soon joined the army, graduating first in his flight class. By 1926 he was flying for the new airmail service from Chicago to St. Louis.

Then he went after a big prize—a long-standing offer by a French hotel manager in New York to pay \$25,000 to anyone who could fly alone, nonstop, from the United States to Paris or vice versa—a 3,600-mile dare. Lindbergh found some backers and began customizing a plane. The plane, named the *Spirit of St. Louis*, was finished in San Diego in 1927, and he flew it across the country with a stopover in St. Louis. His 22 hours of flying time set a new cross-country record. Ten days after leaving San Diego, Lindbergh flew east from Long Island, out over the Atlantic Ocean. Alone in a stripped-down plane for thirty-three-and-a-half hours, he finally landed in Paris. Thousands cheered his arrival. Back in the United States, he was given a parade in New York City, where 4 million cheered his feat.

Lindbergh became America's goodwill ambassador to the world. He married in 1929, and his wife learned to be a pilot. Together, they flew all over the world. All the time, Lindbergh tested technical improvements to planes.

Then, in 1932, tragedy struck. The Lindberghs' infant son was kidnapped from their home. A note asked for \$50,000 in ransom money. Two-and-a-half months later, the baby was found, dead. The Lindberghs were grief-stricken, and the nation mourned with them. A suspect was finally tried and convicted, but press coverage of the tragedy had left the Lindberghs totally without privacy. In 1936, they left the United States for England.

They lived there for the next three years, taking a number of trips to the continent. On several occasions, they were hosted by Hermann Goering,

the leader of the air force of Nazi Germany. Impressed by its size, Lindbergh warned officials in other countries of the Nazis' growing air power. On one visit to Germany, Goering surprised him by giving him a medal. Lindbergh was widely criticized for accepting it.

In 1939, Lindbergh returned to the United States. Certain that war in Europe would break out soon, he was determined to work to prevent U.S. involvement. (His father had served in the House of Representatives from 1907–1917, where he had opposed U.S. entry into World War I.) Germany, Lindbergh said, was too strong. Britain was an unreliable ally. At the same time, he urged Americans to strengthen the nation's defenses—especially by adding 10,000 war planes. Still a member of the army reserve, he resigned his commission early in 1941 and joined the America First Committee. He spoke at countless rallies. Then in September of 1941, he went so far as to blame Roosevelt, the British, and Jewish people for pushing the country to war. Lindbergh denied that he was prejudiced, but the charge of anti-Semitism stuck. No longer a credible speaker, he left the committee.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December, Lindbergh joined the calls to unite the nation, but he was not allowed to re-enter the army. Still, he contributed advice—and some test flying—to the effort to improve military aircraft. After the war, he was busy in the airline industry and later was an advisor to the government's space program. His autobiography, *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1954), won a Pulitzer Prize and was filmed in 1957.

Questions

1. What did Lindbergh lose in gaining fame?
2. Based on the opening quotation, why did Lindbergh think that the United States should not become involved in World War II?
3. Why did Lindbergh withdraw from the America First committee?