

# Wanted: Exemplary Heroes

Book Review by Joseph Daleiden

It has been more than thirty years since I read John F. Kennedy's book, *Profiles in Courage*, yet I still believe the book had a major influence on my life. The common theme of the biographies of a handful of Congressmen he discussed was their courage to take a position on an issue that they felt was right despite the consequences for their political future. They were outstanding examples of the kind of person I hoped to be if put to the test.

Today, the need for role models for young people has never been greater. In this cynical era when historians seem to be bent on proving not just that every American hero has feet of clay, but that they were downright wicked, it is refreshing to read a book that focuses on persons who did indeed accomplish great deeds, often overcoming significant obstacles. Most importantly, the 32 short biographical sketches provided in *Classic Americans* demonstrate that individuals can make a profound difference in the world.

Many of the persons discussed by authors Lane and Albert are the most revered in the American pantheon of statesmen, inventors and industrialists — George Washington, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, the Wright brothers, Henry Ford and Andrew

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Carnegie. The lesser know luminaries are also included, such as Anne Hutchinson, Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, Jonas Salk, Rosalyn S. Yalow and C. J. Walker. Great athletes, poets, songwriters, and even the great animator, Walt Disney, all had one thing in common: they were individuals who succeeded despite the odds. Rather than lamenting their deprived backgrounds or the obstacles to success, they epitomized courage and perseverance, virtues that have always been rare, but today seem all but forgotten.

To cite just a few examples:

Thomas Paine's stirring patriotic writings were credited by George Washington with bolstering the morale of American troops through the darkest hours of the Revolutionary War. Paine was one of the first to support civil rights for

all Americans, opposed injustices in England and France (where he spent time in prison), and had the audacity to criticize the Bible. For this last effort, Paine was vilified, ostracized, and forced into abject poverty, yet he never wavered in his pursuit of the truth.

Born into slavery, Booker T. Washington's life long quest to educate himself and other blacks led to his founding of the Tuskegee Institute whose primary purpose was to enable blacks to become self-sufficient through learning in both academic subjects and a trade.

Beginning in 1851, Susan B. Anthony spent fifty-five years crisscrossing the nation to organize the women's suffrage movement. Although she died before her dream was fulfilled, it was her indefatigable spirit, more than any other, that was responsible for gaining women the right to vote.

Starting as a lowly telegraph messenger, Andrew Carnegie built an empire in the manufacturing of steel

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## Classic Americans

by Louise Lane and  
James Albert

New Rochelle, NY:

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that enabled him to become one of the first great American philanthropists, building 2,500 free lending-libraries in the United States, Canada and Great Britain.

The undaunted Thomas Edison failed 1,600 times in his efforts to develop a filament for his light bulb that did not burn out in a few minutes.

Of particular interest to those involved in immigration reform is Henry Ford who, when he was faced with a shortage of labor for his newly invented assembly line for producing autos, did not whine to the government to import more immigrant labor. Instead, he doubled wages from the prevailing rate of \$2.50 a day to \$5.00 to attract and maintain the labor.

We discover that Charles Lindbergh believed that freedom was not compatible with population density, that in his own lifetime he saw parking space disappear in New York City, and Long Island Sound become polluted — all due to population growth and out-of-control cities.

One common thread we find winding through these many remarkable lives is that they almost all were self-motivated individuals who as often as not had little in the way of formal education, and no public support of any kind. One wonders how this was possible when today classroom size is seen as a major determinant to individual success.

*Classic Americans* is written in a straightforward, easy-to-read style that should appeal to teenagers who, today more than ever, need role models other than obnoxious athletes, vulgar rock stars, opportunistic politicians and narcissistic Hollywood idols. One hopes to see the book taken into the public schools as a text.

It is unfortunate that in an effort to present so many examples, the book often gives short shrift to the individuals discussed. Taking only a few pages to summarize the life of a brilliant and intrepid person like Frederick Douglass makes it difficult to elicit a visceral response from the reader. Too often the deprivations and seemingly impossible hurdles which these individuals had to overcome to pursue their dreams are mentioned in only a few brief lines. On the other hand, given the attention span of American youth today,

perhaps that is all they are capable of absorbing. Still, I would have liked to have seen the individuals depicted with a little more passion and personality. The cryptic encyclopedic descriptions of these courageous Americans drains them of the life and vitality that is necessary to generate an empathetic cord with the reader.

Nevertheless, in an age which places more emphasis on excuses for failure than motivation to succeed, *Classic Americans* is a worthwhile effort to demonstrate that our nation has produced many extraordinary persons who relied on their own initiative and tenacity to achieve goals which have benefitted succeeding generations. **TSC**