Henry Ford: America's Automotive Father

History 162: 1877 – Present
Henry Ford was a driven, relentless and incredibly motivated person. He was a revolutionary in multiple ways; he not only helped keep America a world leader in technology and engineering, but he also raised the bar on what was possible for the future. He was responsible for putting Detroit on the map and if it weren’t for him the Dodge Motor Company never would have existed thanks to his ousting of the Dodge brothers from Ford. He lived a long, interesting, and accomplished life.

In *Henry Ford: A Great Life In Brief*, Roger Burlingame comes across right from the start of the book as having a “respectful but resentful relationship” towards Henry Ford. The book starts out with Burlingame admiring how wise a man Henry Ford was. However, as the reader reads shortly after that, Burlingame makes Henry Ford sound like a very isolated conservative, yet very outspoken kind of person.\(^1\) Henry Ford came across as a selfish stubborn man stuck in his ways. Once you learn that Roger Burlingame and Henry Ford lived during the same time period in history it makes the reading a little more interesting. The reason being, Burlingame basically had the opportunity to watch Henry Ford become who he did from a far. Between reading the biography and reading the background on the author, it becomes clearer as to why Burlingame would have written about Ford in the way that he did.

Ford grew up as a conservative farm boy hardly educated by his own choosing and more so self-taught in his trade. This was a result of his incredible passion for machines and how they worked. His lack of education and close-mindedness really bothered his father. On the opposite end of the scale is Burlingame who grew up in Manhattan and was very well educated and very open-minded having acquired a bachelor’s degree from Harvard University and “serving with the American Expeditionary Forces in France during World War I.” Where, he educated American

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students at the University of Paris.² There's quite a contrast here but the reason that Burlingame writes with a certain level of respect is probably because Ford still managed to make something of himself and ended up being very successful. It's worth mentioning though that the lack of schooling did eventually come back to hurt Ford, especially when it came to making certain business decisions, but that didn't mean he didn't understand how money worked. His education can easily fall under the category of on the job training more than academic learning.

Even though Henry Ford lacked the typical education needed to be a successful businessman, he always seemed to make it work based on whit and gut feeling, and a lot of luck didn't hurt either. One of the reasons he was so successful was because he took advantage of the changing environment around him. His understanding of machines, the inspiration he gained by having the privilege to talk to his hero, Thomas Edison, "one on one at a dinner one night during his time working at the Edison's company";³ and with the industrial revolution going on at the same time gave Ford all the motivation he needed.

His inventiveness was recognized by people from a very early age and this allowed him to gain the opportunities necessary for him to pave his own path of success. He started out by fixing machines on his family's farm, then he started going in search of other machines to fix either on other farms or in factories in his home state of Michigan.

At this time in history the country was divided between conservative people with the attitude of why should we care what happens outside the borders of the United States of America and people who felt it was necessary that America get involved in foreign affairs. Henry Ford was one of the conservatives and this extended from him as person to his trade and business. His

feeling was why worry about lending money out to people on Wall street when he could directly translate it to physically expanding his company. A bigger factory meant more floor space which meant more machinery which meant increased production and this all cycled back around to increased profits and more money. He was a typical big business Republican for the time. Amazingly, he was so confident in his product that he didn’t even feel the need to advertise. He obviously knew something that other people didn’t. Maybe it was the fact that an automobile was something only few people could afford and their options were very limited when came to buying one.

It can be easily perceived by the reader that Burlingame felt a certain level of competition with Henry Ford. This competition was not based on a level of income or level of athleticism but a competition of personality. There was a sense that somehow Burlingame felt like he was the better person. This could be because of the amount schooling between the two; with Burlingame’s Harvard degree versus Ford’s barely middle school level education. There were times when Ford, whether or not it was due to his level of education, didn’t always handle situations in the best or most professional way, his choice of words not always being on par when it came to giving the answer people were looking for. Ford had many critics, as do most big business leaders, but Ford’s amount of critics far exceeded what some would call ‘normal’. In fact at one point in the support book, *Henry Ford A Pioneer in the Automobile Industry*, he gets compared to Adolf Hitler by his critics by the way he handled certain situations throughout his career. This was especially true when the Great Depression hit. Henry Ford seemed completely blind to the severity of the problem, which is weird considering not even his company was immune to the effects caused by the stock market collapsing. Burlingame on the

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other hand not only had the education but had numerous amounts of life experience that, had he been put in the same position as Ford, would have probably helped him handle things much differently and thus having a much smaller number of critics. He had knowledge to share, as did Ford, but in Burlingame’s eyes, Ford’s knowledge seemed to be deemed inferior because of how much more learning Ford had to do before he could turn around and share it with his ‘peers’.

Probably the most ironic thing about Henry Ford was his involvement in both World Wars. Keeping in mind that he was a conservative Republican businessman, his company and his workers created inventions, such as standardized parts and the assembly lines for mass production, which were so influential to the war effort that chances are had these inventions not been created, we wouldn’t have won either war. Between the time of World War I and World War II, Ford had become increasingly interested in aviation. He hated World War I due to his feeling that America should remain neutral and understandably felt same way towards World War II, but he knew he would end up getting involved in the wars in some way. Burlingame, throughout this part of the book, seems to really make sure that reader understands Ford’s level of frustration.

Towards the end of both books however, it is clear that even with his stinginess, Henry Ford realized that he had made mistakes along the way that probably hurt him more than helped his success. So when he handed over control of Ford Motor Company to his grandson Henry Ford II, he knew that it was the right decision. Henry Ford II, took Ford Motor Company, having learned from watching his grandfather, from a company that was fading with the times, to a company that has been rejuvenated and become the powerhouse that we see today.

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From the start of chapter one throughout almost the entire book, Burlingame continually points out different opportunities that Ford created for himself. Burlingame’s admiration for Ford, as the reader will realize as the book go on, was also for the fact that Ford knew that he was living during a very prosperous time in America’s history. At the end of both books, it clearly states how much Ford was a product of his time. There’s a lot of luck that he had on his side as far as timing, much like hitting the winning lottery numbers. He both is and isn’t a model that should be followed in the pursuit of success. His talents and wisdom happen to be the perfect mix at the right time to be able to capitalize on the opportunities presented to him to be the successful man that he was. However, he isn’t exactly the most ideal person to idolize because of the way he handled certain situations, again probably due to his lack of schooling, his lack of education overall, but mainly because of how easy he made the idea of the hard working average man to American dream success story look, when in reality we all know that hard work can lead to success but except for the few rare cases, it’s not going to happen as quickly as it did for Henry Ford and most likely won’t reach his level of success either. Either way you perceive Henry Ford as a person, there is no denying he was very relentless and he had the ingredients that it took to be successful at his time in history. And the way Burlingame wrote it, if read correctly, he immediately shows a sense of frustration in the last few pages.

My personal opinion of Henry Ford is that he was a lucky relentless old bastard, stuck in his ways and not much to say BUT when he did have something to say it was nothing short of ‘staggering’. I have trouble thinking before I open my mouth sometimes but Henry Ford takes it to a whole other level. I mean you don’t gain as many critics as he did without insulting quite a

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few people along the way. I absolutely agree with both books in saying that he was incredibly lucky with the timing. He was in the right place in America, blessed with the right skills, at the right age to match the American Industrial Revolution timeline, to be able to capitalize on everything presented to him. Even as a reader it’s frustrating and really annoying because of how easy he made getting rich quickly look. He made it seem like we could all become billionaires in matter of a few years. He reinvented the term American dream success story. Upon doing some further research and looking up what Henry Ford is worth in today’s money, I found an astonishing figure of up around $200 billion.
Bibliography

