

June 19, 2013



The 15 Greatest Americans Of The 20th Century (PHOTOS)

Posted: 07/23/2012 8:27 am

I wrote *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* [[Nation Books, \\$19.99](#)] to celebrate achievements of the people and movements that have made America a more humane, inclusive, and democratic country. But I not only wanted to educate and inspire people by offering profiles of these fascinating pioneers. I also wanted to provoke debate and controversy by encouraging readers to think about what defines someone as "great" and how progressive movements often beat the odds and bring about significant and lasting change.

You won't find Henry Ford, John Rockefeller, Thomas Edison, Charles Lindbergh, Walt Disney, Louis B. Mayer, Sam Walton, Ronald Reagan, Elvis Presley, Babe Ruth, or Billy Graham in my book. They may have been great in their specific fields of endeavor but they did not contribute to making America a more just, equal, or democratic society. Most of them, in fact, actively opposed movements for social justice.

Back in 1900, people who called for women's suffrage, laws protecting the environment and consumers, an end to lynching, the right of workers to form unions, a progressive income tax, a federal minimum wage, old-age insurance, the eight-hour workday, and government-subsidized health care and housing were considered impractical idealists, utopian dreamers, or dangerous socialists. Now we take these ideas for granted. The radical ideas of one generation have become the common sense of the next.

We also sometimes change our views about the people who espoused once-radical ideas. Today we view Rev. Martin Luther King as something of a saint. His birthday is now a national holiday. His name adorns schools and streets. But in his day, many people in positions of power, and not just southern racists, considered King a dangerous troublemaker. He was harassed by the FBI and vilified in the media.

We stand on the shoulders of earlier generations of reformers, radicals, and idealists who challenged the status quo of their day. Some of the 100 people in my book are famous, but many more are not well-known by the general public, but should be. A few of the "greatest" Americans - like Albert Einstein, Helen Keller, and Theodor Geisel (better known as Dr. Seuss) -- are household names for their professional accomplishments, but few people know that they were also radicals.

Some of the 100 people were more radical than others. Quite a few came from privileged backgrounds but dedicated their lives to creating a society that would erase class, racial, and gender privilege. These individuals were all heroes, but they were not saints. They made strategic mistakes, had personal flaws, and reflected some of the prejudices of their times.

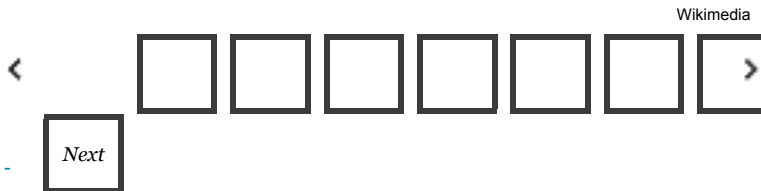
These 100 people helped move America forward by organizing movements, pushing for radical reforms, popularizing progressive ideas, and spurring others to action. They expressed their commitment to change in three ways. Some were organizers and activists who mobilized or led grassroots movements for democracy and equality. Others were writers, musicians, artists, editors, scientists, lawyers, athletes, and intellectuals who challenged prevailing ideas and inspired Americans to believe that a better society was possible. Finally, some were politicians--presidents, members of Congress, mayors and city council members, and some who ran for office and lost -- who gave voice to social justice movements in the corridors of power and translated their concerns into new laws that changed society. Quite a few of the 100 greatest Americans played more than one of these roles. The leaders, organizations, and movements that made this a better society all had to learn how to balance the tension between outsiders and insiders.

The 20th century is a remarkable story of progressive accomplishments against overwhelming odds. But it is not a tale of steady progress. At best, it is a chronicle of taking two steps forward, then one step backward, then two more steps forward. The successful battles and social improvements came about in fits and starts. When pathbreaking laws are passed--such as the Nineteenth Amendment (which granted women suffrage in 1920), the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (which created the minimum wage), the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which outlawed many forms of racial discrimination), and the Clean Air Act of 1970--we often forget that those milestones took decades of work by thinkers, activists, and politicians. The people I profile in the book were not sprinters; they were long-distance runners for justice.

Each generation of Americans faces a different set of economic, political, and social conditions. There are no easy formulas for challenging injustice and promoting democracy. But unless we know this history, we will have little understanding of how far we have come, how we got here, and how progress was made by the moral convictions and courage of the greatest Americans.

I'm often asked who are my "favorites" among the 100 people I've profiled in the book. It was hard enough to get the list down to 100, much less rank them. All were giants, but some of them were taller than others in terms of bending the arc of history. So I've pulled out 15 people who represent the most influential progressives of the last century and provided short summaries about their lives and legacies.

Of course, the story doesn't end in 2000. In the last dozen years, grassroots movements have continued to push and pull America in a positive direction, often against difficult odds. The story of progressive change is a continuing one. That's why the book includes final chapter that introduces a few young activists who are strong candidates to make the Social Justice Hall of Fame for the 21st century.



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televisionsets 23 12
 64 Fans · It's the price you pay for living in a society

Wow, it's a perfect list of people who represent the systematic destruction of the individual. Good job!

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[In reply to: televisionsets](#)

pjordan 2 1
 2,615 Fans · Ain't wastin' time no more

really....our motto is e pluribus unum...out of many one. Our motto is not screw you I've got mine. These people helped build a country that is better for everyone. Sorry if child labor and discrimination is part of your American dream that has been taken away from you by big bad liberals.

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[In reply to: televisionsets](#)

American Subversive 2 1
 1,308 Fans · Free markets are beneficial to ruling class only.

Close. The preservation of the individual, without the exploitation and destruction of the common good.

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Candide33

28 9

SUPER USER · 4,558 Fans · I heart Bernie Sanders

Good list, all liberals... try to make a list of conservatives that ever accomplished anything good... ever built highways or advocated for public education or civil rights... nope...

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[In reply to: Candide33](#)

JHberger

1

SUPER USER · 296 Fans

If you think the only "good" people are redistributionists, remember that somebody has make the money before you get to redistribute it. Parasite.

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[In reply to: Candide33](#)

MarcEdward

1

POLITICAL PUNDIT · 4,233 Fans · likes all cats more than most people

Can't do that. The problem with conservative ideas is they're all bad. Seriously, can anybody point to any conservative public policy that, when enacted, did what it was supposed to do? Did the Reagan Tax Cuts lead to lower deficits and greater income equality for all Americans? Did Pre-emptive war in Iraq "end terrorism"? Did the invasion of Panama "win the drug war"? Has the war on drugs made Americans safer? **Can anybody name ONE SINGLE CONSERVATIVE POLICY in the last 30 years that delivered on it's promise?**

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hrdbal51

6

182 Fans

Not Capitalists like Edison and Ford....only the liberal socialists? Free market capitalism helped provide jobs and opportunity for thousands or millions this century. The great hallmark of this country.

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hrdbal51

2 6

182 Fans

The Post is socially, politically and economically biased and should be ignored. To only recognize socialist movements is an insult to the strength of capitalism and the great history it had on this country. Their top leaders of this century is a disgrace.

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[In reply to: hrdbal51](#)

bobcornerstone

1

54 Fans

This should read the bottom 15 not the top.

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[In reply to: bobcornerstone](#)

hrdbal51

182 Fans

totally agree

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tyrdofwaitin

186 Fans

4 5

Where are the hedge fund managers, venture capitalists and Wall Street and corporate biggies? This top 15 is downright un-American!

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[In reply to: tyrdofwaitin](#)

mendelcrosses

326 Fans

1

By today standard certainly. just goes to show you how times have changed.

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[In reply to: tyrdofwaitin](#)

Taterhead McGobstopper

439 Fans · Paddle faster, I hear banjos ...

They don't actually do anything of any value or of any benefit to society (but you knew that, already :)

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drmdj

SUPER USER · 2,059 Fans · Tired of Willful Liars.

3 5

Did anyone else notice that all of the people chosen were for bettering the human condition? Not to get political, but how many republicans have been known to do that throughout American history or even world history? Don't say Lincoln because as we all know, the beliefs of the republican party at the time were much more in line with today's democratic party.

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[In reply to: drmdj](#)

Peter Dreier

ARTICLE AUTHOR

474 Fans

1

Among the 15 people on the list, Earl Warren was a Republican. Among the 100 people in my book, there are quite a few Republicans, although except for Warren they are from the early 1900s, when there was still a species called a "liberal" or "progressive" Republican. You can find the entire list of 100 greatest Americans on the book's website:

<http://100greatestamericans.org>

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[In reply to: drmdi](#)

Novgorod Viking

145 Fans · Metropolitan of All Russia NOVGOROD

1

Yeah!

Bettering...

Margaret Sanger
Founder of Planned Parenthood

In Her Own Words

On blacks, immigrants and indigents:
"...human weeds,' 'reckless breeders,' 'spawning... human beings who never should have been born." Margaret Sanger, Pivot of Civilization, referring to immigrants and poor people

On sterilization & racial purification:
Sanger believed that, for the purpose of racial... [Read More](#)

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Bradlinsky

SUPER USER · 751 Fans · Concept Other Than Self

2 5

The funniest thing tho is all the conservatives (?) ragging on the list. Some people just HATE the idea that 'betting humanity' is a nobler thing than merely taking care of ones self.

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[In reply to: Bradlinsky](#)

Patrick12

40 Fans

1

I am guessing you meant bettering, not making fun just guessing. As a conservative, I am inspired by many of these people, but I also am a realist so I do find a few...maybe not in the top 15.

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[In reply to: Patrick12](#)

Bradlinsky

SUPER USER · 751 Fans · Concept Other Than Self

Bettering, yes. :)

My top 15 would be different, too, and like any list – best rock bands of all time? – not everyone is going to agree. I appreciate your candor.

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Sonny5309

12 Fans

5

Thank you for posting this. I'm ashamed there are some people you listed I never even heard of. But I do know them now. It's real a shame how some of these names were never mentioned when I went to school. Thanks again for writing this. I really think in order to create a movement to stop corporate greed we need to go back in history and study and discuss what some of these people did to lead their movements for social reform.

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[piscatawayan](#)

237 Fans

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Looks like an FBI Most Wanted List.

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[pullmafingerquik](#)

SUPER USER · 76 Fans · I don't care if you like me or not,like it or not!

1 5

An incomplete list of nothing.

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[In reply to: pullmafingerquik](#)

[islandgirl15](#)

487 Fans · more Liberal everyday

It's all opinion.

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