



PRESS RELEASE

The dawn of the American century (1919-1944)

Under the Red, White and Blue

**Exhibition | Caen Memorial
May 8th, 2024 > January 5th, 2025**



Where did the American soldiers who gave their lives on the beaches of Normandy in the early morning of June 6th, 1944, come from? What is the story of their lives?

What was the public imagination and cultural environment of their time? To commemorate the 80th anniversary of the Normandy Landings and honor these liberators, the Caen Memorial has chosen to explore the America they grew up in. The exhibition outlines the cultural, social, and political history of America and of Americans, from 1919 to 1944, from the triumphant return of the soldiers from the First World War to the Normandy landings, through the Roaring Twenties and Great Depression.

The exhibition brings together unique artifacts on loan from several major American institutions (the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library, the Steinbeck Center in Salinas, California, the Academy Awards as well as the Warner Bros and Paramount Hollywood studios in Los Angeles...) and from public and private collections in Europe (Chaplin's World in Switzerland, the Great War Museum in Meaux, the Caen Memorial...). Organized in chronological chapters, the exhibition will bring this era to life with a special focus on cinema, in order to better capture the nuances of light and darkness of a creative and complex America marked by crisis and turmoil.

The exhibition's subhead, *Under the Red, White and Blue*, was borrowed from F. Scott Fitzgerald. He initially intended to give this title to his iconic novel, *The Great Gatsby*, which portrays the tensions that defined this pivotal moment of American history.

AMERICA IN MOVIES

The exhibition starts in the Memorial's entrance hall with an evocation of the increasing influence of American cinema from the 1920s to the early 1940s. The soldiers of June 6 grew up watching the great Hollywood films which, between the two world wars, became sound movies in color. *The Modern Times*, *The Great Dictator*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Casablanca*, which all came out in these decades when the movie industry was booming, are undoubtedly revealing of the mood of the nation at the time.

For this reason, visitors are introduced to America's history through cinema, as the Memorial's entrance hall, turned for the occasion into a movie theater from the 1930s, invites them to pass through the screen to discover a country which, behind the scenes, differs to some extent from the one carefully manufactured by the "dream factory" of Hollywood.

A PLURAL AMERICA (1919 TO 1929)

The exhibition starts in the year 1919, at the dawn of the "American century". The Great War is over, triumphant soldiers parade in New York as the United States establishes themselves as a global power. But dark clouds on the

horizon announce a grim future. The first floor takes visitors on a journey through the America of the 1920s in all its diversity and contradictions, with a focus on key American landmarks. In New York, between skyscrapers and jazz clubs, visitors discover the cultural effervescence of the *Roaring Twenties* and the Harlem Renaissance; in Los Angeles, the world of surfing and bathing beauties, female emancipation and the insouciance of the beaches of California; in Detroit, the rise of the automobile...

This journey also brings us to Chicago in the realm of Al Capone and the underworld, as well as to Oklahoma. It is the America of racial tensions that visitors discover there, that of the Ku Klux Klan and of Indian reservations, in this southern state bloodied during the 1920s as much by the racial massacre of Tulsa as by the murder of the Osage Indians. At the end of this geographical journey, visitors abruptly meet the moment that plunged in 1929 this plural America into the unique time of the Great Depression: the Wall Street crash of 1929, unemployment, soup kitchens, the dust storms of the *Dust Bowl* and shanty towns.

CRISIS AND RECOVERY (1929 TO 1944)

The second half of the exhibition focuses on the 1930s, the era of recovery: in the space of one decade, a country broken by the Great Depression finds in itself the resources to eventually establish itself as leader of the Free World. As visitors leave the first floor and climb up the stairs to reach the second level of the exhibition, they discover in the staircase Franklin D. Roosevelt's victory in the 1932 presidential elections and his promise of a New Deal, whose economic measures also had an impact on the public imagination and the culture of the time. The Roosevelt administration mobilized photographers and filmmakers, and found allies in both writers and blues singers, to raise awareness on the seriousness of the crisis and to promote the – relative – efficiency of the measures it was taking to contain the crisis.

At the same time, several radical projects were also in the making and bore the seeds of an infinite number of possible Americas: socialism, communism, racial equality, Black Left Feminism, or populism with antisemitic overtones. Nothing was written!

The exhibition also reveals the hesitations and ambivalence of American society, especially in the face of the rising threat of Nazism. At the Berlin Olympics, while African American athlete Jesse Owens challenged Hitler's regime, Coca Cola flattered him in its advertising campaigns. Anxious to protect its market share in Germany, Hollywood tried to censor the few films that attempted to denounce Nazism before 1942.

As for Franklin Roosevelt's early efforts to let the United States join the conflict, they were met for a long time by deep isolationism and a fascist temptation embodied by star aviator Charles Lindbergh and the *America First Committee*. Then came the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Writers became war correspondents and Hollywood a propaganda machine.

The exhibition ends with the American armada leaving for the beaches of Normandy, while an alcove just above the exit echoes President Roosevelt's prayer as he announces the news of the landings to the American people on the radio. The door closes back on the America that the soldiers who landed on June 6 lived in. As visitors walk back to the entrance hall, they pass through Hollywood's portrayal of this America again, which they will see with new eyes.

General Curator: Kléber Arhoul, CEO of the Caen Memorial

Scientific Curator: Clément Fabre, associate professor of history, member of the scientific committee of *L'Histoire*, and editor of the history TV show *Faire l'Histoire* broadcast on Arte

Press contacts

Claudine Colin Communication

- Julie Camdessus : julie.c@claudinecolin.com
- Alexandre Holin : alexandre@claudinecolin.com

Memorial communication department

- Laura Bataille : lbataille@memorial-caen.fr
- Fanny El Haj El Kaid : presse@memorial-caen.fr



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Practical information

Mémorial de Caen

Esplanade Général Eisenhower
F. 14050 Caen - Normandy

www.memorial-caen.com

Opening hours

- **From May to September** : 9 am - 7 pm
- **From October to January** : 9:30 am - 6 pm
(closed on Wednesdays in November and December)

