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MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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The Most Influential Person Who Never Lived

The writer of Ecclesiastes noted that, "Of making many books there is no end" (Ecclesiastes 12:12). This has been amended many times to apply to many endeavors, but perhaps most of all as follows: "Of the making of *lists* there is no end."

Yet two have entered my thinking of late.

First, in the most recent issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, is a list of the 100 most influential figures in American history.

Beginning with Abraham Lincoln (#1), working down to Herman Melville (#100, noted as the "American Shakespeare"), the list marks luminaries such as George Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as more modern icons as Walt Disney, Bill Gates, and Sam Walton.

Determining "influence" is, of course, tricky business. This particular exercise in subjectivity was the product of a panel of ten experts (including evangelical historian Mark Noll), and presided over by Ross Douthat, who offers an essay on the results. Impressive as such panels can be, one's mind leaps to notable omissions, such as Billy Graham (particularly when both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young are listed), but props go out for Jonathan Edwards. In a recent email, John Wilson, editor of *Books and Culture*, simply pronounces the list "boring," reflecting "the bland consensus liberalism that dominated American élites in 1966, when I entered college."

Far more intriguing, particularly when juxtaposed with the Atlantic list, is that offered by Allan Lazar, Dan Karlan and Jeremy Salter who have compiled a list of the 101 most influential people who *never* lived. The idea behind the book is how characters of fiction, myth, legends, television, and movies have shaped our society, changed our behavior, and set the course of history – often more than those who actually existed. As Thomas C. Foster wrote in his review, "Any book that can bring together Othello, Hiawatha, and Kermit the Frog gets my vote."

And number one most influential person who never existed?

The Marlboro Man.

"Advertising Age picked the Marlboro Man as the most powerful brand image of the twentieth century and one of the top advertising campaigns of that era...Marlboro's new image boosted its

sales four-fold from 1955 to 1957, and by 1972 it had become the top cigarette brand both in the nation and the world. In 2000, its market share was 35 percent of U.S. cigarette sales, outselling the six next most popular brands *combined*."

For influence, consider the following: "Between 20 and 30 percent of the U.S. population now smokes...According to the CDC, deaths attributed to smoking total about 440,000 per year in the United States, plus another 9 million serious illnesses (1995-1999)."

The authors pose the question, "Why do we start?", and then give the answer: "Advertising doesn't merely inform us of price and performance, it tells us what products make us successful and attractive...[the image of the cowboy] was exactly what adolescents wanted to be – tough, independent, and free of their parents...And thus the Marlboro Man came into existence, not to sell trips to Wyoming but to plant the idea that the right brand of tobacco would give you independence and strength."

So next time you think through what shapes culture, you may want to pass on Ronald Reagan and think Ronald McDonald. And then think about what that Ronald is motivating you to become – and more importantly, *how*.

James Emery White

Sources

"The Most Influential Figures in American History," *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 2007 (<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200612/influentials>).

Allan Lazar, Dan Karlan and Jeremy Salter, *The 101 Most influential People Who Never Lived* (Harper, 2006).

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