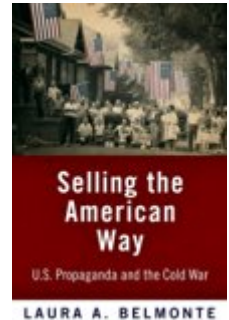


Laura A. Belmonte. *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. xiv + 255 pp. \$47.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4082-5.



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One of the most interesting and welcome features of scholarship on the American and Soviet propaganda campaigns during the Cold War is that it engages such diverse fields of historical inquiry. This state of affairs is largely due to the nature of the conflict itself. The threat of nuclear war led U.S. and Soviet policymakers to devise new means for combating the other short of open war. Inevitably, politicians and diplomats looked to culture and ideas as the best means for waging the superpower struggle. Hence, this subject has drawn the attention of diplomatic, political, intellectual, cultural, and social historians. Scholars such as Kenneth Osgood, Walter Hixson, Jessica Gienow-Hecht, Reinhold Wagnleitner, and Volker Berghahn have all examined how the United States used radio stations, libraries, films, cultural exhibits, newspapers, and other forms of media to undermine the Soviet position.[1] Laura A. Belmonte's new book, *Selling the American Way*, makes a thoroughly researched and thoughtfully analyzed contribution to this scholarship. Her book both synthesizes existing scholarship and

contributes important new research to the study of the propaganda campaigns of the Harry Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower administrations.

The book's first main goal is to explore how American information strategists developed a basic conception of America and then consider how this conception often clashed with the cultural and social realities of the late 1940s and 50s. Belmonte argues that American information operatives "faced difficult choices in reconciling their symbolic 'America' with the complex political, economic, and strategic realities of the early Cold War" (p. 7). Information operatives working for the State Department, United States Information Agency (USIA), and other organizations were often confronted with the challenge of promoting an America that stood for democratic freedom and economic prosperity but also faced problems such as gender inequality, economic disparity, and racial segregation. Their solution, Belmonte asserts, was to develop a narrative that trumpeted the accomplishments of democratic capitalism, downplayed domestic problems, and justified U.S.

actions in the Cold War. Importantly, however, Belmonte notes that these operatives were not cynical propagandists, but believed strongly in the virtue of their cause and of the struggle against the Soviet Union. They justified the compromises they made in presenting an idealized vision of the United States as a necessary means for combating the greater danger of Soviet communism.

Belmonte's study draws on a wide range of archival sources, including the records of the U.S. State Department, USIA, and National Security Council, as well as congressional records and pamphlets, radio broadcasts, and films produced by the various U.S. information organizations. While the table of contents does not indicate a formal division, the work can be split into two sections. Chapters 1 and 2 explore the institutional and policymaking history of American propaganda operations during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. These chapters provide the reader with a comprehensive historical overview of information operations during the early Cold War and allow readers to see the important problems and obstacles faced by operatives during both presidential administrations. As Belmonte shows, U.S. propaganda operations frequently encountered tepid support from Congress, as demonstrated by inadequate budgets and attacks from individuals such as Joseph McCarthy, who repeatedly accused organizations such as the official U.S. broadcaster, Voice of America, of communist sympathies. Yet, for all the challenges faced by America's information agencies, they nevertheless enjoyed notable successes. Belmonte cites the Moscow Exhibition of 1958 as a high point in America's propaganda campaign against the Soviets.

The second part of Belmonte's study presents four chapters on the ways in which information strategists defined democracy, capitalism, gender, family, and race. As Belmonte notes, these topics presented strategists with considerable obstacles to their attempts to develop a coherent, attractive

conception of democracy and capitalism. Bringing together issues of importance to historians of politics, ideas, culture, and gender, the book examines areas that American propagandists found particularly challenging when it came to trumpeting American superiority. Chapter 3, "Defining Democracy," analyzes the creation of a basic definition of democracy by strategists to serve as the foundation of the anticommunist ideological offensive. U.S. operatives defined democracy in broad, ideological terms that cast clear distinctions between democracy and communism. Pluralism, individualism, patriotism, and the value of the individual citizen were all hallmarks of this definition. However, unable to reach a consensus on what principles defined America, U.S. operatives focused more on depicting the Soviet Union as an opponent of fundamental American principles such as freedom, family, culture, and peace. Official films such as *Social Change and Democracy* (1951) illustrated this concept well. The film contrasted oppression by communist regimes with efforts made by a group of American fishermen to convince their local city council to protect local waters. Another common expression of this approach was to contrast religious Americans with atheist Soviets. As one USIA director noted, "no exhibition about the United States would be complete without demonstrating the 'pervasive influence of religion'" (p. 105). U.S. officials presented a wide range of religious programs and made efforts to present a general, ecumenical picture of religion that did not overly favor the Judeo-Christian faiths. For example, Voice of America Arabic service featured programs stressing the incompatibility of Islam and communism. Thus, USIA officials presented religion as an integral component of democracy.

The remaining chapters explore how this conception of democracy factored into strategists' discussion of capitalism, gender, and race. In "Selling Capitalism" (chapter 4), Belmonte analyzes the ways in which operatives countered Soviet assertions that capitalism was an inherently unequal,

unjust economic system. The United States stressed that capitalism was better able to provide basic, consumer goods to citizens. A USIA chart cited by Belmonte, entitled "Comparative Work-time Required to Buy Basic Food Items," illustrates this technique. Listing disparities in the time it took to acquire staples such as bread, beef, and sugar, the poster noted that it took 52 minutes of work time to buy beef in New York, compared to 257 minutes in Moscow. U.S. officials thus presented a sanitized vision of capitalism in which average workers were granted the dignity and autonomy that their counterparts under communism lacked.

Chapter 5, "The Red Target is Your Home," examines the themes of gender and family in U.S. information campaigns. As Belmonte shows, U.S. operatives contended that the nuclear family was inherently democratic. The mostly male strategists contended that American middle-class women eagerly embraced roles as housewives, mothers, and community organizers. Combating Soviet arguments that women in America suffered from wage inequalities and laws barring them from certain jobs, U.S. propaganda argued that communism robbed women of the opportunity to raise children and take care of their homes. Belmonte argues that these assertions reflected the biases of the strategists themselves: "'America,' to these overwhelmingly male bureaucrats, meant that men were able to take care of their wives and children. In 'America,' women devoted themselves to their families and their communities" (p. 137). Information strategists offered an vision of the American family similar in idealism to their depictions of democracy and capitalism. When the State Department attempted to present U.S. officials in London with photographs of a typical middle-class family, they provided images of the Seymours, a seemingly respectable Virginia couple. After their choice was criticized in the Washington *Evening Star*--both were previously divorced and Mr. Seymour lacked a war record--officials rejected the family as not being a "'typical middle

class family'" (p. 151). While strategists spoke of an America that embraced diversity and pluralism, they embraced a narrow conception of "typical" America.

U.S. officials' basic visions were particularly problematic on the issue of race relations, the topic of chapter 6. U.S. information officials were aware that criticism of Soviet oppression often rang hollow to individuals aware of segregation. In response, they tended to focus on the economic and political progress made by African Americans. To illustrate this point, Belmonte quotes a 1954 USIA report which recommended, "'It is unwise to focus attention on bad conditions, unless this helps maintain credibility in a major way, or shows the U.S. is attacking its social problems.... A lynching should be reported without comment, but the following week there should be a general report of U.S. progress in race relations'" (p. 167). Publications such as *The Negro in American Life* (1952) focused on African American achievements in culture and economics. However, media often avoided topics about African American family and domestic lives to focus instead on public activities. Often, U.S. information strategists could not hide the injustices of segregation, as during the 1957 struggle to integrate public schools in Arkansas. Moreover, African American cultural figures such as Louis Armstrong, Josephine Baker, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Paul Robeson all publicly noted discrepancies between the U.S. government's democratic rhetoric and the realities of racism.

Belmonte's work offers an excellent analysis of the intersection between information and propaganda programs with U.S. cultural diplomacy during the Cold War. Readers will note a few weaknesses, however. The chapters on the Truman and Eisenhower administrations could each be shorter, or even condensed into a single, synthetic overview of the period from 1945 to 1960. While they provide helpful background information for readers unfamiliar with this field, most of

the information and conclusions presented in these chapters will be known to those familiar with works by Kenneth Osgood, Arch Puddington, and Walter Hickson.[2] The innovative and insightful research presented in the subsequent four chapters only highlights this point. Finally, the conclusion could do a better job of synthesizing the work's research and arguments. The final chapter is devoted almost entirely to the problems of American cultural diplomacy during the George W. Bush presidency. While the contrasts between U.S. conduct of cultural diplomacy during the 1950s and the first decade of the twenty-first century are interesting, an analysis that recapitulated and addressed the main arguments of the preceding chapters would have made for a stronger conclusion. As it stands, the overwhelming focus on contemporary challenges and issues makes the concluding chapter feel somewhat out of place.

Overall, however, this fine study highlights the interactions of culture and politics during the Cold War. It will be of interest to a wide range of readers, including scholars of American diplomacy, the mass media, propaganda, gender, and the Cold War. While it will be a welcome selection for new graduate course syllabi, its clear writing and organization also make it a fine addition to future undergraduate syllabi on a number of topics. It is highly recommended.

Notes

[1]. Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2006); Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, *Transmission Impossible: American Journalism as Cultural Diplomacy in Postwar Germany 1945-1955* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999); Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the*

Second World War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Volker Berghahn, *America and the Intellectual Cold Wars in Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 2000).

[2]. Osgood, *Total Cold War*; Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000); Hixson, *Parting the Curtain*; and Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*.

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