

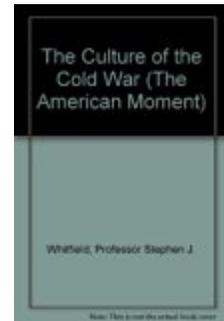
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Stephen J. Whitfield. *The Culture of the Cold War, 2d ed.* Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. viii + 275 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-5195-7; \$38.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5196-4.

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The Cold War in Culture and Politics

The first edition of Stephen Whitfield's survey of American culture during the Cold War years was published in 1991, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union ended the four-decade struggle between the world's two great super powers, and it remains a useful introduction to the ways in which the crusade against communism contributed to the reshaping of American society in the years following World War II. Whitfield focuses on the first two decades of the Cold War, the period, he argues, when a political consensus that equated "Americanism" with a militant anti-communism dominated all aspects of American life. By the mid-1960s, however, this dominance began to wane. The Kennedy Administration's movement toward detente with the Soviet Union and an increasingly vocal opposition to the authorities and institutions that enforced Cold War values marked the end of the Cold War culture.

Whitfield's ideological perspective is similar to many of the Cold War liberals he cites throughout the book. He has no sympathy for the American leftists who supported the Party through Stalin's purges and his non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. Whitfield deliberately chooses to call the Soviet Union's American defenders Stalinists rather than Marxists to emphasize the contrast between socialist ideals and Soviet reality. At the same time, he agrees with Philip Rhav's 1952 observation that "communism was a threat to the United States...but it was not a threat in the United States" (pp. 3-4). But, he points out, there was little the United States could do to defeat its enemy on the international scene. Despite calls for

a preemptive nuclear strike against the Soviet Union by members of congress and promises to free the peoples of Eastern Europe by presidential candidates, the knowledge that either course of action would likely end in an atomic holocaust insured that the rhetoric was never followed up by action. Consequently, "the most vigilant patriots went after the scalps of their countrymen instead" (p. 9), offering Richard Hofstadter another example of what he labeled "the paranoid style" of American politics.

In the opening chapters, Whitfield outlines the events that gave rise to the fears that international communism was undermining America from within and points out how unwarranted these fears were. A weak and divided American Communist Party, under constant FBI surveillance, was not a serious threat to the country. Nevertheless, accusations of widespread communist influence in the federal government, in colleges and universities, and in Hollywood and its new rival the television industry resulted in hundreds of men and women being denied security clearances, fired from teaching positions, or black-listed because they had once been associated with liberal and leftist causes. Whitfield, who is convinced that Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs were guilty as charged, feels that these cases helped to create public support for the spurious claims made by Senator Joseph McCarthy and for the practices that routinely deprived the accused of basic civil liberties. In the name of fighting totalitarianism, the United States was willing to suspend the Bill of Rights and make a virtue of informing on one's neighbors

and colleagues.

As Whitfield points out in the third chapter of *The Culture of the Cold War*, the problem of articulating and celebrating the idea of “Americanism” was more problematic than stigmatizing communism. The traditional American dedication to individualism, to the “liberal stress on rights in political life,” and to the belief in private enterprise as the basis of economic life had to be “adapted to the crisis of the Cold War” (p. 53). This meant a renewed appeal to the belief in American exceptionalism. America was described as a the “embodiment of democracy, freedom, and technological progress.” It was regarded as a society without serious class or ideological divisions. What problems did exist could be solved by competent and pragmatic leaders. Echoing many of the social scientists of the era, Daniel Bell, in 1960, declared the “end of ideology.” The end of ideology in this context referred primarily to the end of utopian thinking and Marxist politics.

This assumption tended to disguise the strong ideological forces at work in the crusade against communism. In 1949, for example, the president of the American Historical Association urged his colleagues to “assume a militant attitude,” because neutrality had no place during a period of “total war, whether it be hot or cold” (p. 58), and throughout the 1950s high school history texts, which presented the official view of the American past, identified the idea of democracy with a the single-minded opposition to communism and fascism. This reconceived idea of loyalty and patriotism also meant encouraging respect for institutions of authority from the military and the FBI to the idealized nuclear family. Whitfield shows how popular novels, films, and television series portrayed the military and the FBI as essential champions of democracy. In *The Caine Mutiny*, Herman Wouk suggested that a leader deserves unquestioning loyalty even if he has become mentally deranged.

Filmmakers were reluctant to make military films without Pentagon approval, and television series like *The FBI* and *I Led Three Lives* were approved by J. Edgar Hoover. Hoover’s own anti-communist tract, *The Masters of Deceit*, was a bestseller. Religion also enjoyed a revival in the 1950s, and, Whitfield shows, this revival depended on the circumstances of the Cold War. Religion was drafted into the Cold War because it stood in opposition to “Godless communism” and became identified with “Americanism.” The religious celebrities of the period—Billy Graham, Fulton J. Sheen, Norman Vincent Peale, Francis Cardinal Spellman—regularly mingled their spir-

itual mission with the national defense; conversely, anti-communist political rhetoric was filled with allusions to religion.

Although Whitfield tends to recount clearly and concisely the major events and personalities of the Cold War years, he places special emphasis on the way militant anti-communism influenced Hollywood, the television networks, and the press. In his chapters on the investigations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, he uses the appearances of Lillian Hellman, Elia Kazan, and Arthur Miller to illustrate the methods of the committee and the various responses of witnesses pressured to inform on friends and co-workers. He then shows how the informer was given heroic status in Kazan’s *On the Waterfront* and other films.

In a chapter on what he calls the “dissenters,” the author introduces a collection of figures who found themselves unwelcome in the Cold War culture. They include Alfred Kinsey, Charlie Chaplin, Paul Robeson, Dashiell Hammett, and Woody Guthrie. While all of them felt the wrath of the zealous anti-communists, both the nature of their “dissent” and their treatment at the hands of their accusers vary greatly. Kinsey may have lost Rockefeller Foundation funding for his sexual research because his findings offended politicians and elicited the protests of the clergy, but he was not hounded out of career and country like Paul Robeson. It was Chaplin’s attraction to very young women as much as his political views that, in 1952, cost him his visa and forced him to take up residence in England. Whitfield apparently decided to include this very diverse group in a single chapter in order to include passing reference to the high-profile figures caught up in search for subversives and to show how deeply the countersubversive movement penetrated all aspects of American life. What he does not consider is the fact that racial animosity, a desire to enforce traditional sexual mores, and an effort to discredit New Deal reforms serve as important subtexts to the accusations leveled at this group of “dissenters.”

A final chapter, “Thawing: A Substitute for Victory,” describes the fragmentation of the Cold War culture. Whitfield cites the growing feeling that the danger of nuclear disaster outweighed the ideological conflict between East and West and, during the early 1960s, the increasing willingness to question “Americanism” and figures of authority. Once again Whitfield makes effective use of novels and films to mark the shift in the political climate. He sees the popularity of novels like Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) and John le Carre’s *The Spy Who*

Came in from the Cold (1963) and the box office success of films such as John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) as evidence of a growing skepticism toward both the Cold War and the institutions that fought it. By the mid-1960s, Whitfield concludes, the culture of the Cold War had begun to disintegrate.

Whitfield manages to provide a clear, well-organized overview of a very complex era in just over 250 pages, including a very good bibliographical essay. Moreover, he is at his best when he shows how the popular culture of the era both reflected and contributed to the dominant political climate. He traces the rise and fall of the Cold War culture as reflected in novels and films, ranging from the hysterical anti-communism in Mickey Spillane's *One Lonely Night* (1951) and Leo McCarey's *My Son John* (1952) to anti-Cold War themes of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1957) and James B. Harris's *The Bedford Incident* (1965).

My reservations about Whitfield's study may be asking for what was never intended of a volume in "The American Moment" series edited by Stanley I. Kutler. Each of the titles is a concise introduction to a crucial moment in American history. Still, it would have been valuable to place the identifying characteristics of the Cold War culture into a larger historical perspective. The hunt for enemies within, the attempts to maintain the rhetoric of democracy and individualism while controlling the limits of public discourse and personal freedom, and the desire to police the realm of a potentially subversive popular culture did not begin with the fall of the Iron Curtain. In Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), the comparisons between the Salem witch trials and the anti-communist investigations are unmistakable, and Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1970) sees the political witch hunts of the 1950s as a reflection of an important aspect of American politics. More-

over, these tendencies were evident in American anti-communism at least a generation before Joe McCarthy arrived on the scene, as Gid Powers's *Not Without Honor: The History of Anti-Communism* (1996) makes clear.

Nor do the social forces that shaped the contours of Whitfield's Cold War culture appear to have ended in the mid-1960s. Whitfield acknowledges that "the legacy of the Cold War did not disappear" (p. 225) in the 1960s and discusses briefly the war in Vietnam. He could have continued. After Vietnam we have President Carter's initiating a renewed military buildup that was fulfilled in Ronald Reagan's preparations to face the "evil empire" of the East. His director of the CIA, William Casey, once said that he hoped to see America return to the good old days of the Cold War.

Even today, seven years after the "evil empire" collapsed under its own weight, the culture wars dominating the 1996 elections are very similar to those of the 1950s; the movie hit of the summer, *Independence Day*, is filled with allusions to the 1950s and celebrates a world united against another "evil empire"; and a strain of nostalgia for the Cold War years runs through our popular culture. If the early decades of the Cold War intensified and focused tendencies evident throughout twentieth-century America, that same period was richer and more varied than Whitfield's study suggests. Just how much more can be seen in *Grand Expectations* (1996), James T. Patterson's new history of American life from 1945 to 1974. Within its limits, however, Whitfield's book offers a good overview of the period and would serve as a fine place to begin a study of post-World War II American culture.

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