

Elaine Tyler May. *Fortress America: How We Embraced Fear and Abandoned Democracy.* New York: Basic Books, 2017. 256 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-05592-0.

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For many decades historians of the United States have been reckoning the damages of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Early scholarship focused on the consequences of militarization on the global side, including nuclear brinksmanship, and the Red Scare on the domestic side, including the actions of Senator Joseph McCarthy and black lists. More recent scholarship has widened to examine the Cold War's spawning of conflicts around the globe and to acknowledge the breadth and depth of anticommunist campaigns in the United States and abroad. Grouped together, the Cold War's casualties are massive—human lives lost, money reallocated, state structures deformed, and social movements cut short or destroyed.

Historian Elaine Tyler May now adds to that list of damages in a slim, provocative book, *Fortress America: How We Embraced Fear and Abandoned Democracy*. May is the Regents Professor of American Studies at the University of Minnesota and former president of the Organization of American Historians. For decades her work has sensitively evoked the relationships between people and events, and American political and cultural values. She has plumbed the meaning of family arrangements, domestic architecture, reproduction, and sexuality. May first took on the history of the Cold War decades ago, in her groundbreaking

cultural history, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988), which explored the ambivalent and sometimes chilling relationship between the fears of the Cold War era and postwar domesticity and family life in America's suburbs.

Thirty years later, May takes up the Cold War again, but *Fortress America* is a quite different book—a short, bold synthesis that relies largely on secondary sources and a few evocative primary sources. It extends May's first analysis of the Cold War up through the present, and it offers an even darker interpretation: *Fortress America* contends that the Cold War produced a tectonic shift within the United States from democratic and communitarian culture and political life toward its opposite, what she labels "securitization." The Cold War killed the faith Americans placed in the state during the New Deal and World War II and replaced it with distrust and a consciously crafted self-reliance that produced the politics of privatization, personal responsibility, and prisons we know today.

The conflict with the Soviets fundamentally reshaped the American political imagination both at the level of policy and of psyche. Americans, May contends, developed a "security obsession" (p. 10). They learned to see more threats than really existed, to feel uniquely vulnerable to these

threats, and to construct novel defenses of their communities, their homes, and themselves. Obsessions with Soviet military aggression and communist subversion fostered fear in new realms of American life. They could be observed, May explains, in everything from increased gun ownership to the rise of gated communities and to women's self-defense classes. The Cold War, May concludes, initiated a culture of fear that remains with US citizens today.

Fortress America's synthesis begins in the days after American victory in World War II, where she reminds readers, "from the start, it was clear that peacetime would not necessarily be peaceful" (p. 16). Here May recounts stories now familiar of the ways that both nuclear arms and communist subversion fostered new apprehensions. And she reprises her own original thesis of the ways that Americans crafted domestic suburban life as response to alarm. Here May mines evocative and unexpected examples of the "every home a fortress" mentality that pervaded white suburbia (p. 13). The culture of backyard swimming pools, swing sets, and barbeques, for example, was less about a culture of consumption than a culture of fear: "Private leisure and entertainment ... kept families isolated from a public world where dangerous and subversive elements might be lurking" (p. 28). May captures anew the affective consequences of Americans' subjection to films like *Survival Under Atomic Attack* (1951) and *What You Should Know about Biological Warfare* (1952). The hundreds of thousands of Americans who built their own in-home bomb shelters, she explains, feared not only a Soviet military attack, but also their own neighbors. May recounts a chilling 1961 *Twilight Zone* episode in which (erroneous) alerts of an incoming atomic bomb disrupt a suburban barbeque. The host, the only person in the neighborhood with a bomb shelter, abandons his neighbors, fights them off, and barricades his family and himself in the shelter, to let the rest possibly perish. The show's "insight was prophetic," May explains: the Cold War

"gave rise to fear and distrust, not only of distant enemies, but of one's own neighbors and friends." Americans "instructed, conditioned, and socialized" in fear "were likely to lose sight of the common good" (p. 52).

The replacement of the common good with private advantage emerges as one of the book's central arguments. Even as elected officials, media, and business leaders enumerated and calculated the dangers posed by the Soviets and their sympathizers, and even as they created organized responses, they simultaneously counseled Americans to take personal responsibility for their safety. In the case of nuclear fears, Washington acknowledged its powerlessness to save Americans and preached "preparedness" for those who might somehow survive a nuclear attack. Duck-and-cover drills and bomb shelters became the remit of individual citizens. So too did the monitoring of subversion. Even as the national government took the lead in defining perceived political subversion, political leaders and media suggested it was every American's duty to recognize and root out communists in their own communities. This shifting of burdens onto the private individual was not by chance or the consequence of practical assessments of government capacity—it was the result of political ideology. May recounts how anti-New Deal, antistatist politics on the right refused government roles in labor, business regulation, and social welfare as "socialistic" or "communist." This opposition extended even to the government role in security, May explains, where the Dwight Eisenhower administration eschewed a federal role and decided "primarily civil defense starts in the home" (p. 37). May closes chapter 1 with sobering observation that neither the depictions of dangers nor the demands for Americans to protect themselves assuaged anxiety. They stoked it. What the early Cold War years bequeathed, then, was a powerful cycle of fear, private response, and more fear—the process May calls "securitization." The rest of *Fortress America*

attempts to capture the long-term consequences of Cold War securitization.

May uses her training as a scholar of gender, society, and culture to reveal a host of Cold War legacies that scholarship on both the Cold War and the Red Scare has largely overlooked. One of those legacies was the law-and-order politics of the late twentieth century. May explains in chapter 2 that in the 1960s and 1970s, “the color of danger blended and morphed from the red of communism to the black of African Americans” (p. 58). Recounting a now-common narrative of the conservative backlash among white men against the advances of civil and political rights for African Americans, May repurposes it to explain how these resentments were mobilized in the tracks created by Cold War fears. Political leaders cannily adapted the bunker mentality of the Cold War to white male anxieties of the sixties. May describes how political advertising and media coverage replayed Cold War scripts, substituting crime and race for communism. Clifton White, an advisor to Senator Barry Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign, explained that voters were worried about “crime, violence, riots (the backlash), juvenile delinquency, the breakdown of law and order, immorality” and more. “This issue,” he promised Goldwater, “can be the ‘missile gap’ of 1960” (p. 65). Goldwater, Governor George Wallace, and Richard Nixon pioneered political strategies drawn from the playbook of the early Cold War: just as conservatives like Joseph McCarthy had taunted liberals of the 1950s as “soft on communism,” they would cast them in the 1960s as “soft on crime” (p. 62). Just as fighting communism required military build-up and rooting out subversives, fighting criminal disorder required police build-up and citizen vigilance. Law-and-order politics, with their template from the early Cold War, would shape national sentiments and policies up through the 1990s, May argues. In a strong section of the chapter on the 1990s, May deconstructs influential criminologist John DiIulio’s research on African American “super-

predators” as the kind of spurious racialized fear-generating claims that echo the bunker mentality created during the early Cold War.

Just as the Cold War culture of fear dragooned Americans into privatized regimes of self-protection, so too did the fear of crime. May describes government and professional organizations issuing guidance to urban residents for “recognizing and handling dangerous situations, safeguarding their home, obtaining good training in self-defense, and hiring a security guard” (p. 84). The ironies of the government’s insistence on individual citizen responsibility were enormous, May points out. While the government might not have been able to protect Americans from the fallout of a hydrogen bomb, it could reasonably be expected to protect citizens from crime and punish criminals. And indeed, May documents how as a result of the bunker mentality, the government in fact created vast new policing programs, draconian sentencing policies, increased spending, and new prison construction. Here May quickly recounts what many recent historians have detailed—the rise of the war on drugs and crimes and the increasing police and carceral capacity of the state. May concludes that none of the “war on crime” was necessary, as crime rates and the threat to politically valuable white suburban voters never meaningfully increased, and by some measures decreased. Realistic evaluation of threat, May reminds readers repeatedly, was one of the casualties of the securitization of the United States.

The Cold War culture of fear produced not only a robust police and carceral state but also new modes and technologies of self-protection. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 delve into three distinct ways that the bunker mentality played out in the lives of individual Americans from the 1970s through the 1990s. Chapter 3 recovers the story of vigilantism in the 1970s and 1980s, refitting it into the legacy of the Cold War’s culture of self-protection, and in particular the role played in it by masculinity. Male vigilantism thrived in the privatized

culture created by the Cold War. Just as Americans of the 1950s had to learn how to recognize and root out communists to protect themselves and their communities, they needed to be able to protect themselves and others from crime when necessary. The very government that was spending billions on policing and prisons was portrayed in films and by politicians as feckless. “Most people,” explained New York City mayor Ed Koch, “believe the criminal justice system is broken down” (p. 102). This was especially true for white men, and May’s story recounts the fictional vigilantism of Charles Bronson in the 1970s and the very real vigilantism of subway attacker Bernard Goetz in the 1980s. They, too, articulated their actions as the result of government failure: if government could not or would not protect Americans from “the deterioration of society,” Goetz explained at his sentencing, then he had to do it himself (p. 103). May rounds out the chapter by linking vigilantism to the growing rights of gun owners, from the 1980s’ concealed carry laws through the “stand your ground” laws of today. Gun manufacturers and their advocates capitalized on the burgeoning culture of male vigilantism to rake in profits. A 2012 Bushmaster ad for a semiautomatic rifle reassured the presumed male consumer that with his Bushmaster, he could “consider your man card reissued” (p. 97).

While it may seem unsurprising to link vigilante masculinity to the culture of fear, May takes her gender analysis in a less expected direction in chapter 4, which links the long Cold War culture of fear to women, femininity, and feminism. As May makes clear, though, when it comes to “women’s issues’ ... the same dynamic” observable in anticommunist and anticrime phenomena again prevailed: anxieties about deep personal vulnerability, the inability of government to provide protection, and the need for self-reliance appear again (p. 127). May describes three distinct discourses and practices of gendered security culture. Two emerge from feminism and women’s changing roles in society. First May describes how

feminists’ demands for abortion rights rendered the female womb a dangerous site, and feminists dangerous people. May links the anti-abortion movement’s rhetoric and actions to the vigilantism of her previous chapter, and recounts how conservative activists broadened the category of “criminal” to include those who accessed or facilitated female reproductive rights. Women’s rights also threatened children and home as women entered the labor market. Here May recovers the often antifeminist debates of the 1980s that labeled women’s paid employment harmful to children and marriage. Children’s growing vulnerability, measured by worries about delinquency and sexual activity on the one hand, and child abuse and abduction on the other, were all, May asserts, part of the way that security culture bred unrecognized symptoms in the realm of gender and family politics. But women were not only seen as threats in America’s culture of fear. They were also positioned as uniquely vulnerable. Much of the crime and vigilante discourses describe in early chapters positioned women as likely and frequent victims, in need of protection. In chapter 4, May describes the growth of women’s self-defense culture as a response to this perceived threat. What all the stories of women and gender in security culture have in common is May’s astute recognition that “women who resisted or abandoned their prescribed maternal role posed risks to themselves and their children” (p. 127).

Chapter 5 brings the story of security culture to the individual American’s front doors, where May examines the history of what she identifies as “self-incarceration.” The alarmed, locked, gated communities that spread across the American landscape during the 1980s and 1990s were the natural consequence of forty years of the privatizing culture of fear. If in the 1950s, as May’s first book explained, the home operated as a site “that provided protection,” it had transformed in the decades after the Cold War into “the place that needed protection.” Here May enumerates the modes of securitization of the American home,

from architecture and planning to alarms and safety gadgets. “Who is downstairs ringing your bell?” asked a 1970s ad for General Telephone and Electric’s new intercom system, “A friend? Or the Boston Strangler?” (p. 165). Self-incarceration functions for May as the tragic ending for security culture: the logical culmination of five decades of fear’s undermining of government, community, and democracy. May’s sadness over the history she tells is palpable. The long Cold War initiated a process in which Americans “redesigned their responses to perceived danger.... They have imprisoned themselves, distrusted each other, and turned their backs on the common good.” That “no one is any better off, and certainly no one is safer,” makes it all the more tragic (p. 179).

Ranging from duck and cover to abortion, from vigilantism to SUVs, *Fortress America* is an imaginative and impressionistic synthesis of a wide range of issues and events, brought together in a bold, brief text. The book is at its best putting unexpected yet familiar phenomena together. Even as May guides the reader over a wide terrain of creatively combined histories, the reader never loses her hand. The book accumulates power through May’s ability to pull into the orbit of Cold War history unexpected themes and historical developments. Almost a dozen new dissertations could emerge from drilling down into some of the topics broached in the book.

The book’s boldness is sometimes undercut by its brevity, however. The securitization of the United States, as May describes it, is a social, political, and cultural process not unlike, say, militarization. The best books on historical processes dig deeply, and follow the trail doggedly, in order that the reader see, hear, and feel the ways that meaning-making happens. May surely knows that securitization is a more complex process than her slim volume often allows.^[1] While she captures the surprising cultural echoes of the Cold War—the reverberations of modes and metaphors of fear and security derived from the battle with the

Soviets—in unexpected places, she does not always offer the evidence to let us see how those resonances developed in the first place.

On some questions, such as race, crime, and imprisonment, the historiographical stakes are too high not to provide more evidence and deeper discussion. Her thesis that the war on crime and the development of a carceral state resulted in large part from the Cold War culture of fear does not engage deeply enough with histories that trace the racialized politics of crime and imprisonment to other sources: slavery and Jim Crow; the war on alcohol and illicit drugs; the contested terrain of urban and suburban geographies; and the successes of the African American freedom movement. While May is likely correct that the Cold War accelerated or reshaped the racialized war on crime, she does not slow down or dig deep enough to show how the Cold War’s legacy of fear interacted with pre-existing discourses of racism and policies of state repression to produce a new Cold War version of racialized repression.

The book’s brevity may also lead to some elisions and unevenness. May writes using the global “we” and about generalized “Americans” throughout much of the book. But as May makes clear in key sections of the book, white Americans made the initial investments in the Cold War culture of fear, and white Americans sustained it over many decades. Substituting “we” for whites is surely not what May intends, but the fast pace and sweeping scope of the short book allow for too little specificity where it matters. The book’s fast tempo may have also pressed May into an analytical bind most historians aim to avoid. May uses perhaps too much of the text not on history per se, but on the more normative political goal of “point[ing] out the distance between our fears and reality” (p. 9). In every chapter May snaps out of the historical narrative to underscore how the culture of fear was rarely, in fact, based on accurate measures of danger. She dutifully recounts the gap between what was perceived and what

was “real.” What could have been quite easily dispensed with in the introduction instead often slows the momentum and crowds out her vital historical argument.

Fortress America may glide over details, but ultimately it hits its mark. The book is meant as a provocative corrective to decades-old conservative arguments—ascendant today—that cast privatization, guns, and prisons as guarantors of freedom and liberty. May calls their bluff. The Cold War inheritance of the culture of fear, nurtured by politicians, media, and corporations, has produced very nearly the opposite of freedom. Historians need to engage with her unflinching take on the Cold War and American security culture.

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