

# H-Diplo

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**Andrew L. Yarrow. "Selling a New Vision of America to the World: Changing Messages in Early U.S. Cold War Print Propaganda." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11:4 (Fall 2009): 3-45.**

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For many years the historiography of the Cold War seemed bogged down in minutia of arms buildups, covert activity and domestic politics. Coincidental with – or more likely directly because of – the obvious role of public opinion in precipitating the political changes of 1989 scholars belatedly engaged the role of culture and mass communication in the waging of the Cold War. It took a decade for the theses and major studies to become monographs, but they are here now and Cold War scholarship has changed accordingly. Besides the illumination of the great intrinsic questions of Cold War such as how and to what effect it was waged, the study of the Cultural Cold War has deepened scholarly understanding of issues with implications beyond the period. Scholars have gained insight into the role that communication, culture and exchange can or should have in foreign policy and issues such as Americanization and the role of state private networks on foreign policy. New additions to this literature are always welcome and it was with some excitement that I read Andrew Yarrow's essay on the changing messages with U.S. print propaganda. What I found was an important but limited contribution to our collective understanding of the role of the economic dimension in U.S. Cold War propaganda.

Yarrow's achievement is to have read widely in the swathe of magazines published by the Department of State and United States Information Agency to explain America to the world, and to track the transformations of that message over the first fifteen years of the Cold War.

Yarrow's principle finding is that America's self representation changed during that period from a liberal/New Deal era portrait in the Truman era to a much more assertive – or in contemporary parlance 'in your face' approach during the later Eisenhower years. He notes that American public diplomacy switched from an emphasis on the ideals on

which the country had been built to a focus on the material standards of living which those ideals had made possible. The great slogan of the Eisenhower period was People's Capitalism, a concept which met Communist claims about the inequality of the American way head on by arguing 1) that the capitalist system had benefited the vast majority of the American population and 2) that part of the reason for this was that the means of production was not held by a small group of plutocrats but rather was distributed amongst any American who owned shares or even paid into an insurance or pension fund. It was a blow aimed at major claims of Communist propagandists as the message of "People's Capitalism" moved beyond printed journals to be carried to the world in exhibits and trade fairs. It seems to have had an impact, not least in the Soviet Union itself where the American National Exhibition of the summer of 1959 held the local public in thrall. It is useful to have Yarrow's documentation of the rise of this theme, though frustrating to see the narrative end so abruptly in 1961, more especially as he gives no evidence to back up his justification that Kennedy's USIA under Edward R. Murrow abandoned this kind of messaging.

While Yarrow's contribution is welcome, the essay presents a problem to a reader with a background in the historiography of U.S. public diplomacy. Although the essay introduces new and important material, it does so with far too little engagement with a field which has evolved tremendously in recent years. There is precious little scholarship cited here from the post-9/11 period. The author is apparently unaware of the work of Scott Lucas, Michael Krenn, Ken Osgood, Giles Scott-Smith, Chris Tudda, James Vaughan and numerous other scholars on exactly this immediate post-war period, or my own volume on the history of US propaganda during the entire Cold War, or significant memoirs by participants, most especially the substantial volume by Jack Masey, whose career as the chief designer of U.S. exhibitions overseas is most germane here.<sup>1</sup> It is simply not true to say, as Yarrow does, that he is the *first* to examine the transition from New Deal liberal images of the U.S. to Eisenhower era themes of "People's Capitalism". The article would be stronger if the author had not presented himself as a voice crying in the wilderness but rather as one of many contributors at bustling scholarly crossroads. That said, Yarrow fairs little better when examining familiar terrain with a long established historiography. His summary of the pre-history of international propaganda (n.29, pp. 15-16) has only one reference and manages to significantly misrepresent the development of international broadcasting and U.S. international propaganda.

There are other fairly serious gaps in the author's contextualization of his work. The article seems adrift from the contemporary scholarship on the role of communication in

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<sup>1</sup> W.Scott Lucas, *Freedom's War: The American Crusade Against the Soviet Union* (1999); Michael L. Krenn, *Fall-Out Shelters for the Human Spirit: American Art and the Cold War* (2005) Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (2008); Giles Scott-Smith, *Networks of Empire: the U.S. State Department's Foreign Leader Program in the Netherlands, France, and Britain 1950-1970* (2008); Chris Tudda, *The Truth is Our Weapon: The Rhetorical Diplomacy of Dwight D. Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles* (2006); James Vaughan, *The Failure of American and British Propaganda in the Middle East, 1945-1957: Unconquerable Minds* (2005).

foreign affairs, hence the opening paragraph blithely conflates ‘propaganda’ and ‘public diplomacy’ which makes sense in the early Cold War moment but hardly fits contemporary usage. In his characterization of public diplomacy on p. 5 Yarrow speaks only of the transmission functions of public diplomacy and says nothing of the listening and advisory functions. While these have historically been neglected – especially within the United States – they were an important part of USIA’s work. In the 1950s USIA operated a thriving research office, initially under CIA veteran Henry Loomis, and successive USIA directors advised on the making of U.S. foreign policy as guests in both the cabinet and National Security Council.

The third field which is under-served is American Studies and American intellectual history. Yarrow makes no attempt to survey the literature on the culture of the 1950s and merely makes-do with a litany of notable events and citations of Gunnar Myrdal and Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* (1963). He would have done well to begin with the excellent survey by Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s* (2007). Yarrow might also have probed more deeply back into U.S. culture. His sketch history of the image of the U.S. as the ‘abundant society’ acknowledges only roots in the 1920s. The reality is that the idea of “economics, wealth, and consumption were the principal measure of social value,” (p. 13) is profoundly rooted in the soul of America. The founding American concept of Liberty is Lockeian and predicated on freedom to pursue property. By the same token the dominant American concept of Christianity has historically had little to do with a Christ who drove moneychangers from the temple or taught that it is as difficult for rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven as for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. America’s gospel is one in which wealth and piety are not only compatible but one’s wealth is a sign of God’s pleasure and poverty is a badge of shame and presumed moral weakness. The ideology of the abundant society is not a moment in the history of America. It is an element in the structure of America.

There are one or two places where Yarrow’s lack of engagement with the field leads him into errors of fact. On p. 18 he erroneously speaks of William Benton and Edward Barrett as liberal Democrats. Neither was especially liberal by today’s standards. Benton had advised the America First committee on its propaganda that argued against the entrance of the United States in World War Two, and Edward Barrett was a member of the Republican party. Truman joked that by the time of Barrett’s appointment he had run out of good Democrats. On p. 19 Yarrow speaks of Senator McCarthy attacking USIA. In reality he was attacking the State Department’s information program and his assault forms part of the backdrop to the decision to create the new agency (with a stringent internal security policy). McCarthy even claimed to be a founder of USIA. Yarrow is also confused about the location of cultural diplomacy within the bureaucracy after the creation of USIA. Culture and exchange work should have left the Department of State and passed to the new agency, but Senator Fulbright blocked this idea – largely to safeguard the non-political nature of ‘his’ Fulbright exchange program. The real situation was an awkward compromise in which the State Department controlled the budget and U.S.-based administration of the Fulbright program and cultural diplomacy while USIA was

sub-contracted to implement the program in the field. Cultural Affairs Officers (CAOs) were a breed apart within USIA and did not sit comfortably next to colleagues with propaganda on their agenda. The full story of this work and these difficult relationships is told in Richard T. Arndt's magisterial volume: *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (2005). Finally, Yarrow misdates the revelation that Radio Free Europe was funded by the CIA. This and the entire CIA subsidy for the Congress on Cultural Freedom became known in 1967 as a result of a series of reports in *Ramparts* magazine. The wider background the CIA's campaign is significant and has a scholarship all of its own, including Hugh Wilford's *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (2008).

One of the ultimate problems of the article is that Yarrow underplays the longevity of the approach he identifies. It is simply not true to say as Yarrow does that the theme of American plenty had somehow run its course by 1961. On the contrary USIA continued to sponsor trade fares and projections of the American economic system. While nothing quite approached the success of the Moscow show of 1959, USIA had many smaller hits such as the Leisure USA show of the early 1970s, at which the star attraction was a Winnebago camping van. Russians reportedly greeted the Winnebago as they might a spaceship from another world, which in some ways it was.

Yarrow's essay highlights one of the major problems in the history of USIA. The agency began life focusing on ideology, including U.S. support for faith in the face of Godless communism, but the agency allowed its territory to be defined by Moscow's arguments and shifted – as Yarrow demonstrates – to output designed to show that the U.S. was better than the USSR because its citizens amassed more material possessions. Allowing the Cold War to become a duel of two materialisms worked well when the adversary was locked into its own materialist framework, but it misfired elsewhere in the world. The “People's Capitalism” approach and the approaches that flowed from it had little to say to deflect a radical Islamic critique of the USA which had equal scorn for the materialism of the USSR. In fact, the Cold War approach played into the radical Islamic claim that the United States was materially rich but spiritually bankrupt. The damage was apparent by the end of the Carter administration, but the U.S. did not react swiftly to adjust its message. The very image and approach that helped America prevail in the Cold War set the nation at a disadvantage in the emerging clash with radical Islam. The country is still playing catch-up.

**Nick Cull** is Professor of Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles where he directs the Masters Degree in Public Diplomacy. He was born in the UK and educated at the University of Leeds for both BA and PhD. He is the author of *Selling War: British Propaganda against American Neutrality in the World War II* (Oxford University Press, 1995); and (with James Chapman) *Projecting Empire: Imperialism in Popular Cinema* (IB Tauris, 2009); and *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public*

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*Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). He is presently concluding a sequel to his Cold War public diplomacy book.

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