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S.R. Joey Long. "Winning Hearts and Minds: U.S. Psychological Operations in Singapore, 1955-1961." *Diplomatic History* 32:5 (November 2008): 899-930. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00734.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00734.x> .

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Reviewed by **Kenneth Osgood**, Florida Atlantic University

S. R. Joey Long has written a laudatory appraisal of the Eisenhower administration's psychological warfare operations in Singapore. As the British gradually relinquished control over the island in the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration feared that the newly independent government of Singapore would fall prey to the wave of anti-Western sentiment sweeping the island and align itself with the communist camp. So, following a brief moment of hesitation about stepping on British toes, the administration embarked on a crash program of psychological warfare to publicize the promise of America and the evils of communism.

Long, who thoroughly mined the pertinent declassified documents at the U.S. National Archives and Eisenhower Presidential Library, argues that this program was largely successful: "American psy-war activities undermined communism's appeal, enhanced the United States' image as an advanced society that was worth emulating, and cultivated local sympathies for American foreign policy." (903) Long attributes this success to two factors: first, the sophisticated, intense, and well-coordinated propaganda disseminated by the Eisenhower administration; and second, the peculiar local context in Singapore, which included a cultural attitude that was predisposed to receiving U.S. messages positively.

In making this argument, Long situates his study with reference to three larger bodies of work, and I will focus my commentary on how his article speaks to each of these areas. First, he addresses literature on U.S. foreign relations with respect to Southeast Asia, a body of scholarship that has focused overwhelmingly on the Vietnam War, its origins and aftermath, and thus has paid scant attention to Singapore.ⁱ In this respect, Long's study focuses on an important but neglected topic. Even though his work is based on American documents, Long evinces a sensitivity to Singaporean politics and culture, and incorporates Singaporean perspectives in his narrative.

Second, Long casts his study with reference to scholarship on the Eisenhower presidency. His argument stands in stark contrast to “postrevisionists” who have criticized the Eisenhower administration for its misguided approach to the Third World.¹ In the case of Singapore, Long argues, the Eisenhower administration not only possessed a keen understanding of local culture and politics but it employed its resources effectively to achieve U.S. policy goals there. Existing literature on Eisenhower’s Third World policies disagrees in both respects, highlighting both the administration’s myopic perception of Third World nationalism and its bone-headed implementation of counterproductive policies in the region. Long’s spirited defense of the Eisenhower administration is not likely to induce a wholesale revision of historical attitudes about U.S. foreign policy in the Third World – especially because Long’s argument hinges on the purported effectiveness of Eisenhower’s propaganda initiatives, which, for reasons I articulate below, were probably less successful than Long supposes.

Finally, Long speaks to a growing body of work on U.S. propaganda abroad. Here Long’s goal is not so much to challenge the existing literature as to augment it by providing a “country-focused” study that highlights specific details pertaining to the Singapore case that are lost in broad surveys. In this regard, Long brings to the surface some remarkable detail relating to U.S. propaganda activities in Singapore. But his story will seem very familiar to anyone who has studied U.S. psychological warfare in this period. In Singapore, the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) used the same techniques and developed the same propaganda themes that it did everywhere else in the world. Thus, without saying so much, Long supports the claim that U.S. propaganda themes and information activities were pursued “more or less uniformly around the world.”ⁱⁱ Just about every issue pertaining to the Singapore case fits the broader contours of U.S. information operations worldwide. In Singapore, as elsewhere, the Voice of America moved to adopt a more factual, less strident tone. In Singapore, as elsewhere, the U.S. promoted Atoms for Peace. In Singapore, as elsewhere, the Eisenhower administration stressed positive themes about American life and culture. In Singapore, as elsewhere, the USIA put a positive spin on American race relations. And so on.

And so one is left wanting to know more, particularly about how U.S. information operations in Singapore differed from those pursued in other countries. Was the Singapore case special or remarkable in any way, or did the USIA, as it seems, pursue a cookie-cutter approach there? To what extent did the USIA involve itself in *local* issues relating to *local* politics? To frame my point more broadly, the issue we need to consider is this: now that scholars have flushed out the basic contours of U.S. information operations in the 1940s and 1950s, the challenge for country-specific studies is to show how the specific details of the case illuminate, challenge, or complicate the overarching assessments in the existing literature.ⁱⁱⁱ

¹ For a summary of the “postrevisionist” critique of Eisenhower’s policies in the Third World, see Robert J. McMahon, “Eisenhower and Third World Nationalism: A Critique of the Revisionists,” *Political Science Quarterly* 101:3 (Fall 1986): 453-473 and Stephen G. Rabe, “Eisenhower Revisionism: A Decade of Scholarship,” *Diplomatic History* 17 (Winter 1993): 97-116. Recent scholarship continues to support this assessment, as in Kathryn C. Statler and Andrew L. Johns, eds. *The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World, and the Globalization of the Cold War* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

In this regard, Long offers his potentially most valuable contribution by tackling the thorny issue of “effectiveness.” To date, few scholars (myself included) have attempted to gauge just how well U.S. propaganda programs “worked.” Long argues that the Singapore case provides compelling evidence for the effectiveness of U.S. propaganda programs. He suggests, for example, that the United States “was winning the battle of the airwaves” since statistical data reveals that many more Singaporeans listened to the Voice of America than listened to Radio Peking. (913) Likewise, he shows that the USIA was extremely adept at placing propaganda materials in the Singaporean press, and even more effective at luring local audiences to see U.S. propaganda films. In the end, Long concludes, “if U.S. officials wanted the positive aspects of U.S. society made known in Singapore, they largely accomplished that objective.” (918) He continues to argue that “American information operations had made considerable progress in undermining the Communist powers’ appeal, and in developing a sense of affinity among a number of Singaporeans for American foreign policy.” (927)

But Long probably goes too far in judging Eisenhower’s propaganda war in Singapore a success. Part of the problem is that Long does not define rigorously the meaning of success. It is important to remember that a propaganda campaign’s effectiveness can be measured in at least two ways: its ability to disseminate its message to a wide audience, and its ability to influence. Long offers some impressive evidence to suggest effectiveness in the first category –dissemination– but much less to support effectiveness in the second – influence. After all, just because a large number of people were exposed to a given propaganda campaign does not mean they bought into it

Another part of the problem relates to evidence. Long’s evidence comes overwhelmingly from documents and studies prepared by the USIA. But these sources were often skewed by the efforts of the agency and its personnel to prove their own effectiveness (not least because Congress, viewing the USIA as a boondoggle, ritualistically slashed its budget). Long often quotes approvingly the judgments of USIA officers who deemed a given program or initiative a success, but such qualitative data from the USIA is not a credible indicator of effectiveness since agency officials typically trumpeted their successes and downplayed their failures.

Quantitative data is a better indicator of success, and Long cites a small number of opinion surveys conducted by the USIA which suggested that Singaporeans viewed the United States more favorably than the Soviet Union or China. But this data is not very persuasive. Not only does he base his argument on a mere two surveys, but his data does not track change over time. So we have no indication of whether Singaporean attitudes toward the United States improved, declined, or stagnated before and after the USIA began its propaganda campaign there. We also do not know (indeed, probably cannot know), what most influenced the attitudes of Singaporeans. What had the greatest impact -- U.S. policies, the interests of Singapore’s economic and political elite, fear of neighboring communist China, the preexisting attitudes and preferences of the local population, the USIA’s propaganda, or some other array of factors?

More importantly, one key survey cited by Long implies more failure than success. This survey, from 1958, shows that the U.S. completely failed to convince the Singaporeans of two key ideas: that the United States was a leader in the field of nuclear disarmament, and that the United States did not exploit other countries economically. These were absolutely central themes of the Eisenhower administration's psychological warfare offensive, so the failure here is critically important. To be fair, Long notes this fact, but he essentially dismisses it, since relative to the Soviet Union and China the United States came out ahead in other attitudinal metrics: "If 'success' is measured in comparative terms ... the American information operations had succeeded in painting the United States, in contrast to the Communist states, as a country marked by altruism, political freedom, social mobility, and economic opportunities." (926)

This seems to be an excessively optimistic reading of the data. Considering that the USIA labored to convince the world that the United States was committed to disarmament and economic development, its patent failure to do so seems a much more notable indicator of "success". After all, convincing people that the United States was more free and prosperous than the Soviet Union or China hardly seemed like an achievement. Long may be right in arguing that U.S. propaganda in Singapore "worked," but many scholars will want to see a broader array of data, more methodically interpreted, to be convinced.

Kenneth Osgood is an associate professor of history at Florida Atlantic University. He is the author of *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (2006), which won the Herbert Hoover Book Award, and co-editor of three books: *The Cold War after Stalin's Death: A Missed Opportunity for Peace?* (with Klaus Larres, 2006), *Selling War in a Media Age: The Presidency and Public Opinion in the American Century* (with Andrew K. Frank, forthcoming 2009), and *Washington and Beyond: Public Diplomacy and the United States: Towards an International History* (with Brian C. Etheridge, forthcoming 2009).

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ⁱ "Disappointingly slim" is how Robert McMahon has characterized literature on U.S.-Singapore relations. See Robert J. McMahon, *The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 261.

ⁱⁱ Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda War at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 105.

ⁱⁱⁱ Recent studies that provide broad overviews of U.S. psychological warfare during the early Cold War include: Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), Scott Lucas, *Freedom's War: The American Crusade Against the Soviet Union* (New

York: New York University Press, 1999), Laura A. Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), and Osgood, *Total Cold War*. The most comprehensive overview of the propaganda activities conducted by the U.S. Information Agency throughout the Cold War is: Nicholas Cull, *The Cold War and the U.S. Information Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).