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## **The Cultural Turn in Cold War Studies**

Robert Griffith

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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**Christian G. Appy, ed. *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945-1966*.** Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000. xii + 340 pp. Notes, contributors, and index. \$60.00 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

**John Fousek. *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War*.** Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xvi + 253 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

A little over a decade ago, there were relatively few studies of Cold War culture;<sup>1</sup> fewer still that sought to explain the Cold War as a cultural phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Today, all this has changed, prompted by the entry into the field of scholars trained in literature, American studies, sociology, anthropology, communication and media studies, as well as by a somewhat belated turn toward culture among Cold War historians themselves. The result has been an extraordinary outpouring of books and articles on virtually every aspect of American culture and how that culture shaped and was in turn shaped by the Cold War.<sup>3</sup> Many of these studies introduce new issues (especially the role of linguistic and visual symbols); examine new evidence (including popular culture), explore the role of new actors (including artists, writers, tourists, filmmakers and many others), employ new methodologies (drawn mainly from sociology and literary criticism), and raise new questions (about nationalism and national identity, cultural transfer, the role of race, class and gender in the construction of relations among nations, and so on).<sup>4</sup>

Both of the volumes under review in this essay are part of this recent flowering of interest in Cold War culture. Both address "public culture," what John Fousek describes as "the arena in which social and political conflict is played out and in which consensus is forged, manufactured, and maintained or not" (p. ix). Both books focus on language and, to a lesser extent, the visual symbols out of which culture is constructed. Both challenge the failure of diplomatic historians to realize, in Christian Appy's words, that "policy-making, intelligence-gathering, war-making, and mainstream politics might [End Page 150] be profoundly shaped by a social and cultural world beyond the conference table and the battlefield," reading "documents too literally and assum[ing] the events they describe can be understood as unmediated, objective realities rather than dynamic historical constructions" (p. 4). Both studies contribute new insights to the history of the Cold War, though both also overstate the originality of their contributions. Finally, both reveal the limitations of the new cultural history as it is sometimes practiced.

The essays that comprise *Cold War Constructions* occupy a middle ground between the new cultural studies and traditional diplomatic history. Their authors are sensitive to both culture and politics; or, as Appy puts it, to both the idea that "culture is inherently political (and that it is embedded in, and expresses, relations of power)" and the idea that "all political struggles are culturally constructed (embedded in systems of value and meaning)" (p. 4). Thus, in the collection's opening essay, Mark Bradley challenges the dominant political and economic explanations for how the United States became involved in Vietnam. "[R]anging from the potential instability of Western Europe to the need for a liberal capitalist trading order in the Pacific, the vulnerability of Southeast Asia with the rise of Mao's China, or the domestic political threat of McCarthyism at home," he writes, "they share a common focus in asserting that realist geopolitical imperatives were the centerpiece of American policy." Instead, Bradley argues for "the persistence and centrality of cultural forces in decision making." U.S. policy makers saw Vietnam through a lens heavily shaded by European "orientalism" as well as by the homegrown racialism that pervaded much of American culture. As former Soviet Ambassador William C. Bullitt told the State Department's Division of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs in 1947: "The Annamese are attractive and even loveable but essentially childish." Such perceptions...

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