Total Cold War Roundtable Review
Review by Hugh Wilford, CSULB

Reviewed Work:

Roundtable Chair: Scott Lucas
Reviewers: Sarah-Jane Corke, Chris Tudda, and Hugh Wilford.
H-Diplo Roundtable Editor: George Fujii

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26 February 2007

**Roundtable Chair**: Scott Lucas; **H-Diplo Roundtable Editor**: George Fujii; **Reviewers**: Sarah-Jane Corke, Chris Tudda, Hugh Wilford

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**Review by Hugh Wilford, California State University, Long Beach**

The last several years have witnessed a surge of scholarly interest in the ideological, cultural, and even rhetorical dimensions of U.S. involvement in the Cold War. In addition to analyzing the superpower conflict’s vast and complicated impact on domestic political culture, historians have paid increasing attention to the ways in which psychological factors actually shaped the American Cold War effort. Some have focused on how unstated assumptions about race, class, gender, and sexuality affected the decisions of foreign policy-makers, while others have concentrated on the ways in which politicians and diplomats deliberately employed “psychological warfare” (propaganda designed to undermine enemy morale and strengthen that of allies) as a means of winning the Cold War struggle for “hearts and minds.”

Kenneth Osgood’s excellent new book belongs more to the latter than the former tendency in this new kind of Cold War scholarship. It takes as its subject U.S. psychological warfare in the so-called “Free World” (as opposed to propaganda measures designed to penetrate the communist bloc itself, the subject of a number of earlier works) during the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower, who emerges from Osgood’s account as a tireless advocate of “psy-war” methods in the fight against communism. Part one of the book establishes the broad historical context of the Eisenhower administration’s propaganda campaigns. After a first chapter tracing the historical roots of the psychological concepts and techniques employed by propagandists during the early years of the Cold War, the book goes on in this section to explain the president’s personal enthusiasm for propaganda; examine changes in the nature of the Soviet-American confrontation in the early 1950s, such as de-Stalinization, and the rise of the post-colonial “Third World,” which appeared to necessitate a greater focus on ideational and symbolic considerations; identify the individuals and agencies involved in the planning and prosecution of psy-war strategy (chiefly C. D. Jackson and Nelson Rockefeller in the first category, and the Operations Coordinating Board and

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1 See, for example, Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1997).
U.S. Information Agency in the second); and, finally, note the main geographical and chronological variations in the U.S. propaganda effort during Eisenhower's two terms in the White House.

Having clarified the background, strategy, and apparatus of Ike's Cold War psy-war effort, Osgood goes on in the book's second part to examine the unfolding of specific propaganda campaigns during the Eisenhower era. Hence there are chapters on such disarmament initiatives as Atoms for Peace and Open Skies; the involvement of private groups of U.S. citizens in "grass-roots diplomacy" in the Third World; the favorable representation by the U.S.IA of daily life in America, especially the everyday experiences of traditionally disadvantaged or oppressed groups such as African Americans and women; secret efforts to win the ideological allegiance of the Free World's intellectuals by such means as the covert official sponsorship of book publishing; and the psychological aspects of the early U.S. space program.

In the course of these case studies, certain overarching themes are developed and arguments expounded. The main one of these is the centrality of the psychological dimension to understanding U.S. Cold War foreign policy during the Eisenhower years: not only did Ike's advisers and the president himself see propaganda as one of the most valuable weapons in their Cold War arsenal, they constantly took into account the likely psychological repercussions of U.S. political, economic, and military actions overseas, making psychology a major conscious determinant of American foreign policy during the 1950s. Indeed, in a related line of argument, Osgood also claims that the various disarmament initiatives of the Eisenhower years, which some "revisionist" scholars have interpreted as signifying a strong desire for world peace, were in fact conceived primarily with their likely Cold War propaganda impact in mind. Détente was desirable, of course, but uppermost in Ike's thinking was the kudos the U.S. would earn in the Free World from putting out peace feelers, and the embarrassment that would result for the Soviets from turning them down. Third, Osgood argues throughout that Eisenhower and his psychological warriors were also constantly mindful of the domestic reception of their foreign policies, displaying a concern about preserving American public morale that could be traced back to the conditions of total mobilization experienced during World War II. Linked to this factor, Ike attached great importance to involving non-government organizations and individuals in U.S. diplomacy, not only because American overtures to foreign populations tended to be more successful when made by private citizens rather than government officials, but also because "people-to-people"-style programs increased ordinary Americans’ psychological investment in the Cold War. The effect of these tactics was to blur the boundaries between the domestic and international, as well as between state and private, that had already been greatly eroded during the War years.

These are all powerful arguments, and Osgood makes them persuasively, supported by an extremely impressive array of primary materials derived from thorough and enterprising research in a great variety of official record collections. Besides these strengths of argumentation and evidence, the book has many other laudable qualities. The structure is
sensible and sound, the writing highly polished, and the volume itself handsomely produced, with a particularly good range of illustrations.

From a personal viewpoint, this reviewer especially appreciated two aspects of the book not mentioned so far. One of these was the light it throws on the influence of public relations theory and, in particular, the writings of PR founding father – and nephew of Sigmund Freud – Edward Bernays, on U.S. Cold War psychological warfare. It has long been known that Madison Avenue played a part in the making of government policy (and, more specifically, that Bernays acted as a consultant to the United Fruit Company in the run-up to the CIA-engineered coup in Guatemala in 1954), but few other studies have explained so well how long established public relations principles and practices shaped American Cold War propaganda tactics, such as the covert official use of anti-communist “front” organizations. I was also extremely grateful for the clarity of Osgood’s explanation of the somewhat bewildering welter of committees instituted throughout Eisenhower’s spell in the White House to review overseas U.S. informational activities, as well as for the fullness of his discussion of the inter-departmental psy-war planning unit, the Operations Coordinating Board. As an organizational history of early Cold War U.S. propaganda, this book is peerless. (Researchers more interested in the cultural history of Eisenhower-era diplomacy are advised to consult Christina Klein’s superb Cold War Orientalism which, while primarily concerned with the analysis of “middlebrow” literary and cinematic texts of the 1950s, makes many similar points to Total Cold War, including the importance of the role of private citizens and the emphasis laid by the Eisenhower administration on the psychological “integration” of the Free World through bonds of personal sympathy or “sentiment.”)²

For all its many strengths, there are several aspects of the subject which the book does not fully address. One of these is the actual impact of psychological warfare on its target populations. There is the occasional nod in this direction, based on local press coverage of U.S.IA exhibits, but the author sidesteps the broader issue of the effectiveness of these measures, stating in the book’s introduction that the patchiness of evidence on this score would make any speculation misleading. Hence, one will have to look elsewhere for answers to such questions as: was Eisenhower’s psychological warfare program worth the expense? Did the American tax-payer get value for money? How did target audiences react to Ike’s propaganda blandishments? Was the response one of acceptance, resistance, or appropriation? Do country and regional variations make it impossible to generalize at all? Of course, these questions are vast ones, answers to which could fill several volumes, so it is understandable that Osgood should have chosen not to address them in any thoroughgoing, systematic way. There are, however, encouraging signs that other scholars,

especially in Europe, are beginning to undertake more pinpointed studies of the impact of U.S. psychological warfare on overseas societies.³

Second, the book is much more expansive on the subject of overt than covert psychological measures, particularly political warfare operations carried out by the CIA and its numerous front organizations (although it does have some good passages on lesser known secret programs, such as the distinctly harebrained invention of Colonel John C. Broger, Militant Liberty). Again, this reflects the paucity of available sources, and, in any case, the enduring romance of the clandestine has meant that the importance of covertly conducted psychological warfare, as opposed to the publicly sponsored initiatives of such agencies as U.S.IA, has tended to be exaggerated in previous writing. Nonetheless, the evidence is there, for those who care to look, concerning CIA front group organizations, scattered among private archival collections (the Agency ran organizations representing each of the “minority” citizen groups covered in Osgood’s chapter about U.S.IA representations of everyday American life, including women and African Americans). As with the issue of foreign reception, there is still much work to be done on the involvement of U.S. citizens in the “state-private network,” both overt and covert – something which Osgood himself acknowledges.

Finally, it is difficult not to wish that Osgood had been tempted in the book’s conclusion to relate his study of Eisenhower-era propaganda to the present day and the Bush administration’s “War on Terror.” There clearly are valuable lessons to be learned from this painstaking and meticulous examination of an earlier U.S. campaign to win hearts and minds, but one suspects they need to be made more explicitly in order to have any influence on the current generation of politicians in Washington.
