

Total Cold War Roundtable Review
Review by Sarah-Jane Corke, Dalhousie University



Reviewed Work:

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

Roundtable Chair: Scott Lucas

Reviewers: Sarah-Jane Corke, Chris Tudda, and Hugh Wilford.

H-Diplo Roundtable Editor: George Fujii

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 **ROUNDTABLE** Review

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Review by Sarah-Jane Corke, Dalhousie University

Where for art thou strategy?

Over the last four years the international community has watched with dismay as the Bush administration struggled and failed to develop a coherent strategy for its policy in Iraq. Plagued by ideological and bureaucratic divisions within the administration, American strategy has vacillated between at least two “strategic visions.”¹ On the one hand the State Department has consistently pushed for operations designed to rebuild Iraq’s society; on the other the Pentagon, under the leadership of Donald Rumsfeld, eschewed “nation-building” and instead pressed for operations designed primarily to secure the country and rout the enemy.² With Rumsfeld’s departure in November 2006, however, the American people were promised a new strategy for combating the civil war in Iraq. That has yet to occur.

Nevertheless on January 10, 2007 President Bush announced the decision to send 20,000 additional troops to Iraq. The men and women deployed are to be dispersed in around Baghdad and Anwar province, apparently an “insurgent” stronghold. The deployment represents a 15% increase in U.S. troops, bringing the total number of soldiers to approximately the same number that were in Iraq in 2003. As John Stewart made clear in the week following the President’s address, this new deployment was “not a surge. It’s a tip. And not a very good one at that!”³

¹ I have borrowed the term “strategic visions” from Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: The Roaring of the Cataract*, Volume II, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990.

² Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006.

³ Jon Stewart, “The Daily Show,” *The Comedy Network* (Canada), Monday, January 15, 2007.

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Humor aside and irrespective of the questions surrounding the decision to increase the troops levels, in his address to the nation the President outlined a subtle yet important tactical shift away from the Rumsfeldian emphasis on security. While still conceding that the “most urgent priority” for the troops was in fact “security”, the President also conceded that the American commanders should have “greater flexibility to spend funds for economic assistance”, and he stated that he will “double the number of provincial reconstruction teams” in order to help stabilize the country”.⁴

All this will be for naught, however, if it is not accompanied by a well-coordinated strategy that includes a psychological warfare campaign designed both to bolster Iraqi perceptions of the United States and to build allied support for the American cause. Coordinating military campaigns with psychological warfare operations is not easy, however, and only a few presidents have been successful in unifying the two. It is clear from reading *Total War* that Dwight Eisenhower was more successful than most.

In his masterful new book, Osgood chronicles the Eisenhower Administration’s development of an integrated and unified psychological strategy for waging the contest against the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War. The book is a must-read for anyone interested in the relationship between policy, strategy and operations, and it should be at the top of the list for those charting a new course in Iraq.

According to Osgood, during the 1950s psychological warfare touched all areas of life, both in the United States and abroad. As he points out, “The principle of total war—that wars were no longer fought just by armies in the field, but by the entire nation—erased distinctions between the front line and the home front, and made the mobilization of the masses an indispensable feature of modern conflict.” Not surprisingly, he concludes, “Virtually every aspect of American life—from political organizations and philosophical ideals, to cultural products and scientific achievements, to economic practices and social relationships—was exposed to scrutiny in this total contest for the hearts and minds of the world’s peoples.”⁵ Not much has changed since the 1950s. Like the Cold War, the American war in Iraq must be fought on all fronts if it is to have any chance of success.

In making his argument, Osgood addresses five central themes. First and perhaps most importantly, he places the story of American psychological warfare into its proper context, which he identifies as “the changing nature of international relations as a result of the communications revolution and the age of mass politics and total war”. Second, he explores the variety of ways psychological warfare became part of American Cold War policy. Third, he opens up the process by which, policy is translated into operations; a question the author concedes is “sometimes overlooked by diplomatic historians.” Fourth,

⁴ “Transcript of the President’s Address,” *New York Times*, January 10, 2007.

⁵ Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower’s Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2006), 1.

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picking up a theme first introduced by Scott Lucas, Osgood examines how propaganda developed by the “state-private” nexus influenced the “domestic-international” context and vice-versa.⁶ Finally, the book contributes to the growing historiography on Dwight Eisenhower. On the one hand Osgood’s argument supports the revisionist and post-revisionist claim that Eisenhower was an active president “who left his mark on American national security policy”. On the other, however, his work simultaneously and persuasively refutes the claims made by revisionist and post-revisionist scholars that Eisenhower’s foreign policy was developed in order to pursue a “détente” with the Soviet Union.⁷ Instead Osgood argues that Eisenhower attached “far greater value to waging and to winning the Cold War than to ending it through negotiations.”⁸

The book demonstrates scholarship of the highest quality, supported by an excellent array of evidence from primary and secondary sources. Osgood has a firm grasp of the subtleties and nuances of psychological warfare, and he builds into his argument the assumption that the ability to wage total war rests on strategic clarity. Yet policy and strategy are notoriously difficult to narrow down to the type of simplistic slogans necessary to wage an effective propaganda campaign. Today the available evidence suggests that neither Roosevelt nor Truman were able to achieve the type of strategic coherence that Eisenhower did.⁹

According to Osgood, Eisenhower was successful because he capitalized on the groundwork provided by his successors. Throughout the book he traces the linear progression of American psychological strategy, starting with the Creel Committee through the public relations campaigns of Edward Bernays and into World War Two. He also offers a brief examination of American psychological exploits during the Truman Administration, thereby setting up the historical context for Ike’s ultimate triumph. Through the structure of this narrative, however, Osgood implies that there was an element of progress in the development of these operations. I want to suggest, however, that the efforts were not uniform as he proposes. For example, it was not until the final days of the Second World War that a weekly propaganda directive was developed and implemented. Moreover, after World War Two ended, there was no consensus among senior policymakers that these types of activities should be conducted in the post-war world. Between 1948 and 1952 psychological warriors were consistently on the defensive, playing catch-up in a hostile

⁶ Scott Lucas, *Freedom’s War: The American Crusade Against the Soviet Union, 1945-1956* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

⁷ See for example, Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁸ Osgood, 4-7.

⁹ Carnes Lord and Frank Barnet (eds.), *Political Warfare and Psychological Operations: Rethinking the U.S. Approach* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1989), pp. xiii and 14; Carnes Lord, *The President and National Security* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

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bureaucratic environment. Furthermore there was never an agreement over what American Cold War strategy should be. Instead between 1948 and 1952 there were a number of “strategic visions” in play.¹⁰ And it is here that I wished Osgood had provided more linguistic precision.¹¹

For instance, as I have argued elsewhere, “liberation” and “rollback” were not identical strategies.¹² “Rollback” had a very brief life span. It was first used in 1949 in a NSC paper on the Far East, and it was subsequently employed in NSC 68. Yet the term was all but abandoned, by even the most die-hard interventionists, after Chinese forces successfully pushed U.S. troops back across the 38th parallel in the Korean War. Thereafter the preferred linguistic artifice became “liberation.” Seized upon by John Foster Dulles and other Republican “interventionists” during the run-up to the 1952 election campaign, “liberation” also had a short existence, all but disappearing from the historical record in 1954.

In this context, I would also have liked to see a more careful delineation between “psychological warfare,” “political warfare,” “propaganda” and “psychological strategy,” terms which Osgood argues were used “more or less interchangeably.”¹³ Here again I disagree, but not for traditional reasons. During the Truman Administration each word was used at a particular point of time, not to delineate changes in strategy, but rather to serve as a political weapon in the burgeoning bureaucratic battles and turf wars that came to characterize the government. For example, in his determination to have all covert operations placed under his direction George Kennan purposely substituted the term “political warfare” for “psychological warfare” in “The Inauguration of Political Warfare.” Yet, in all of his replies to the Policy Planning Staff director, Admiral Roscoe Hillenkoetter, DCI at the time, continued to use the term “psychological warfare.”¹⁴ The language wars belied a larger bureaucratic conflict and the personal animosity between the two men.

Language again became important after the Psychological Strategy Board was set up, in 1951. The State Department, determined to limit the PSB’s activities, consistently substituted the word “information activities” for “psychological warfare” in all of their memo’s to the PSB. For their part, both the military and the CIA preferred “psychological

¹⁰ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*.

¹¹ Sarah-Jane Corke, “History, Historian and the Naming of Foreign Policy: A Postmodern Reflection on American Strategic Thinking during the Truman Administration, *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Autumn 2001), pp. 146-163.

¹² Sarah-Jane Corke, *U.S. Covert Operations and Cold War Strategy, Truman Secret Warfare and the C.I.A.* (London: Routledge, 2007).

¹³ Osgood, 8.

¹⁴ Sarah-Jane Corke, “George Kennan and the Inauguration of Political Warfare,” *Journal of Conflict Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 2006), 98-117.

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warfare” because it provided a more expansive definition of the types of operations that could be conducted. In both of these cases the subtle nuances are crucial to understanding the power struggles that took place within the Truman Administration. We have to be able to interrogate the changes in language more forcefully.

I would also have liked to see a bit more discussion on the PSB’s role in narrowing the strategic options open to Eisenhower. While Osgood is correct when he suggests that the PSB failed to provide a coherent effort in developing American Cold War strategy, I believe that the board did play an important role in narrowing the gap between policy and operations in the early fifties. By the time the PSB was shut down, “rollback” and “liberation” had all but disappeared and the American people had for the first time a coherent strategy for waging the Cold War.

These minor points aside, Osgood is correct when he points out Eisenhower played the critical role in his administration’s success in this area. During his first year in office he undertook three activities designed to clarify American Cold War Policy. He set up the President’s Committee on Governmental Organization, the so-called “Jackson Committee.” He also participated in the Solarium Exercise, which narrowed the gap between policy and operations by effectively reconciled the competing and contradictory “strategic visions” that plagued the Truman administration. Finally he appointed CD Jackson as Special Policy Advisor to the President on all Cold War matters. All of these decisions were crucial to the development of a unified and integrated Cold War strategy.

Eisenhower’s decision to abolish the Psychological Strategy Board and set up the Operations Coordination Board in its place also had an impact because the bureaucratic ideology of these two organizations was strikingly different. Under Truman, the State Department insisted that psychological operations should be kept separate from strategic considerations. However, on the recommendation of the Jackson Committee, the OCB was established on the premise that psychological operations and Cold War strategy were intimately related. As Osgood points out, “From the highest levels of the national security establishment to the remotest diplomatic outposts abroad, political warfare became *the* organizing concept for American foreign policy.”¹⁵

Beginning with Eisenhower’s “Chance for Peace” address in the aftermath of Stalin’s death, which Osgood characterizes as “a dress rehearsal” for the administration’s Cold War strategy,¹⁶ the White House made it clear that it intended to insure strategic clarity. This trend continued after the creation of the United States Information Agency (U.S.IA), which was established on August 1, 1953. The U.S.IS saw themselves as “the ideological shock troops on the front lines of the Cold War”.¹⁷ However, in contrast to the Truman

¹⁵ Osgood, 76 (emphasis in the original text).

¹⁶ Osgood, 67.

¹⁷ Osgood, 104.

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Administration, where propaganda often contradicted and sometimes undermined U.S. foreign policy, the U.S.IA was able to construct a clear message in a number of different areas in the world. In Iceland, for example, American efforts were designed to combat neutralism. In Asia, U.S.IA was committed to developing programs to challenge communism. In Africa and the Middle East, American operations walked the “delicate line” between Arab nationalism and French and British colonialism. While in this arena they were perhaps the least successful, as U.S. propaganda leaned more toward European colonialism and therefore alienated many Arabs, the message was at least, consistent.¹⁸ The Eisenhower Administration’s strategic triumph was also evident when there were issues dividing the government. As Osgood makes clear with topics such as nuclear testing and the project Militant Liberty, these initiatives, although fraught with bureaucratic tensions, presented a coherent message to the world.¹⁹

The administration’s most successful campaign, however, was the creation of “the friendly atom”, a symbol that still has resonance today. This propaganda campaign converted “the dreaded atom [into] a force for peace, a source of life”.²⁰ To publicize this message, U.S.IA dispatched fourteen news stories a week. Each story targeted a different audience with a different message.²¹ More amazing, however, was the degree to which “legitimate” news stories mirrored the propaganda messages created by the government. “Total War” encompassed every area of American life from economic trade fairs to garden clubs, pet culture and chewing gum. The degree of strategic coherence was complete.

Yet, according to Osgood, while Ike strived to make “psychological strategy an integral part of the policy-process...psychological considerations did not always exert a decisive influence in foreign policy decision-making”.²² Moreover, in one of his most provocative arguments, he points out that the American empire was not built “by invitation” as Geir Lundestad has suggested.²³ Rather it was a “covert empire built on subtle manipulation”, resting on “informal modes of dominance camouflaged to reduce the apparent size of intervention”.²⁴

¹⁸ Osgood, 125 and 131.

¹⁹ Osgood, 221.

²⁰ Osgood, 161.

²¹ Osgood, 170.

²² Osgood, 102.

²³ Geir Lundestad, *The United States and Western Europe Since 1945* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²⁴ Osgood, 150.

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Despite my earlier quibbles over language, this is an excellent book. Unlike many histories, it presents tangible lessons for today's world. In this sense, it offers a cautionary note for psychological warriors in Iraq. Propaganda and psychological warfare operations are rarely enough. As the Jackson Committee pointed out in 1953, "Mere words [can] only accomplish so much; they need to be harmonized with deeds....[What the U.S. does] will continue to be vastly more important than what [they] say."²⁵ So while Eisenhower Administration successfully executed a coherent propaganda campaign, "where every man became an ambassador", American deeds did not always live up to the rhetoric. Indeed, I believe that the success of Ike's psychological campaign probably contributed, in part, to the disillusionment with American foreign policy that occurred in the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate.

In the Cold War world, American actions never lived up to the ideals that it advertised. Thus in no small measure the Eisenhower Administration's propaganda can be understood, in part, as the architect of "America's" demise. It sold the American people and the international community an image, which included— "protecting the rights of the individual, limiting the power of the state, extending the benefits of capitalist production to all, and advancing the principals of freedom and democracy" — images that were impossible to maintain in the face of perceived strategic interests.²⁶ Then and now, it is important that the U.S. government not promise more than it can deliver.

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²⁵ Osgood, 80.

²⁶ Osgood, 287.