

Total Cold War Roundtable Review
Author's Response by Kenneth Osgood



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

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Author's Response, Kenneth Osgood, Visiting Mary Ball Washington Chair in American History, University College Dublin, and Assistant Professor of History, Florida Atlantic University

As I reflect on the many important works that have been debated on other H-Diplo roundtables, I consider it a special honor to have my book reviewed in this forum. I am grateful to George Fujii, H-Diplo, and the roundtable participants for making this discussion of *Total Cold War* possible. It has been rewarding to read that the reviewers, whose scholarship has so greatly influenced my own, all agree that *Total Cold War* has enriched their understanding of American propaganda during the early Cold War. It is even more gratifying to read that all the reviewers find my arguments persuasive and, in Hugh Wilford's words, "well supported by an extremely impressive array of primary materials." I was humbled by Sarah-Jane Corke's conclusion that the book is "masterful," and by Chris Tudda's generous judgment that "*Total Cold War* should be read by all historians of U.S. foreign relations." In light of the reviewers' positive appraisals of *Total Cold War*, I hope readers will take the following remarks more as a friendly dialogue, than as a needlessly defensive rebuttal.

I would like to begin with a few words of caution. Both Wilford and Corke (as well as reviewers elsewhere) see connections between my historical analysis of the Cold War era and the foreign policy dilemmas facing us today.¹ I do, too, especially since I was putting the finishing touches on the manuscript while bombs were falling on Baghdad. Yet I would urge readers not to rush to conclusions about the lessons to be learned from Eisenhower's psychological strategy. To be sure, there is something to admire about Eisenhower's approach to foreign relations. On this score I have come to sympathize with the Eisenhower revisionists whose arguments on other matters I challenge in the book. Just as those historians found much to appreciate about Eisenhower in the wake of Vietnam, so

¹ James D. Marchio, review of *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* by Kenneth Osgood, *Journal of Military History* 70:3 (July 2006): 80-81; Robert J. Kodosky, review of *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* by Kenneth Osgood, *History: Reviews of New Books* 34:3 (Spring 2006): 103-104.

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too is it easier to respect Eisenhower's sense of global and moral leadership when juxtaposed against the dismissive attitude to world public opinion exhibited by George W. Bush and his administration at many points in the run-up to the war in Iraq. On more than one occasion in 2003, I found myself thinking that maybe "I like Ike" after all. I share Eisenhower's judgment that world opinion matters, and that the U.S. ability to achieve its objectives will continue to depend on its ability to mobilize meaningful international support. I also suspect we would not be in the mess we are in now had Ike been in the White House in 2003.

That being said, I did not conclude the book with a commentary on contemporary affairs, as Hugh Wilford recommends, in large measure because as a historian I think my primary mission is to engage the past on its own terms, and for its own sake. I write to understand, not to advocate. I also view with some trepidation the possibility that Eisenhower's tactics could be viewed as a sort of magic blueprint for psychological strategy today. I say this not just because I doubt psychological warfare can solve the problems the United States faces in Iraq. I also think my research findings raise troubling questions about the role of propaganda in a democracy. As Jeff Broadwater so aptly put it, *Total Cold War* provokes the question: "to what extent did the propaganda war stifle public debate and corrupt the very democratic process it was ostensibly designed to protect?"²

Eisenhower employed a range of techniques that contravene the principles of democratic government that he espoused. There is much to criticize in Eisenhower's approach to public opinion: He played up the hope for peace to facilitate a staggering build-up in weapons of mass destruction; he meddled repeatedly and occasionally egregiously in the internal affairs of other governments; and he found ingenious ways to manipulate the free press at home and abroad. On issues such as civil rights, Eisenhower put more thought into putting a positive spin on Jim Crow than into changing the hardened minds of segregationists. It could even be argued that he broke the law in allowing the U.S. Information Agency (U.S.IA) to conduct propaganda, even if restrained, at home. Thus, while we can admire Eisenhower's efforts to reach out to people abroad, we also can be concerned about the cynical manipulation of perceptions and politics that his approach to total Cold War engendered.

Hugh Wilford inadvertently points to another reason why *Total Cold War* should not be read as a proscriptive tract for solving today's international problems. Because my study does not methodically address the "impact of psychological warfare on its target populations", we should avoid jumping to the conclusion that Ike's propaganda campaigns worked as well as he and some of his advisors seemed to think. I explain in the book's introduction why I did not engage more fully the intractable question of effectiveness (pgs. 9-10), and Wilford finds my argument "understandable". Still, since it is an important issue I will briefly elaborate on my thinking here.

² Jeff Broadwater, review of *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* by Kenneth Osgood, *Journal of American History* 93:3 (December 2006).

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As I point out in the book, I did not attempt to assess systematically the effectiveness of Ike's psychological operations because the global and chronological sweep of the book would have made such an effort nearly impossible. Any arguments I might have made to that end would have stretched the available evidence beyond credulity. In addition there were also intrinsic problems with some of the sources that were available. The U.S.IA's records, for example, are filled with documents titled "Evidence of Effectiveness", but these were compiled for the express purpose of selling the information program to Congress. They were anything but proof of effectiveness. I also have my concerns about studies by historians and communication specialists which have made bold claims about the impact of U.S. propaganda and cultural diplomacy based on exceedingly thin and speculative types of evidence.

To analyze effectiveness properly, one would need to have a focused case study on a narrowly defined issue, amply supported by a wide range of sources that convey the pulse of public opinion in the "target area". Since propaganda by a foreign government is only one of a range of inputs that affect public attitudes and perceptions, an effective case study would also need to examine the broader context of the propaganda campaign in question. An analysis of the impact of Atoms for Peace, for example, would have to look at the impact of the *Lucky Dragon* incident, a U.S. thermonuclear test that inadvertently sprayed a Japanese fishing boat with radioactive ash just a few months after Eisenhower's speech before the UN. This event, probably more than the propaganda about atomic power, affected Japanese and world perceptions of the splitting of the atom.

Generally speaking, an assessment of effectiveness should probe the issue on at least four different levels. First, did the sponsor of the propaganda disseminate its message effectively? Since modern propaganda typically works through the mass media, an assessment of effectiveness would need to analyze pertinent media resources to determine if the intended message circulated widely. Public opinion polls also can provide clues on this issue. A month after Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace speech, for example, the U.S.IA conducted a flash poll in six countries to ascertain international reactions to the president's proposal. In no country had a majority even heard of Atoms for Peace.³ The administration attempted to redress this problem through a sustained propaganda campaign, and it would be interesting to find additional polling data to indicate whether it worked in raising public awareness of Atoms for Peace. Evidence in the book suggests it probably did, but more systematic research at the local level would help answer this question more conclusively.

³ "6-Country Reactions to the President's December 8 Speech," White House Office, National Security Council Staff Series, Operations Coordinating Board Central Files, box 121, OCB 388.3 (File #1) (2), Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas; U.S.IA Office of Research and Evaluation, "Six Country Reactions to 'Atoms for Peace' Speech," 8 January 1954, Record Group 306, Special "S" Reports of the Office of Research, 1953-1963, box 5, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

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The second question one should ask is this: did the propaganda campaigns have a perceptible impact on media coverage? Did the sponsor manage to “change the story”, so to speak? The research in *Total Cold War* seems to suggest that on this level the Eisenhower administration encountered mixed success. On issues such as Atoms for Peace and Open Skies, for example, Eisenhower was able to shift the debate on nuclear weapons, even if only temporarily. On other issues, such as civil rights, he was decidedly less successful; stories about the persistence of Jim Crow greatly outnumbered those of racial progress.⁴

The third aspect to consider when approaching the effectiveness issue concerns reception. As specialists in film cultural studies suggest, audiences often interpret a given media product in ways unintended by the creator. Thus a study of effectiveness would need to go beyond mere analysis of a given piece of propaganda to evaluate how audiences responded to it. Walter Hixson and Michael Krenn, for example, used the U.S.IA’s “exit surveys” and other sources to gauge how people responded to the international exhibitions in Moscow and Brussels at the end of the 1950s. Such an approach, their work reveals, can lead to exciting and unexpected discoveries.⁵

The fourth (but perhaps not the last) way to approach effectiveness is to ask if minds were changed. Did the propaganda change or reinforce existing attitudes and perceptions? This is a most wily issue. It is also the one that both practitioners and scholars of propaganda would most like to see answered. A good argument could be made, however, that this question is impossible to answer conclusively – something even the most hardened spin doctor would concede.

On other issues raised by the reviewers, Wilford laments the fact that my book devotes more treatment to overt propaganda techniques than covert ones. While *Total Cold War* does discuss some of the most pertinent clandestine campaigns – including those in Iran, Guatemala, and Indonesia – Wilford properly observes that the book devotes less attention to the CIA than other “overt” organizations. I did so in part because there already exist many excellent works which analyze the agency’s operations in detail (Wilford’s work included). Moreover, I wanted to draw attention to the extraordinary range of clandestine techniques employed by groups and organizations other than the CIA, including: the U.S. Information Agency, which more often than not acted like the CIA in its propaganda activities; U.S. embassy personnel overseas, whose “low key” efforts to influence local perceptions and attitudes generally fell below the radar screen; and high-level administration officials, including the President, who worked tirelessly to camouflage their efforts to manipulate foreign and domestic opinion.

⁴ See for example, Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁵ Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997); Michael L. Krenn, “‘Unfinished Business’: Segregation and U.S. Diplomacy at the 1958 World's Fair,” *Diplomatic History* (Fall 1996): 591-612.

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I also wanted to reorient the debate about U.S. propaganda away from the “romance of the clandestine” (in Wilford’s fine phrasing). I wanted to draw attention to the wide range of other types of psychological warfare initiatives that so profoundly shaped American diplomacy. One of my most important goals was to explore the intersection between propaganda, policy, and diplomacy. In part because of the communications revolution and in part because of the ideological nature of the Cold War, distinctions between propaganda, policy, and diplomacy became blurred. The imperative of manipulating or influencing public opinion at home and abroad exerted a profound influence on the ways in which policies were formulated, implemented, and presented. Moreover, as I argue in chapter four’s survey of psychological operations around the world, overt and covert operations to manipulate perceptions and politics became routine: “Intervention in foreign internal affairs was standard operating procedure.” (pg. 150)

Sarah-Jane Corke’s review raises interesting questions about the terminology employed by psychological warfare advocates and their bureaucratic opponents. Her perceptive critique in this regard follows from her fine scholarship on national security discourse, which I have found persuasive on many levels.⁶ Still, I only partially agree with her analysis here. Terminology may have been a component of the turf war between the psy-warriors and the diplomats, but I think it remains true that even the most ardent propaganda enthusiasts like C. D. Jackson used such terms as “propaganda,” “psychological warfare,” and “information” interchangeably. At least during the Eisenhower years, officials devoted less attention to linguistic precision than Corke suggests. Occasionally their discourse revealed a lack of clarity in their thinking. To the extent that propaganda specialists gave attention to terminology, it was less a matter of their concern for waging bureaucratic warfare than for managing public perceptions of their trade. They became increasingly unnerved by the term psychological warfare itself. It seemed too antagonistic, too manipulative. They lurched for euphemistic ways to describe their craft before settling on the now fashionable “public diplomacy”, a term which masterfully obscures the manipulative elements of propaganda practices.

Also, to reply briefly to Corke’s observation that the Psychological Strategy Board “played an important role in narrowing the gap between policy and operations in the early fifties”: I heartily agree. *Total Cold War* acknowledges repeatedly the impact of the PSB – as well as its bureaucratic and intellectual predecessors, including those in the public relations industry.

Finally, in response to Hugh Wilford’s comment that “the volume itself [is] handsomely produced, with a particularly good range of illustrations”, I must give credit where it is due by concluding with a special word of thanks to the University Press of Kansas, who

⁶ Sarah-Jane Corke, “History, Historians and the Naming of Foreign Policy: A Postmodern Reflection on American Strategic Thinking During the Truman Administration,” *Intelligence and National Security* (Fall 2001): 146-165.

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graciously accommodated my desire to use visual images to reinforce the main arguments of the book and did so much more to make my vision for the book come alive.

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