The Origins of the Cold War in United States History Textbooks

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The impact of the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union on American politics and society during the post–World War II era can hardly be overstated. As Gary B. Nash and his coauthors point out in their textbook, *The American People*, "The Cold War was the greatest single force affecting American society during the decade and a half after World War II." Scholars must therefore use the Cold War as the starting point for explanations of American diplomatic, political, social, economic, and cultural history in the post-1945 era.

The importance of the Cold War in shaping American politics and society is perhaps obvious to those who lived through it. For the baby boom generation, the dramas that the Cold War produced around the globe, from Greece to Berlin to Korea to Cuba to Vietnam, were vivid events that made a lasting impact, at least on members’ impressions of, or attitudes toward, world and national affairs. How and why the Cold War began was an issue of immediate political relevance as well as a question for historical analysis. But for students who are just coming of age, it will become increasingly difficult to understand the sources of all the excitement, fear, and tension. The end of the Cold War is likely to obscure the roots of the passions it aroused. As the Cold War fades into distant collective memory, the reasons why Americans attached life-and-death significance to the struggle with the Soviet Union will become less apparent. The trend is under way; John Lewis Gaddis has recently observed that "our students are already beginning to raise [the question of] what the Cold War was all about in the first place." Those students, even more than their predecessors, will need to be educated about the Cold War and its implications for the development of modern American society.

How college survey textbooks treat the origins of the Cold War is a good indicator of what students learn, or at least what they are told, about the causes and consequences of the American-Soviet conflict. The issues of what caused the Cold War and how Americans perceived Soviet behavior are keys to understanding what fol-

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1 Gary B. Nash et al., *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, 2d ed. (New York, 1990), 918. For the names of all authors of each text discussed, see the list "Textbooks Reviewed" at the end of this article.

lowed, because in the early years of Harry S. Truman's administration, policies, programs, attitudes, and assumptions that lasted for a generation were established. The beginning of the Cold War has long been a focus of intense historiographical controversy, and the debate among specialists has profoundly influenced discussions of the subject in survey textbooks.

For the first two decades of the Cold War era, most scholars, like most Americans, regarded postwar tensions as a result of Soviet expansion and aggression. In this interpretation, the United States reacted defensively to frustrate Soviet ambitions for world domination. By the late 1960s, as the Vietnam War became increasingly divisive and scholars sought to explain the roots of United States involvement in it, a conflicting interpretation of the beginning of the Cold War had gained prominence. The revisionist, or New Left, view placed the primary burden of responsibility for the Cold War on the United States. Some scholars focused on the personalities and visceral anticommunism of American leaders. But the New Left position, drawing on the work of William Appleman Williams, emphasized the economic expansion of American capitalism and the search for foreign markets as the primary cause of the Cold War. This drew a spirited response and prompted a bitter scholarly debate.

After more than a decade of fireworks, the debate produced a new consensus that drew elements from the competing interpretations. The new view, soon called postrevisionism, placed the responsibility for the Cold War on the ambitions and activities of both the United States and the Soviet Union. This was a milestone in Cold War historiography because scholarly interpretations centered on the question of blame. As Geir Lundestad pointed out in 1989, "A moral assessment of blame is the most important criterion in categorizing the various interpretations of the Cold War."

The postrevisionism that prevailed in the works of Cold War specialists after the late 1970s testified to the influence, but not the predominance, of revisionist arguments.

The broad consensus on responsibility for the Cold War did not mean the end of the scholarly controversy. Many issues continued to be sharply contested. Even those who agreed that both the United States and the Soviet Union shared the blame often disagreed about which was more responsible. Scholarly views diverged on the aggressiveness of actions by the United States, the motivations and extent of its influence on foreign countries, and the role of economic objectives in its diplomacy. Some scholars rejected or severely criticized postrevisionism as an approach to explaining the cold war. The consensus that emerged was, at best, uneasy, and, in the judgment of some scholars, an object of disdain. But it provided a widely accepted framework in which a variety of other issues were debated.

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4 For a highly critical commentary on postrevisionism and three of its leading practitioners, see Bruce Cumings, "Revising Postrevisionism?" or, The Poverty of Theory in Diplomatic History," *ibid.*, 17 (Fall 1993), 539–69. For responses to Cumings's article and the continuing divisions among Cold War scholars, see Karen J. Winkler, "Scholars Refight the Cold War," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 2, 1994, pp. A8–9.

5 The summary of Cold War historiography is drawn from the following comprehensive surveys: J. Samuel Walker, "Historians and Cold War Origins: The New Consensus," in *American Foreign Relations: A Histori-
In their discussions of the origins of the Cold War, American history textbooks now take a centrist postrevisionist position. Indeed, an even-handed interpretation is more entrenched in textbook presentations on the subject than it is among diplomatic historians. Treatments of the early Cold War in survey textbooks are in many ways remarkably similar. They generally review the same key events in the early Cold War period—the growth of tensions during and after the end of the war, the Iranian crisis of 1946 over Soviet withdrawal from areas of wartime occupation, the Baruch Plan for international control of atomic energy, the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the Berlin airlift, and the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The uniformity in the issues covered also extends to illustrations; nine of the eighteen books reviewed use a shot of Berliners watching an American plane flying overhead with supplies for their beleaguered city during the airlift of 1948–1949.

Despite the similarities among textbooks, some differences in tone and emphasis are apparent. Although no textbook depicts the Soviet Union as solely responsible for the growth of tensions and the United States as entirely blameless, several place the burden principally on Moscow. Arthur S. Link and his coauthors, for example, assert that the Cold War began "in earnest" as a result of "certain clear signs that the Soviet Union intended to expand its influence into areas that the West deemed vital to its security." George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi view the Cold War as inevitable because of mutual misunderstandings, but they suggest that the basis of the conflict was the universal commitment of Communist nations to "world revolution."

While there are no unreconstructed traditionalists among textbook authors, there are also no strident revisionists who claim that the United States alone caused the Cold War. The text that shows the greatest sympathy for a revisionist position is that by Mary Beth Norton and others. The section on the early Cold War, written by Thomas G. Paterson, assigns somewhat greater blame to the United States than to the Soviet Union for postwar disagreements. It points out Moscow's transgressions but focuses on American power and exaggerated fears of the Soviet threat. Nevertheless, it makes clear that the actions and perceptions of both nations triggered the Cold War.

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7 Mary Beth Norton et al., A People & a Nation: A History of the United States, 3d ed. (Boston, 1990), 819–30. For another view that also places somewhat more blame than do most textbooks on the United States, see Paul S. Boyer et al., The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People, 2d ed. (Lexington, Mass., 1993). The Cold War, the book asserts, occurred when an "uncompromising Truman squared off against an obsessive Stalin." Ibid., 933.
Most textbooks take a position that is very close to dead center. Reflecting the influence of both traditional and revisionist interpretations, they allocate blame to both adversaries in roughly equal measure for policies and behavior that aroused mutual suspicions and hostilities. The majority of books attribute the American-Soviet dispute to clashing ambitions and objectives. Some place greater emphasis on misunderstandings, exaggerated fears, and worst-case preparations that fueled distrust on both sides. One of the most thorough and judicious discussions of the early Cold War is found in the text by John M. Blum and his coauthors, The National Experience. It well illustrates the balance that is typical of most textbook treatments: “The Cold War soon became an intricate, interlocking, reciprocal process, involving authentic differences in principle, real and supposed clashes of interest, and a wide range of misunderstanding and misperception.”

Consistent with postrevisionist scholarship, textbooks generally regard a rupture between the United States and the Soviet Union as inevitable, though not the bitter intensity that characterized the conduct of the Cold War. In this view, the Cold War becomes more an unavoidable tragedy and less the outcome of expansionistic ambitions and villainous behavior by one side or the other.

The middle ground occupied by textbook treatments of the early Cold War generally disregards or downplays the recent and continuing controversies among specialists on the subject. It more closely reflects the scholarship of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when, as Anders Stephanson has recently pointed out, “Historians were wont to talk about [Cold War origins] as a largely settled issue.” The widespread agreement on such a divisive topic among textbook authors, many of whom embrace divergent perspectives and views on other issues, is quite striking. This might result, in part, from a tendency of textbook writers to take a centrist position. Frances FitzGerald has commented that high school textbook publishers “try to compete for the center of the market, designing their books not to please anyone in particular but to be acceptable to as many people as possible.” College texts are not subject to those pressures with the same intensity, but neither are they immune from an affinity for the center.

Nevertheless, the presentation of the early Cold War in textbooks seems a derivative more of a scholarly consensus than of a gravitational pull toward the center. The weight of the available evidence and scholarly writing support a balanced position. One indication that textbooks are most influenced by the findings of scholarly investigations is that textbook discussions written by diplomatic historians conform with the even-handed views they have expressed in other works. Furthermore, a middle position is compatible with the conclusions of many leading accounts, including recent ones. Melvyn P. Leffler’s prizewinning study, A Preponderance of

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8 John M. Blum et al., The National Experience: A History of the United States, 8th ed. (Fort Worth, 1993), 794.

9 Stephanson, “United States,” 23; Frances FitzGerald, America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century (Boston, 1979), 46.
Power, for example, assigns approximately equal responsibility for the Cold War to the United States and to the Soviet Union.10

The balanced postrevisionist approach that prevails in United States history textbooks provides a sharp contrast with interpretations presented during the heyday of Cold War orthodoxy, which also reflected the scholarly consensus of the times. Four leading textbooks demonstrate the extent of the change. Earlier editions of the text by Blum and others did not describe a “reciprocal process” but took a much harder line on Soviet responsibility. The 1967 version, for example, attributed the Cold War to Soviet expansion and “Soviet pressure against the West.” It featured sidebars containing lengthy quotations from George F. Kennan’s “X” article in Foreign Affairs in 1947 and George C. Marshall’s commencement speech at Harvard University proposing what came to be called the Marshall Plan. The 1993 edition, by contrast, dropped the Marshall speech for an extended quotation from Henry A. Wallace on the need to cooperate with the Soviet Union.11

The same pattern recurs, sometimes even more dramatically, in other textbooks. The 1971 edition of Thomas A. Bailey’s The American Pageant placed the onus for the Cold War on “the Russian rulers [who] kicked [the United States] in the teeth,” thus disclosing “that they had not abandoned their zeal for Communist world revolution.” The 1991 edition, which carries Bailey’s name posthumously along with that of coauthor David M. Kennedy, declares that the “two powers provoked each other into a tense standoff.” The 1967 version of Richard N. Current, T. Harry Williams, and Frank Freidel’s American History reported that “Communist aggression” and “a series of Russian thrusts into weak areas in Europe and Asia” caused the Cold War. The 1991 edition, which includes Alan Brinkley as a coauthor, affirms that “both the United States and the Soviet Union contributed to the atmosphere of hostility and suspicion that quickly clouded the peace.” In 1966, John A. Garraty blamed the Cold War on Joseph Stalin’s intentions “to control all eastern Europe” and his hopes “to dominate western Europe.” He is less certain in the 1993 edition; rather than taking a clear position on the origins of the Cold War, he suggests that “complete understanding is not yet possible.”12

There is much to applaud in the treatment of the early Cold War by survey textbooks. Nearly all the textbooks under review give Cold War origins a fair allocation of space and attention relative to other major topics in United States history. Despite the decreased emphasis in textbooks on political and diplomatic history relative to social history, the Cold War has held its own in the amount of space it receives. Re-

10 Melvyn P. Leffler, A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War (Stanford, 1992).
cent editions of older texts have not reduced their coverage of the early Cold War. Indeed, a very crude quantitative analysis—page counting—indicates that nearly all the books under review (in covering the entire span of United States history) give the topic approximately 1 percent of their space.\(^\text{13}\)

More important, survey textbooks offer a balanced view of the causes of the Cold War that shows how the actions and perceptions of both the United States and the Soviet Union contributed to tensions. In contrast to the one-sided manner in which they described the development of the Cold War a generation ago, they now more fully demonstrate its complexities, uncertainties, and ambiguities. They uniformly refrain from presenting a simplistic struggle between an aggressive, willful, ungrateful Soviet Union and a defensive, well-meaning, generous United States.

In their discussion of the origins of the Cold War, American history textbooks also reveal some common deficiencies. As a rule, they give insufficient attention to new findings and recent scholarship. Some of the most important contributions of the past decade or so have made little impression on textbook treatments of the early Cold War. One of these is the role of the British in the growth of American-Soviet differences. It now seems clear that the Cold War cannot be understood as simply a bilateral affair; the interests and activities of Britain contributed significantly to the divisions between the Soviet Union and the West. One scholar, Fraser J. Harbutt, has even suggested that former prime minister Winston Churchill's intervention was decisive in Truman's adoption of a get-tough policy. Despite the profusion of scholarship on British influence on the Cold War, textbooks devote little attention to the subject except to make passing references to Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech. Blum and his coauthors provide the fullest recognition of the impact of the British, and even their discussion borders on cursory.\(^\text{14}\)

A second issue that receives less attention in textbooks than in scholarly analyses of the Cold War is the role of United States economic expansion. This was originally the key to the New Left interpretation of the beginning of the Cold War, but few specialists now view it as the critical element in causing American-Soviet tensions. Still, many regard economic considerations as important motivating forces behind American foreign policy and economic aid, or the refusal of it, as tactical weapons for fighting the Cold War. The most sophisticated treatment of American economic concerns in the early Cold War is Michael J. Hogan's discussion of "corporatism" in his prizewinning book, \textit{The Marshall Plan}. Corporatism, in Hogan's presentation, featured a collaborative arrangement among government, business, and labor leaders to achieve prosperity. The United States sought to export its corporate system

\(^{13}\) The exception is R. Jackson Wilson et al., \textit{The Pursuit of Liberty: A History of the American People}, 2d ed. (Belmont, 1990). It is unique in providing in-depth accounts of selected topics and cursory coverage of most others. The book includes a lengthy discussion of the Manhattan Project, the use of the atomic bomb in World War II, and the nuclear arms race, but very little on the origins and conduct of the Cold War. Students relying on this textbook alone would be hard pressed to figure out the importance of the Cold War in shaping American society.

to Europe to thwart Soviet expansion. No textbook includes the corporate model in its discussion of the Cold War, and few mention American economic objectives at all. The notable exceptions are Norton's and Nash's books, which cite the importance of increasing American markets abroad and the use of economic warfare as a weapon in the battle against the Soviets.15

The most glaring shortcoming in the discussion of the early Cold War in textbooks is a failure to convey the frustrations, tensions, and anxieties that gripped American society as a result of the growing hostilities with the Soviet Union. Understanding the emotional content of the Cold War is vital for students seeking to figure out what it "was all about." Although textbooks generally do a good job of laying out the issues that triggered the Cold War, they are less successful in defining the political atmosphere of the times. A sober and balanced presentation of facts, however necessary and commendable, cannot of itself enable students fully to grasp the reasons for the centrality of the Cold War in American politics and society.

Americans' responses to Cold War strife were frequently based on fears, or at least vast unease, that grew out of their experiences during World War II and their interpretations of what had caused it. How rational, logical, and proportional to the threats they faced those fears were is a matter of continuing historiographical debate. But the alarm they felt is a historical reality that needs to be explained if American attitudes toward the Cold War are to be understood. Many scholars have shown how anxieties among government officials and the general public conditioned their responses to Cold War crises. Leffler, for example, has cited the "enormous apprehensions" of United States policy makers as a key to their decisions. Paul Boyer has focused on one prominent source of public distress, the fear of nuclear destruction. Within a short time after the bombing of Hiroshima, he argues, a "primal fear of extinction" that "pervaded all society" was apparent.16 The problem with many textbooks is that they offer a bland and bloodless account of the Cold War that fails to capture the emotions of the period. The recitation of facts that they provide, no matter how well done, seems likely to leave students wondering what generated all the excitement or why the Cold War escalated into a tense, unrelenting, and occasionally terrifying struggle.

The similarities in textbooks in the topics they cover, the interpretations they offer, and the shortcomings they exhibit do not mean they are of equal overall quality in their discussions of the early Cold War. Of the eighteen books consulted for this review, five are outstanding. James Kirby Martin and his coauthors are exceptional in capturing the mood of the nation in the immediate postwar period. They begin their chapter on the Cold War with a lengthy discussion of the Alger Hiss case. They later examine the "paranoid style" of the anticommunist crusade, Cold War movies, and a "Commie for a Day" experiment in the town of Mosinee, Wis-

consin, in which a mock Communist takeover was intended to educate citizens about "what it would be like to live under a Soviet-type, communist dictatorship." A vignette in Gary B. Nash’s book, in a section written by Allan M. Winkler, also effectively conveys the political atmosphere of the country. It gives a detailed account of the tribulations of Val Lorwin, a State Department employee who endured investigations, hearings, and indictment because of groundless charges that he was a Communist agent. The book follows Lorwin’s story with a presentation on the origins of the Cold War that clearly shows how the differing perspectives and conflicting aims of the United States and the Soviet Union led to tensions. Both the Martin and Nash texts demonstrate how carefully chosen examples can enlighten students about the emotional aspects of Americans’ response to the Cold War.¹⁷

Other texts, though less successful in suggesting the national mood, offer particularly thorough, sophisticated, and instructive discussions of the early Cold War. The books by Blum, Norton, and Robert A. Divine and his coauthors make clear the complexities of the Cold War, the sources of conflict between the Soviet Union and the West, and the misapprehensions that prevailed on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Divine’s book is especially strong in tying the Cold War to other key events in American society: not only McCarthyism, making a connection that all textbooks recognize, but also economic growth, civil rights, and the space race. The Norton text’s discussion of the early Cold War is notable for presenting the Soviets’ perspective on Cold War crises without absolving them of responsibility. Blum’s account offers the considerable virtues of clarity, balance, and a sense of how the Cold War escalated as a result of decisions and actions by all three principals. The Divine, Norton, and Blum books contain sketches of Truman’s personality that implicitly take issue with the heroic image that has flourished in popular mythology.¹⁸

The view of the origins of the Cold War that prevails in American history textbooks seems unlikely to be drastically modified, at least to the extent of the changes made as a result of the revisionist challenge to traditional interpretations. Scholarship that has investigated the American side of the Cold War is based on massive research in primary sources in the United States and other Western nations during two decades and is informed by a rich debate over the meaning of those sources. Textbook writers have drawn on this body of knowledge to present their accounts of the origins of the Cold War. It is possible that the opening of primary sources in the archives of the former Soviet bloc may greatly revise scholarly views of the origins of the Cold War. Knowledge of the Soviet side of the Cold War has been inhibited by limited access to documents, and it is, therefore, based largely on unreliable published sources, including memoirs, and much speculation. This situation is changing as a result of the end of the Cold War, though not as quickly and

¹⁷ James Kirby Martin et al., America and Its People, 2d ed. (New York, 1993), 904–33; Nash et al., American People, 889–918.
as certainly as scholars would like.\textsuperscript{19} When, or if, the archives are opened and scholars can conduct large-scale primary research in Soviet records, new findings will surely increase understanding of the growth of tensions after World War II. It is less certain, however, that new information will dramatically alter the prevailing view that both the United States and the Soviet Union shared responsibility for the conflict. It is still much too soon to know what the impact of Soviet bloc documents will be.

Most of the textbooks under review discuss the end of the Cold War and the decline of the Soviet empire. But none connects the end of the Cold War with its beginning, either by showing how the conditions that first led to the conflict had changed by the late 1980s or by reflecting on how the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union might revise views on how and why the fifty-year struggle began. This is, perhaps, too much to expect from survey textbooks under any conditions; certainly it is too soon to look for such analyses. For now, despite the flaws in many textbooks, their treatments of the early Cold War generally provide students with an able and even-handed introduction to the complex drama that played such a decisive role in shaping the postwar United States.

TEXTBOOKS REVIEWED


\textsuperscript{19} The best source on the status of records in, and new information coming out of, archives in the former Soviet bloc is the \textit{Bulletin of the Cold War International History Project}, edited by James G. Hershberg and published by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. See also Garry Gendlin, "Accessing the Archives of the Former Soviet Union," \textit{Perspectives}, 32 (March 1994), 7-8.
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