

Historians and the Cold War

THE BATTLE OVER AMERICA'S IMAGE



At the heart of the present political crisis lie fundamental questions about the role of the Executive Power in American government and the continuing viability of America's self-image as a democratic republic.

Radicals will tend to regard the terms in which the crisis presents itself with an air of skepticism. The rhetoric of Constitutional legalities and national ideals will seem to them little more than a smokescreen for vested material interests. But carried too far, such skepticism will miss an important perception: an idea widely believed can become a powerful material force.

It is true that the democratic idea has been a self-serving instrument of empire and aggression. But it is only because the concept itself engages support for such practical enterprises that it is of service to power at all. That is why the maintenance of belief in the democratic idea is, paradoxically, an imperative also for those "realists" whose privilege and interest it so efficiently serves.

America now faces a political crisis because recent administrations have found it necessary to violate systematically the set of norms through which national power has heretofore been legitimated. To be sure, the norms have always been violated: that is the pragmatic core of the American Way. But the nature of the crisis indicates a qualitative change in the way such violations are required. Something has taken place in the historical development that presents the American government with continuing imperatives for action which cannot be contained within the traditional flexibilities of the national self-image. There is, in sum, a deeper fault in the system, a widening fissure between the nation's sense of itself and the government's sense of the "national interest" that provokes the present inquest into the national identity and purpose.

This inquest has already produced a crisis in the writing of American history, the ultimate repository of the national memory, and guardian of its self-image. It is no accident that the one area of the academic mainstream on which the vast spasm of anti-war protest had a visible and lasting effect was the field of "cold war history," where the tolerant atmosphere for dissent it created helped to legitimize a group of historians who became identified as the "revisionist" school.

In a series of works dating back to the 1950s, these historians—myself included—articulated a vision of America's postwar role which entailed a profound reassessment of America's self-image as a redemptive world force, and reflected a radical moral and intellectual break with the traditions of America's 20th Century expansion under the rationalizing imperatives of liberal internationalism. It is an expressive indication of the depth of the current crisis that in the wake of the Vietnam cease fire, when the advocates of America's imperial mission are eager to erase the moral and political reflections precipitated by the aggression in Southeast Asia, this school of "revisionist" historians should come under strong and uncompromising attack.

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In an important sense, the revisionist history of the cold war traces its origins to the profound disenchantment provoked by America's First World War crusade. This war between Europe's empires was emphatically rejected by the American electorate in 1916, but then suspiciously sold as a defensive necessity, and afterwards, more boldly, as the war to end all wars and to make the world safe for democracy. Lyndon Johnson's famous peace candidacy of 1964, which became a war program in office, was not the first executive betrayal of an electorate and its reluctance to engage in international slaughter. It is cause for reflection that the presidential elections of 1916, and even of 1940, were won on platforms pledging to keep the nation out of war, by men who promptly led the nation in. (Campaigning for a third term in 1940, Roosevelt declared: "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again: Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars.") The fact that the post-mortem congressional reaction to America's unsuccessful aggression in Vietnam has brought forth cries of "neo-isolationism" from opponents, suggests the continuing relevance of the themes first aired in the great debate of the '20s and '30s about America's emerging world role.

Revisionist historians of America's first major international war were impressed by the self-dealing cynicism of its conclusion at Versailles, and the active involvement of Wall Street bankers and other self-benefacting emulators of the British Empire in Washington's resolve to enter the conflict. The Nye investigations of the financial titans and military-industrial war profiteers, which took place during the New Deal, reinforced the historians' interest in the connection between corporate expansion and American internationalism. It also alerted their concern to the situation in Asia, where a similar pattern of "open door" expansion was leading to what seemed a similar conflict with Japan.

Among those troubled by the implications of these events was the Progressive historian Charles A. Beard, one of the most distinguished figures in American intellectual life. Beard saw the dangers inherent in America's economic expansion abroad and the effort to underwrite that expansion politically under the manifesto of the "Open Door." He understood, further, the dynamic of intervention in "foreign quarrels" as a traditional path by which American reform presidents resolved the internal crises created by a monopolistic economy, and thereby escaped the more difficult tasks of social and economic reconstruction at home. In 1935, on the basis of a lifelong study of America's progress, he wrote an awesome prophecy of the coming war with Japan:

Confronted by the difficulties of a deepening domestic crisis and by the comparative ease of a foreign war, what will President Roosevelt do? Judging by the past history perhaps it would be more accurate to say, amid powerful conflicting emotions he will "stumble into" the latter.

by David Horowitz

The Jeffersonian party gave the nation the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and its participation in the World War. The Pacific War awaits.

Beard's insights into the nature and menace of America's frontier legacy, the connection between liberal reform and imperialist expansion, were later to be revived and extended by the cold war "revisionists." They were partially obscured, however, by the narrowness of Beard's focus in his last great blasts against the Rooseveltian politics that proclaimed peace and domestic reform, while maneuvering the nation inexorably, and deceptively, into imperial war.

Beard's last book, *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War* (1948), has a contemporary ring that is positively eerie. The revelations of presidential deception and manipulation, the concern with the usurpation of Constitutional powers reserved to Congress and the people, all seem taken from yesterday's papers. Its conclusion could serve as an emblem for the conduct of foreign affairs during the next quarter century of American policy and expansion into Asia: "At this point in its history," Beard wrote, "the American Republic has arrived under the theory that the President of the United States possesses limitless authority publicly to misrepresent and secretly to control foreign policy, foreign affairs, and the war power."

[BEARD IS OSTRACIZED]

In the framework of Beard's analysis, a contemporary reader can easily discern how in every respect, from his domestic new dealism to his executive arrogance and aggressive internationalism, Lyndon Baines Johnson was indeed, as he claimed, the disciple of FDR. At the time that Beard developed his critique, however, his analysis of the crisis of the American Republic under the stress of its imperial ambition was overwhelmed by the moral dimensions of the developing European conflict and the aggressive miscalculations of the Axis powers. Set against the background of the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the great wartime coalition against fascism, Beard's portrait of Roosevelt as the 'Caesaristic' betrayer of the American Republic served only to isolate him politically and bury his insights under an avalanche of abuse. Liberal and conservative historians joined together in ostracizing Beard and subjecting his work to scathing and patronizing attacks, which resulted in the rapid eclipse of his academic reputation and influence.

The intellectual juggernaut arrayed against Beard and his revisionist colleagues came from the very heart of the internationalist establishment, and was motivated at least as much by the urgency of the developing cold war crusade, as by a lingering animus from the prewar controversies. In a review article in the *Atlantic*, Rear Admiral and Harvard Professor Samuel Eliot Morison alerted his audience to the fact that Beard was "desperately trying to prove to the American people that they were 'sold down the river' by Roosevelt, and anxious to prevent them from being tricked by Truman into a war with Russia."

What seemed an academic controversy was in reality a struggle over the definition of the national interest at a moment of critical transition in the international order. At that very moment the specter of Soviet Communism was



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—Charles A. Beard, 1948

being used by the internationalists to silence the congressional isolationists and underwrite the transformation of *Pax Britannica* into *Pax Americana*. Among the forces marshalling the intellectual interest in behalf of an American imperium was the powerful Council on Foreign Relations, by then the effective long-range planning council for American foreign policy, led by the great figures of American high finance, and backed by the formidable treasuries of the Carnegie-Rockefeller Foundations.

In *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War*, Beard had taken note of the "subsidized and powerful private agencies engaged nominally in propaganda for 'peace' [that] are among the chief promoters of presidential omnipotence in foreign affairs." This was a reference to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace which had been a mainstay of the internationalist cause in the interwar period, and whose board chairman, John Foster Dulles, was to play a prominent role in launching America's cold war crusade. (It was an appropriate irony that Beard had lost his last permanent academic position at Columbia in 1917, in a celebrated academic freedom case in which he opposed the firing of a young instructor whose pacifism was offensive to Nicholas Murray Butler, the president of both Columbia and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and an ardent supporter of the War.)

In 1946, the Council on Foreign Relations commissioned the definitive answer to Beard and the anti-imperial revisionists. A grant of \$139,000 was made to Professors William L. Langer and Everett S. Gleason for a study—eventually published in two volumes as *The Challenge to*

Isolation (1952) and *The Undeclared War* (1953)—which would provide the scholarly reply to the “partisan controversialists” who had challenged the morality and wisdom of America’s new world role.

A distinguished Harvard historian, Langer was not only one of the founding members of the Council on Foreign Relations, but had been submitting classified intelligence papers to the National War College at least since the early ’30s, and had been chosen to head the Research and Analysis Division of the OSS during World War II. In preparing his scholarly study, he was not only given a handsome allowance by the internationalist party in Washington and Wall Street, but privileged access to the classified files of the State Department and the Navy (which naturally were not open to partisan controversialists like Beard).

The attack on Beard was a resounding success. It effectively put the revisionist and anti-imperialist perspective on the defensive, removing from it the protective shield of academic respectability. After this episode, it took immense intellectual fortitude to work in the vein that Beard’s analysis had opened up. Into the vacuum thus created marched the intellectual mythologizers of the Red Menace.

[INVENTING AN EXPANSIONIST ENEMY]

It is difficult now to recall how pervasive was the myth that one power and one power alone had destroyed the hopes for a peaceful international order at the end of World War II. But the vast U.S. arms buildup, the acquisition of a ring of military bases around the Eurasian land mass, the rearmament of Germany and Japan, the creation of a system of entangling alliances with corrupt and reactionary client states across the globe, and military intervention after military intervention were all sold to the American people as necessary defensive measures to contain the Red Menace, expanding out of Moscow (and later Peking). Nor was there any voice like Beard’s issuing from the academic mainstream to challenge the distortion of the historical record, and the misrepresentation of the political



Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta

reality on which this myth was based.

So ingrained did the myth of the Soviet expansionist threat become, so imbedded in the very language and thought of the times, that a scholarly textbook on American foreign policy written in 1955 could defend the Yalta agreements from right-wing attacks by explaining that by that time (February 1945), “Russian armies had overrun all or nearly all of Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Yugoslavia.” (Julius W. Pratt, *A History of United States Foreign Policy*. Emphasis added.) This was tantamount to a description of American armies as having “overrun” Western Europe after June 6, 1944; but it was the kind of historical basis on which the cold war myth of Soviet expansionism was built.

While the Soviet Union was portrayed in the speeches of American statesmen and in the scholarly textbooks of the academic profession as expansionist by nature and unable to abide by accepted international norms, America was presented as an international innocent, handicapped in dealing with the cynical masters of the Kremlin by its very idealism and scrupulous regard for international law. Expert after expert was brought forward to explain that the Soviet Union was not a traditional nation state, but an ideological power driven by messianic ambitions, which made the negotiated settlement of issues impossible, and forced upon an unprepared and conciliatory Washington the “defensive” military mentality—which became known as “containment.”

As George Kennan, Russian expert and head of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, was to explain, the Soviet governmental machine moved “inexorably along the prescribed path, like a persistent toy automobile wound up and headed in a given direction, stopping only when it meets with some unanswerable force.” Twenty years later, Kennan admitted that “it was perfectly clear to anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of the Russia of that day, that the Soviet leaders had no intention of attempting to advance their cause by launching military attacks with their own armed forces across frontiers,” and that “in creating NATO . . . [American policymakers] had drawn a line arbitrarily across Europe against an attack no one was planning.” But in 1948, he argued that all across the globe the Soviet expansionist threat had to be contained by force. Kennan’s famous “X” article on containment appeared, appropriately, in *Foreign Affairs*, the prestigious house organ of the Council on Foreign Relations. It provided the sophisticated rationale for the cold war crusade which became America’s Manifest Destiny in the postwar years, wedging American liberalism to American globalism and underwriting the creation of its overseas free world empire.

[DEMOLISHING THE MYTH]

The enormity of the deception on which the American cold war crusade was launched, and then sustained for more than 20 years, has never really registered on the public consciousness, and perhaps never will. But for the record, the myth was utterly destroyed in a series of carefully documented works by the so-called cold war revisionists. This was a disparate group, some of whose roots were in the old Left, some in the new,

WIDE WORLD

and some in the intellectual traditions of the Progressive Era.*

The revisionist demolition of the cold war myth rested on two common approaches. First, the revisionists resurrected the realities of the power equation in 1945, which had been conveniently ignored by U.S. spokesmen and their academic apologists. Strictly speaking, there were not two great powers in the world at that time, but one; not only did the United States possess an atomic monopoly and the only intact industrial structure in the world, but the war-ravaged, underdeveloped Soviet Union was wrestling with the very real threat of mass starvation and was simply unable—whatever the intentions of its rulers—to fulfill the role prescribed for it in the standard cold war scenarios. (The economic plight and weak strategic posture of the Soviet Union were of course well understood at the time by U.S. intelligence.)

Second, the revisionists painstakingly reconstructed the historical record of the postwar negotiations and demonstrated that Soviet behavior at the conference table and in regard to previously made agreements was perfectly intelligible in terms of the changing realities of power and the policy imperatives of the traditional nation state. The dynamic of the actual breakdown of the wartime coalition was seen in terms of Washington's eagerness to capitalize on its power advantage, and to drive a harder bargain with the Kremlin than the coalition would bear. Moscow's efforts to stabilize its internal regime and secure its buffer zones against the Western pressure provided a self-fulfilling prophecy for the promoters of the totalitarian menace. Thus containment did not save Europe, but made its division inevitable; it did not remove Russia's influence from the East European border states, but guaranteed that its presence would be oppressive and permanent; and the Truman Doctrine was not a program of global self-determination, but of "free world" empire for the United States.

[THE REVISIONIST CASE TAKES HOLD]

To demolish a historical legend was one thing, however, to gain a hearing in academic circles, and the informed media quite another. In the first place such views were dangerously subversive, and at the very least would have been regarded as "fellow travelling" in the benighted '50s; well into the post-McCarthy decade they would have borne the taint of political heresy. In the second place, a vast field of "international studies" had been created in the postwar period by the Carnegie-Rockefeller complex, operating in conjunction with the intelligence apparatus of the State Department and the military. Beginning with Russian and Slavic "area centers" and spreading geographically and linguistically along the frontier line of the U.S. overseas system, nearly 200 institutes

* Their works included *We Can Be Friends, 1952* (Carl Marzani); *American-Russian Relations, 1952* and *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy, 1959* (Wm. A. Williams); *The Cold War and Its Origins, 2 vols. 1960* (D. F. Fleming); *Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy, 1964* and *Architects of Illusion, 1970* (Lloyd C. Gardner); *Atomic Diplomacy, 1968* (Gar Alperovitz); *The Free World Colossus, 1965* and *Empire and Revolution, 1969* (David Horowitz); *The Politics of War, 1968* (Gabriel Kolko); and *The Limits of Power, 1972* (Gabriel and Joyce Kolko); and *Yalta, 1970* (Diane S. Clemens). (The writings of Isaac Deutscher on the Soviet Union, though different in intellectual origin and scope, provided important support for the revisionist effort.)

focused on Communist activities, ideologies and objectives. The sheer volume of studies produced in these institutes, largely by Russian and East European emigres, joined by academic mandarins and professional intelligence operatives, created an enormous literature on Soviet behavior, which by its inertial weight alone helped to reinforce the basic orienting myth of the cold war: the dynamic character of Soviet actions and the responsive nature of American policy. Thus expansive, messianic Soviet Communism was inevitably the prime mover of the postwar conflict; an idealistic and reluctant America rose to its position of world hegemony, inadvertently, through a series of essentially defensive gestures.

A third factor in slowing the revisionist advance was the continuing academic tradition of State Department history, which provided a scholarly exposition of the cold war drama, and a coherent portrait of the relation between traditional American ideals and the new realities of American power. In this effort, the role once played by Langer was assumed by Herbert Feis, assistant to three secretaries of war, member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and like his predecessor, a beneficiary of privileged access to classified primary sources. In a series of books beginning with *The Road to Pearl Harbor* (1950), which was written *contra* Beard, and including *The China Tangle* (1953), *Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin* (1957), *Between War and Peace* (1960) and *Japan Subdued* (1961), Feis provided a firm scholarly rationale for Washington's cold war policies. His output was reinforced by the regular release of the edited papers and memoirs of U.S. policy officials, treated with a professional deference by the academic community, which extended far beyond their significance as briefs for the government case.

As a result of all these factors, there was little if any recognition, either in the academy or the media, of even the existence of a "revisionist" school of cold war history, until the escalation of the Vietnam War and the massive teach-in campaigns on the campuses made its presence unavoidable. Without these developments, it is entirely possible that the revisionist case would have been buried in the grave that had been dug for Beard's final critiques of the emerging American imperium under Roosevelt.

But the war had changed American consciousness in ways that were both crucial and favorable to the revisionist perspective. It had exposed the dangers inherent in the concentration of executive power, and in the systematic resort to duplicity as a presidential *modus operandi*, both of which were necessary adjuncts to the growth of the American empire, as Beard had argued. It exposed the connection between liberalism and globalism, and made possible a more easy abandonment of the myth of America's unique virtue and special deference to international ideals, and thus undercut the liberal argument for support to the global crusade. Finally, the obviously mythic invocation of the Chinese menace to explain and justify the counter-revolutionary intervention in Vietnam had such distinct parallels with the invocation of the Soviet myth for counter-revolutionary purposes in Greece, and for the intervention in Korea's Civil War, that the revisionist version of cold war history seemed not only plausible, but positively enlightening as to the sources of American conduct.

(Continued on page 58)

The Second Frame-up of



Julius and Ethel Rosenberg

The Implosion Conspiracy, by Louis Nizer, Doubleday & Co., \$10.00.

Twenty years ago, on June 19, 1953, Ethel Rosenberg, 37, and Julius Rosenberg, 35—after three years of imprisonment—were put to death in the electric chair at Sing Sing, in Ossining, N.Y., by order of the United States Government. To the end they insisted on their innocence. They had been convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage but in the mass media they were known as “atom spies”—traitors who had given the secret of the bomb to the Russians.

It was a chilling Cold War episode, and its message was heard 'round the world. Sartre and other European intellectuals saw the decision to execute the couple—in the face of

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massive worldwide clemency appeals—as a sign that America was prepared to go all the way in pursuit of its interests. The final scene was played out with an open telephone line between the death house and Washington: at the Department of Justice, top officials gathered in J. Edgar Hoover's office to await word that the Rosenbergs had broken and confessed; and at the White House, President Dwight Eisenhower was on hand ready to halt the proceedings. The Rosenbergs, who had two young sons six and ten years old, had been notified that their lives would be spared if they talked—which meant admitting to a crime that they had steadfastly denied and offering the names of other victims. They died rather than do that. The French Catholic writer Francois Mauriac, in a commentary titled “Torture by Hope,” referred scathingly to the “simple telephone wire which the day before the Sabbath linked the White House and Sing Sing and which will link them forever.”

by Walter Schneir

WIDE WORLD PHOTOS