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Book Reviews

Cull, Nicholas. *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

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Historians of U.S. foreign relations have increasingly turned in recent years from a traditional emphasis on the importance of power politics and negotiations to an emphasis on the importance of culture and communication in diplomacy. Though not as visible or dramatic as shuttle diplomacy or saber rattling, the diplomacy of ideas is arguably far more important over the long term, shaping the ideological context within which traditional diplomats work. Nicholas Cull's work, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, is an important contribution to this field. Cull traces the emergence of the concept of public diplomacy and the agency that represented it in parallel with the Cold War, and shows how important considerations of propaganda were to policy makers in what they saw as a war not only of states but of ideologies.

According to Cull, the USIA had several functions which often conflicted with each other. The first was the collection of public opinion data about America's reputation in the world. This function varied in importance from Eisenhower, for whom it was a top priority, to Johnson, who canceled data collection as anti-Americanism spiraled out of control. The second function was to disseminate reliable news based on the belief that the spread of truth was a powerful rebuttal to enemy propaganda. The Voice of America revealed the tensions within the concept of public diplomacy, as its news gathering mission conflicted with the aims of those who preferred more direct methods of propaganda. The USIA was finally – and perhaps most fundamentally – the mouthpiece of U.S. foreign policy abroad, selling both specific administration policies and promoting American culture more broadly. The eccentric collection of ad men and journalists who made up its brain trust exemplifies its two conflicting missions of reporting and selling.

The USIA, like its sister agency the CIA, was born during the Second World War and came of age with the beginning of the Cold War. Isolationists were wary of its propagandizing functions while McCarthyites saw it as a hotbed of disloyalty. Eisenhower protected the agency through troubled times, believing that information warfare was crucial to win the ideological competition with the Soviet Union. Cultural competition became even more important in the late fifties when Sputnik and various perceived military gaps made it seem as if the Soviet Union was winning the Cold War.

The Vietnam War was an important proving ground for the USIA. Its agencies became intimately involved with U.S. propaganda, the much touted campaign to win hearts and minds. In addition to leaflet drops and programs to encourage defection, armed units were sent out under the agency's auspices to perform face-to-face propaganda. The failure of the Vietnam War was not the sole responsibility of the agency, but its role became increasingly ambiguous. Nixon and Kissinger's anti-ideological program of détente was incompatible with the strident anti-communist propagandizing of the USIA. On top of that, Nixon was unable to resist politicizing the agency by trying to spin its coverage of Watergate. It was not until Reagan that the agency was revived in its role as anti-communist mouthpiece, though Reagan shamelessly imbued it with Republican partisanship.

Cull goes into exhaustive and sometimes overwhelming detail about the bureaucratic minutia that surrounded the life of the USIA. The fervency of the battles is a testament to the importance policy makers attached to this branch of international diplomacy. By paying so much attention to institutional problems, Cull unfortunately gives only occasional glimpses into the content of the message USIA broadcasted abroad, and even fewer but more enticing glimpses of how that message was received. He makes extensive use of agency archives as well as interviews with USIA administrators. Although the interviews give insight into the minds of policy makers, Cull relies on them too heavily in addressing issues where participants had reasons to be evasive, especially on matters of Voice of America neutrality and on cooperation with the CIA. Cull's work is an overall valuable contribution to understanding the ideological battles that defined the Cold War, battles which continue to be fought in new ways in the post-Cold War world.

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