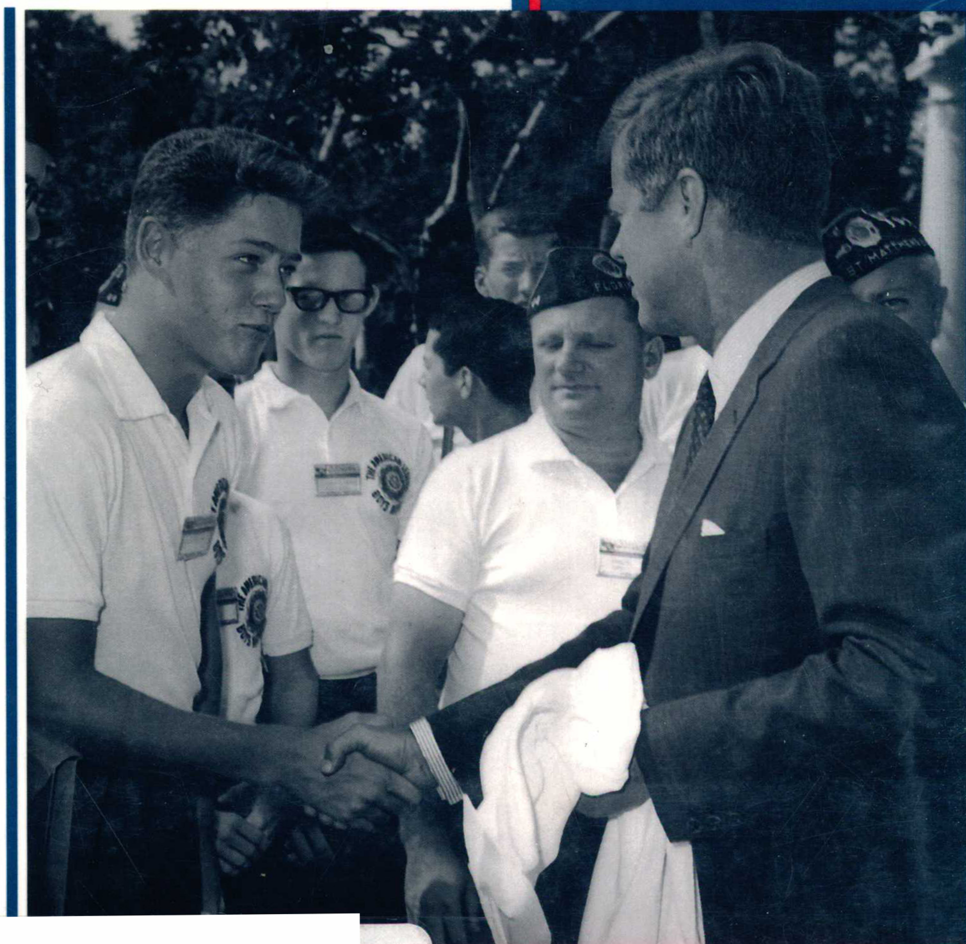
STILL SEEING RED

How the Cold War Shapes the New American Politics



NETH WHITE

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How the Cold War Shapes the New American Politics

John Kenneth White

Transforming American Politics

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Still Seeing Red

For Yvonne, aujourd'hui plus qu'hier

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Gosh, I miss the Cold War.

—Bill Clinton, October 1993

Acknowledgments

Willa Cather once wrote, "A book is made with one's own flesh and blood of years. It is cremated youth." So it is with *Still Seeing Red*. From its inception in the summer of 1992 to its completion more than four years later, this book has preoccupied my late youth. A large portion of each day was spent researching, writing, or shaping the manuscript. As I delved into the Cold War, its influences on partisan politics proved greater than I first imagined. My inquiry recalled an incident involving U.S. Communist Party chairman Gus Hall. When asked in December 1994 how big the Communist Party had become, Hall succinctly replied, "I don't know." So it was when I started this book: The Cold War looms large in the forming and fragmenting of contemporary politics—a realization that seems readily apparent ever since the Soviet Union cried uncle in 1991.

In telling this story, I am indebted to several individuals whose encouragement and inspiration sustained me. A. James Reichley of Georgetown University listened to my idea for this book and closely followed its progress. Ralph Goldman, president of the Center for Party Development, provided incisive commentary as did Jerome Mileur of the University of Massachusetts, William Crotty of Northeastern University, Phillip Klinkner of Hamilton College, and Gary Rose of Sacred Heart University. Sidney Milkis of Brandeis University was an early and enthusiastic supporter of this project, as was Morton J. Tenzer, emeritus of the University of Connecticut, who closely read the manuscript and understood from the beginning exactly what I was trying to accomplish.

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John Kenneth White
Washington, D.C.

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Introduction: Who Are We?

Life is lived forward, but understood backward.

—Soren Kierkegaard

September 1968

The presidential race had begun in earnest. The major party nominees, Hubert H. Humphrey for the Democrats and Richard M. Nixon for the Republicans, were energetically making their appeals for public support. But behind closed doors another "campaign" was taking place. The powerbrokers in the Kremlin were taking their measure of the candidates, trying to determine which would best manage the superpower relationship. It was a difficult decision. Only one month earlier the Soviet Union had invaded Czechoslovakia, ending Alexander Dubcek's brief experiment with "socialism with a human face."[1] After Dubcek's ouster, Communist party chief Leonid Brezhnev enunciated the "Brezhnev Doctrine," the fig leaf under which the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics could correct its fraternal neighbors by military invasion whenever they deviated from Moscow's hard line. The Czech invasion and the Brezhnev Doctrine met with widespread condemnation, and Oleg Kalugin, the KGB station chief in Washington, D.C., found that his informants were keeping mum. Instead of recruiting spies through ideological solidarity, the Soviets needed large sums of cold, hard cash to lure greedy Americans into snooping for Moscow—as was later disclosed in the subsequent spy cases involving John Walker and Aldrich Ames. Kalugin reported to his superiors that after the Czech fiasco publisher I. F. Stone would no longer let him pay for lunches, quoting Stone as saying: "I will never take money from your bloody government."[2] With that, the two men never saw one another again. In Kalugin's view, U.S.-Soviet relations were at an impasse and something "drastic" was required to break the deadlock.[3]

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That drastic step was electing Richard Nixon president. Although Kalugin thought Nixon "unpredictable," he also believed that Nixon's longtime anticommunism might serve as a catalyst "to improve relations between our countries, for no one would ever dare accuse Nixon of being soft on communism."[4] Cloaked with a veil of secrecy, Kalugin and his KGB colleagues spun a web of intrigue. They established a back channel to the Nixon campaign, using Harvard University professor Henry Kissinger as an intermediary. Through a series of letters addressed to Kissinger, Nixon was informed that Brezhnev and the KGB would welcome his election.

But Kalugin did not speak for a unified Soviet leadership. The Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, already had done some politicking on his own. Believing that Hubert Humphrey would never initiate World War III and fearing that Nixon was too staunch an anticommunist (and a scoundrel besides), Dobrynin told Humphrey that the decision-makers in the Politburo looked favorably upon him, and he offered to help the cash-starved Democratic campaign. Humphrey refused, saying it was "more than enough for him to have Moscow's good wishes."[5] After the ballots were counted and Nixon finished a hair's breadth ahead of Humphrey, the Kremlin sent a secret missive via Kissinger congratulating Nixon. Remembering the pro-Humphrey views of the Soviet ambassador, the KGB never told him about the letter. Days later an "official" communiqué from the Soviet embassy offered Moscow's best wishes to the president-elect.[6]

The point of this story is not to argue that these behind-the-scene actions affected the outcome of the 1968 contest—the Vietnam War and public disillusionment with Lyndon Johnson took care of that. Rather, it is to assert that with the end of the Cold War the blindfolds have been removed from our eyes. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, we have been learning much about what transpired behind the high walls of the Kremlin. For example, a recent search of the Soviet archives produced a 1987 plea from U.S. Communist Party chief Gus Hall to Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev: "I don't like to raise the question of finances, but when the 'wolf' is at the door, one is forced to cry out."[7] Gorbachev ordered KGB couriers to stuff their suitcases with $2 million in cash. Further archival digging finds that Moscow gave the U.S. Communist Party substantial sums of money from its inception in 1920 until 1989. Often the cash was stashed in diplomatic pouches sent to KGB agents stationed in the United States who would, in turn, dispense it to eagerly outstretched hands.[8]

Such revelations have not been limited to the Soviet side of the Iron Curtain. In 1994, it was disclosed that thousands of Americans had been treated as human guinea pigs during the Cold War by their own government. Milton Stadt, the son of one of these unwitting subjects, described how his mother had been hospitalized for a duodenal ulcer and found herself in a U.S. government–sponsored lab where, he claimed, "these mon-

sters were." He remembered: "My mother, Jan Stadt, had a number HP-8. She was injected with plutonium on March 9, 1946. She was forty-one years old, and I was eleven years old at the time. My mother and father were never told or asked for any kind of consent to have this done to them."[9] Jan Stadt subsequently died from the "nontherapeutic" radiation experiments performed upon her. Unfortunately, she was just one of many victims. An Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments created by President Bill Clinton found numerous instances of other unsuspecting "atomic veterans," including:

- Hundreds of mentally retarded male teens who were fed a special concoction of Quaker Oats breakfast cereal containing radioactive iron and calcium at the Walter E. Fernald School in Massachusetts from the 1940s until the 1960s.
- One-hundred twenty people, most of them Eskimos and Native Americans, who were exposed to radioactive iodine in tests administered by the U.S. Air Force in 1956 and 1957.
- Thousands of uranium miners working for the U.S. government who were exposed to extraordinarily high levels of radiation. The committee found that the responsible officials knew of the hazards but never informed the miners. Hundreds subsequently died from lung cancer.[10]

Other once-secret documents show the extraordinary preparations the U.S. government undertook in preparing for a possible nuclear war. Top presidential advisers were handed a secret telephone number that granted immediate access to one another by their simply saying "Flash"—a code indicating that the call was essential to the national survival. The 2857th Test Squadron, an elite unit of helicopter pilots, staged landings on the White House lawn. In the event of a Soviet nuclear strike, they were to take the commander in chief to one of several hollowed-out mountain sites or to the heavily reinforced USS *Hampton* off the Atlantic coast. Mount Weather (code-named "High Point"), a retreat in Berryville, Virginia, would accommodate the government-in-hiding. Plans called for several thousand officials to be housed there, including the president, Cabinet members, and U.S. Supreme Court justices as well as the president's family. Photographs show that Dwight Eisenhower kept pictures of his wife and children on his desk there; John Kennedy installed a therapeutic mattress for his bad back. A crematorium and a cache of automatic weapons completed the macabre scene.[11]

Yet in the midst of such awful preparations government officials eagerly sought to reassure citizens that everything was under control. Dwight Eisenhower, however, knew better. In a top-secret 1955 memo, he wrote that if the Cold War turned hot his advisers should not be consumed by mundane questions, such as: "Who is going to bury the dead? Where

would one find the tools? The organization to do it? We must not assume that we are going to handle these problems with calmness."[12] Instead of order, Eisenhower foresaw widespread panic:

> We would have to run this country as one big camp—severely regimented. In a real situation, these will not be normal people—they will be scared, will be hysterical, will be absolutely nuts. We are going to have to be prepared to operate with people who are nuts. . . . We will be running soup kitchens—we are going to be taking care of a completely bewildered population. Government which goes on with some kind of continuity will be like a one-eyed man in the land of the blind.[13]

Reflecting on the Cold War years later, schoolteacher John Driscoll, a child of the 1950s, recalled: "It seems surreal now. Every summer, when I [saw] heat lightning over the city and the sky would light up, I was convinced that it was all over. My whole childhood was built on the notion the Soviets were the real threat."[14] A 1954 poll gives credence to Driscoll's recollections: 72 percent believed that they would have to "fight it out" with the Russians; just 16 percent thought the Cold War would be resolved peacefully.[15] Driscoll and other children in elementary schools were required to practice "duck-and-cover" drills, crawling under desks and placing their arms over their heads to ward off nuclear fallout. Federal authorities distributed *55 million* palm cards advising what to do should the Soviets strike first.[16] Moreover, in one of the first PR campaigns of its kind, the U.S. government touted "Grandma's Pantry," which was nothing more than a state-of-the-art bomb shelter: "With a well-stocked pantry you can be just as self-sufficient as Grandma was. Add a first-aid kit, flashlight, and portable radio to this supply, and you will have taken the first important step in family preparedness."[17]

For the John Driscolls of America, the Cold War was a political and cultural touchstone. It provided a convenient yardstick for separating countries into those "like us" (anticommunist) and those who were "one of them" (communist). It also resulted in the invention of the "Third World" and in competition for its domination. The Cold War also shaped the culture—inspiring the spy novel as a literary genre and prompting cinematographers to preach American values to worldwide audiences. Hollywood film director Sidney Pollack recalled that the Cold War "was very good fodder for drama, because you had what was perceived as a clearly virtuous position against what was seen as clearly bad."[18] Several movies illustrate Pollack's point. In the 1963 antiwar film *Dr. Strangelove*, Slim Pickens waves his cowboy hat and yells "Yahoo, Yahoo!" as he rides a hydrogen bomb toward its Russian target. Twenty-two years later Sylvester Stallone (aka Rocky) battles a menacing Soviet boxer who threatens him by saying, "I will break you." Moments later Rocky's battered and bruised opponent

collapses in the ring. In 1990, *Star Trek VI* depicts the Klingon chancellor searching for an end to decades of unremitting hostility between his empire and the Federation. Leonard Nimoy, the actor who became famous as Mr. Spock, admitted off-camera: "The Klingons have always been our stand-in for the Russians. What about a Berlin Wall coming down in space?"[19]

For decades, Cold War "victories" and "defeats" defined our national moods—reinvigorating an "American Exceptionalism" during the 1950s and 1960s and spawning an "American Pessimism" in the 1970s. It even influenced our view of the sexes: 57 percent in a 1984 Gallup survey believed a "male president would do a better job of handling our relations with the Soviet Union"; only 11 percent said a female would do better.[20] University of Minnesota professor Elaine Tyler May maintains that the 1950s-style nuclear family with its homemaker mom and working dad was a "glamorized, professionalized, and eroticized" symbol of American superiority during the Cold War.[21] Survey research supports her point. In one interview (part of a project that was conducted with 300 married couples), a man defined his family in Cold War terms: His wife and children provided him with "a sense of responsibility, a feeling of being a member of a group that in spite of many disagreements internally always will face its external enemies together."[22]

Like John Driscoll, I, too, am a baby boomer; I was born on October 10, 1952. The Cold War shaped my childhood and spanned most of my adult life, as the front-page headlines from the *New York Times* on that day illustrate: "South Korean Unit, Bayoneting Reds, Regains Key Peak"; "Work Completed on U.N. Buildings"; "Stevenson Taunts Rival for Backing McCarthy, Dirksen"; and "U.S. to Give France $525,000,000 in Aid and Hints at More."[23] Like so many of my generation, I accepted the Cold War as a fact of life. But the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the cascade of events that resulted in the demise of the Soviet Union two years later caught nearly everyone unawares. For example, a June 1989 poll found two-thirds disagreed with the proposition that "communism is dying out."[24] But Soviet-style communism did die—except in China, Cuba, Vietnam, and North Korea—and with it expired the political order influenced and shaped by the Cold War.

Still Seeing Red explores a heretofore little-examined aspect of the Cold War—namely, how the Cold War molded and shaped the internal politics of the United States. It argues that the Republican party was the primary beneficiary of the struggle with communism, as it succeeded in tarring liberalism with the epithet that it was "soft" on communism. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal quickly gave way to a nationalistic, patriotic Republicanism whose leaders occupied the White House for much of the Cold War. In the ten presidential elections held from 1952 to 1988, Republicans won seven of them. Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan are

the founders of a modern Republicanism based in the Cold War era. Yet at other levels of government—particularly in Congress—New Deal Democrats reigned until they were overtaken by the race issue and the cultural liberalism of the 1970s.

The Republican party's success during the Cold War was grounded in two important yet contradictory aspects of American politics: (1) our fanatical preoccupation with communism, and (2) a robust liberalism. As to the former, the Cold War years are replete with illustrations of American anticommunism. In a revealing 1954 incident, for example, journalist Murray Kempton and former U.S. Communist Party leader Earl Browder had a chance encounter in New York City's Greenwich Village. At the time, the number of registered communists had dropped precipitously, Alger Hiss was languishing in a federal prison, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) was grilling suspected communists, and the public was coming to grips with the specter of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Kempton tentatively suggested that the U.S. Communist Party was in danger of becoming a backwater, to which Browder responded, "It was always a political backwater."[25] Yet up to the Cold War's abrupt end Americans continued to believe that communist infiltrators were responsible for many of the country's problems. A 1989 Gallup poll found that 52 percent held communists responsible "for a lot of the unrest in the United States today."[26] Of course, the power of the U.S. Communist Party was never evidenced in massive numbers of proletarians rising in protest against capitalists. Rather, the fear of communism was mostly in our collective consciousness. As Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. perceptively noted in the early days of the Cold War, "In its essence this crisis is internal."[27]

Fear is an animating emotion, especially in the United States. Political scientist Louis Hartz hypothesized that no other ideology, save classical liberalism, could thrive in the American polity.[28] He argued that Americans were so ideologically straitjacketed that a philosophy that did not espouse individualism, equality of opportunity, and freedom would be seen by many as alien. Alexis de Tocqueville held a similar view, writing in *Democracy in America* (1835): "I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America."[29] Indeed, the essence of the American polity is not in the maze of structures erected by the Founders in the Constitution; rather, it is located in the shared values of its citizens. Englishman G. K. Chesterton wrote in 1920 that the United States was founded on a "creed," elaborating: "That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence; perhaps the only piece of practical politics that is also theoretical politics and also great literature."[30] This creed has little tolerance for any deviancy. Lewis Cass, the 1848 Democratic nominee for president, later told a Tammany Hall audience that he was "opposed to all the isms of the day . . . to communism and socialism, and Mormonism; to polygamy

and concubinage, and to all the humbugs that are now rising among us."[31] Abraham Lincoln warned that if the Declaration of Independence was amended to read that "all men are created equal, except Negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics," then "I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy."[32] Karl Marx acknowledged communism's failure in the United States, blaming it on "the tenacity of the Yankees" and citing their "theoretical backwardness" and their "Anglo-Saxon contempt for all theory."[33]

As the post–World War II decades passed with no end to the Cold War in sight, communism became the antithesis of the American creed. In 1964, the *World Book Encyclopedia* drew a bright line between communism and American-style democracy: "In a democratic country, the government rules by consent of the people. In a communist country, the dictator rules by force and stays in power by force. A democratic government tries to act in a way that will benefit the people. . . . Under communism, the interests of the government always come first. . . . Communism violently opposes democracy and the democratic way of life."[34] Such a robust classical liberalism that viewed communism as the antithesis of all that was good handed the Republican party an opportunity to remake itself following the twin disasters of the Great Depression and the Hoover presidency. To be sure, Republicans had long criticized Franklin D. Roosevelt for being naive when it came to Soviet intentions. But the relative success of the New Deal in transforming a generation of "have-nots" into "haves" *enhanced* the GOP's ability to make communism an issue. Repeatedly, Republicans accused Democrats of coddling communists. And just as often Democrats would howl in protest. For example, in a 1944 speech to the Foreign Policy Association, Franklin Roosevelt took note of the Republican attacks on his administration while acknowledging the prevailing antipathy toward communism. Roosevelt recounted an experience his wife, Eleanor, had with a group of elementary school students shortly after he entered the White House:

> In 1933, a certain lady who sits at a table in front of me [Eleanor Roosevelt] came back from a trip on which she had attended the opening of a schoolhouse. And she had gone to the history class, history and geography of children eight, nine, and ten, and she told me she had seen there a map of the world with a great big white space upon it; no name, no information, and the teacher told her that it was blank with no name because the school board wouldn't let her say anything about that big blank space. Oh, there were only 180,000,000 to 200,000,000 people in it, it was called Soviet Russia, and there were a lot of children and they were told that the teacher was forbidden by the school board even to put the name of that blank space on the map.[35]

Roosevelt's defense of his 1933 action permitting diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union won him some admirers, especially as World War II

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