

LOSING OUR SOULS

**The American
Experience
in the Cold War**

Edward Pessen



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THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE
IN THE COLD WAR

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*To Frank Thornton, Eddie Timpone, Jesse "Tex" O'Quinn
Wherever They Are*

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P U B L I S H E R ' S N O T E

EDWARD PESSEN died December 23, 1992, after a distinguished career as a scholar and teacher of American history. He had been Distinguished Professor of History at Baruch College and the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, and was at the time occupying the Edna Gene and Jordan Davidson Chair in the Humanities at Florida International University in Miami.

Less than two weeks before his death Mr. Pessen had sent to his publisher the manuscript of *Losing Our Souls*, its major revisions having been completed after a dialogue between author and editor. In the course of preparing the book for publication, the publisher saw a need for additional minor revisions and additions. With the consent of Adele Pessen, these were accomplished by Athan Theoharis, professor of history at Marquette University and an authority on aspects of American cold war history who had earned Mr. Pessen's respect. Mr. Theoharis's alterations and additions reinforce Mr. Pessen's major arguments in the book.

P R E F A C E

FROM THE closing days of World War II in the summer of 1945 until the end of 1991 when the Soviet Union finally crumbled, the United States pursued a hostile policy against its wartime ally and against the forces of international communist subversion that American leaders claimed the Soviets controlled and directed. Rarely has a great nation been so successful in achieving the goals of its foreign policy as was the United States in the cold war. Almost immediately after it was created in 1947, the National Security Council issued secret policy papers calling on the United States government to wage "economic, political, and psychological warfare" to bring about the "collapse of the Soviet Union," the overthrow of the Soviet Communist party, the dismantling of Soviet armed forces as well as the Soviets' political and economic order, and the liberation of its Eastern European empire. All of this has come to pass. Who can doubt that American policy was instrumental in destroying the Soviet state? And yet, as I shall try to show, our cold war policy, for all its success in dissolving the USSR, was so grievously flawed that the United States may never fully recover from its effects upon our values, our freedoms, our politics, our security, the conditions of our material life, the quality of our productive plant, and the very air we breathe.

The undeniable repulsiveness of many Soviet institutions and their actions, both at home and abroad, doubtless convinced many Americans of the rectitude of a policy directed against so repressive an adversary. A few years ago, as I was standing in

the airport in Reno, the city where the Organization of American Historians had just held its annual meeting, an eminent historian came by and asked about my latest scholarly project. I told him I was working on a critical study of United States cold war policy. He appeared puzzled. "But wasn't Stalin evil? Wasn't the Nazi-Soviet pact a bad thing? Didn't the Soviets commit aggression against Finland?" he asked. The implication of his questions was that reprehensible Soviet conduct justified American policy. He had cited only pre-World War II Soviet misbehavior; he could have substantially enlarged his catalogue of Soviet misdeeds by adding numerous examples of Soviet misbehavior after the war. But what my colleague overlooked is that the impressive array of deplorable actions by Soviet leaders, from Lenin and Stalin through Gorbachev, did not necessarily justify the cold war policy of the United States. It is understandably comforting to a government when its chosen adversary is loveless. It becomes so much easier to enlist popular support for a hostile policy against such a state. But an unattractive adversary does not validate everything done in the name of combating the adversary. During the cold war the United States did deplorable things to people and governments having nothing to do with the Soviet Union while American policymakers insisted that our victims were agents or puppets of the Soviet design for world conquest.

There is by now a massive literature on the cold war, much of it excellent. Many books provide detailed accounts of events, their evidence drawn from patient investigations of archival materials, their claim to our attention resting on the fullness and in some cases the vividness of their narrative. I have read and profited from these writings. Mine, however, is not such a book. Instead I have sought to answer important questions about the post-World War II policy of the United States toward the Soviet Union. What precisely was that policy? (A nation's policy is not confined to what its leaders say it is.) Are there

enduring principles of foreign policy that best serve the people of a democratic republic? And, if there are such principles, was our cold war policy guided by them? What reasons were presented by American leaders for waging the cold war, and how well do these reasons stand up to critical scrutiny? What were the chief means the United States relied on to implement its cold war policy, and what light do these means throw on our policy and its professed objectives? What have been the consequences to date of the cold war for the United States? And, finally, how are we sensibly to assess American cold war policy in light of the evidence? These are the questions this book discusses.

I have written this book because critical examinations of the nation's cold war policy are not in long supply. A society is better served when the deficiencies in its government's behavior are exposed than when they are ignored. As Hans Christian Andersen noted in *The Emperor's New Clothes*, rulers tend not to be favorably disposed toward critics, as their subjects well understand. Most people refrain from calling governmental imbecilities by their rightful name out of fear of incurring the wrath of their leaders. In his great Farewell Address, George Washington warned that "real patriots" who would in the future oppose a foreign policy they believed detrimental to the true interests of the nation would run the risk of being "suspected and odious"—for the policy was likely to be popular because of the government's power to shape public opinion. Clark Clifford's advice that President Harry Truman acted on—to stigmatize sharp criticism of the nation's new cold war policy as helpful to the Soviet enemy and therefore possibly subversive—no doubt induced some Americans to hold their tongues rather than ask the hard questions that might have been asked.

Criticism of policy always serves the public interest, even when the criticism is wrongheaded, by compelling a reexamination of issues that is vital to the well-being of any society.

I have been greatly influenced by an observation made by John Quincy Adams in 1847, shortly before his death. A stranger had written him requesting Adams's advice on how to go about writing a history of the war with Mexico that was then in progress. Adams, who had been a Harvard professor before becoming secretary of state, after that the sixth president of the United States, and finally an antislavery congressman from Massachusetts, had won a deserved reputation for learning and intellect as well as for integrity and patriotism. Adams told his correspondent that the United States was in the wrong with regard to all the important issues leading up to the war with Mexico. He then added, "The historian, you know, must have no country." This was striking advice, coming as it did from an ardent nationalist who had strongly supported the Monroe Doctrine. What Adams meant, of course, is that the historian serves his or her country by appraising its behavior with no less detachment and criticism than he would appraise the behavior of any other country. The scholar's task is not to please the state by approval of its every act but rather to serve the community by calling its attention to and condemning governmental misbehavior.

It has long been fashionable to describe critics of orthodoxy as naysayers, revisionists, and other terms suggesting that what makes such people critics is not the troubled state of affairs but the troubled state of their minds. Perhaps so. A critic is not necessarily reasonable because his detractors delight in denying that he is. I don't know whether or not I am a congenial iconoclast, but I have written a book that the evidence of the past forty-seven years demanded be written.

Important to me have been the writings and statements of onetime American officials who, in Robert Jay Lifton's felicitous phrase, have attained "retirement wisdom." Sharp criticism of our cold war policy by Eleanor Roosevelt or by George F. Kennan, Jerome Wiesner, Robert S. McNamara, or

McGeorge Bundy, men who played crucial roles in formulating and executing that policy, must be respectfully attended. I have also been edified by the criticism of our policy made by former admirals, marine corps officers, Manhattan Project scientists, state department officials, CIA officers, senators and congressmen—all of them conversant with the details and nuances of policy and its implementation, all of them beyond the reach of the slanderous allegations directed at critics less eminent.

I wish also to acknowledge the invaluable suggestions, criticism, and encouragement given me by Henry Steele Commager, Carl N. Degler, James MacGregor Burns, Alfred F. Young, Ronald W. Pruessen, Göran Rystad, Robert Cuff, Walter LaFeber, Martin Jay Sherwin, Gregg Herken, Richard J. Barnet, Thomas J. McCormick, Stanley I. Kutler, Athan Theoharis, Richard Gid Powers, and, above all, Melvyn P. Leffler. Needless to say, any errors of fact and deficiencies of interpretation are entirely mine. My friends Edward Margolies, Stanley Buder, and Myrna Chase have patiently and helpfully listened and responded to my observations and questions during the many years I have worked on the theme. The stimulating questions and responses by faculty, administrators, and students at Florida International University to the public lectures on the cold war which I presented there in 1992, as the Edna Gene and Jordan Davidson Professor of the Humanities, were invaluable. Certainly they stimulated me to think further about important issues. In Ivan Dee I have found a publisher intellectual whose taste for written comment that is sensible, pithy, and well founded has compelled me to refine my thoughts and my prose in order to try to approach his exacting standards. My wife Adele has, as always, given me indispensable spiritual and material support during the years in which I have wrestled with this project.

The dedication is to my best World War II buddies of Company A of the First Battalion of the 318th Regiment of the

Eightieth Infantry Division of the Third Army, who joined me in vowing to spend one night each year in a foxhole to remind us of the miseries of war and to do what we could to make World War II our last war.

E. P.

Miami, Florida
December 1992