

Book Review

H. W. Brands, *The Devil We Knew: Americans and the Cold War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993

In his essay like treatment of the subject, Brands analyzed the actions of the United States during the Cold War, and found a variety of reasons for them. He concluded that American actions during the Cold War were based on psychological, strategic, economic, and political factors; thus, he drew a distinction between the factors that caused and those that maintained the Cold War. Those overlapping factors were the framework of American antagonism, which prolonged the Cold War (227).

Brands crammed almost fifty years of history into seven chapters, starting with the Yalta conference in 1945 and touching on the Gulf War in 1991. Brands argued that the Cold War was a geopolitical and ideological contest in which the United States and Soviet Union could not avoid being suspicious of one another. By the end of 1945, both countries viewed each other as an external and strategic threat. According to Brands, anything that added to the military strength or political power of one necessarily threatened the physical security of the other. Additionally, anything that added to the philosophical or moral influence of one threatened the psychological security of the other (4). As a result, from 1945 to 1950, the primary factor was strategic. Brands argued that to contain the communists and keep countries from falling under their influence, the Cold War struggle was viewed psychologically as a battle between good and evil. Stalin, then, replaced Hitler as the manifestation of that evil. The division created by the struggle between good and evil lent itself to the political divide between dictatorship and freedom.

According to Brands, American Policy in the early years of the Cold War was resistance to aggression in any form (20). Therefore, the United States aided any anticommunist government simply because it was anticommunist. Such a policy left no middle ground, and led to domestic political concerns that lasted until the end of the Cold War. Brands argued that communist victory in China was used as a political weapon against Democrats by Republicans.

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Thus, not wanting to be perceived as soft on communism Presidents Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson intervened with military force in Korea and Vietnam. President Eisenhower, on the other hand, used covert action and the threat of massive nuclear retaliation to keep the communist in check and to avoid the same charge by Democrats. Economically, increased defense spending was good for America. Brands argued even though Eisenhower reduced defense expenditures in his first term, by 1959 expenditures increased. Defense spending kept the Russian bear at bay overseas, and it kept the wolf away from the door at home (41).

Psychologically Brands argued; Americans did not accept that people would choose communism and reject American values without coercion from the Soviet Union. Thus, the United States used covert operations including attempted assassinations to prevent or end communist expansion. In Iran according to Brands, the CIA helped to overthrow the elected government and replaced it with one that supported American strategic and economic interests. In Guatemala, they did the same, but on a larger scale with the same results (57-58). Assassination attempts had their own justification. Brands argued that the use of assassination was a self-fulfilling prophecy, he explained the American rationale: "We are good people working for a just cause. We are attempting to kill Castro.... We would not be doing so unless [he] represented a critical threat to American Security. Therefore, [he] must represent such a danger" (65). That rationale was reinforced throughout the Cold War and used to justify other actions.

That moral relativism continued throughout the Cold War. Brands argued that American support of repressive anticommunist regimes insured three things. First, any alliance the United States made with such regimes would be based on convenience rather than conviction. Next, the alliance in and of itself created new enemies for the United States. Any attack on the regime was viewed as an attack on the United States. Finally, such support undercut the moral basis on which the policy of containment was based. Those consequences solidified in America's Vietnam policy (91-92).

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Détente was the next major stage in the Cold War, and was advocated by fierce anticommunist Republican President Richard Nixon. Brands argued that even after a decade of war the peace of détente was a hard sell in the light of the high expectations that the Nixon administration created. Additionally, détente tended to treat smaller countries as pieces on a Cold War chessboard (131). By 1979, détente was dying and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan put it out of its misery. In 1980, the election of Ronald Reagan marked the return to a tougher stance towards the Soviet Union that détente did not provide. Brands argued that Reagan was able to preserve all the positive benefits of the Cold War without risking any of its dangers. The United States and Soviet Union were never anywhere near direct confrontation during the Reagan administration; he fought the Cold War symbolically.

Through those and other examples, Brands made a convincing argument that psychological, strategic, economic, and political factors were the framework of American antagonism, which prolonged the Cold War and compromised the principles on which this country was based. Had the United States not intervened communism may have fallen on its own in less time.