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Book Review: Cold War Revisited

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How does one write the history of yesterday so that students will read it tomorrow? For anyone over the age of 30, the events of the Cold War, especially its stunning end in the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the failed Moscow putsch, are framed still by the CNN logo beneath the news reports we breathlessly watched. But most undergraduates, of course, are younger than 21; the freshmen who will enter history classes this fall were infants when Václav Havel stood above the crowds demanding the fall of the Czechoslovak Communist regime. How does one describe for such students a time when the greatest threat was not one suitcase nuclear bomb, but thousands of atomic-tipped ICBMs?

John Lewis Gaddis seems to have found the key to good history in Coleridge’s dictum for good poetry – make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Gaddis, the Robert A. Lovett Professor of History at Yale University, already has harvested his share of groundbreaking scholarship from Soviet archives that opened (briefly) after Communism’s collapse; readers looking for stunning revelations would be better served by picking up We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History, Gaddis’ 1998 refutation of many a revisionist’s nostrums. The Cold War, by contrast, is Gaddis’ attempt to tell the story of the Cold War in an entirely fresh voice. Gone is the author as scholar revisiting old arguments with new facts; in steps the author as raconteur, starting the whole narrative from scratch.
It is a tribute to the powers of Gaddis’ imagination that a man who knows the trenches of academic debate so well could find the strength to rise above them. The key to Gaddis’ success is to pick an unusual angle on a familiar and important event, then let that new perspective lead his narrative away from the clichés. In Gaddis’ account of the Cuban Missile Crisis, we find no tales that could serve as a caption to the shop-worn image of Kennedy hunched over his desk; instead, we hear Khrushchev crow that he’ll “throw a hedgehog at Uncle Sam’s pants.” Reagan’s speeches are recounted affectionately in detail as they ratcheted up US pressure on a perturbed Kremlin, but Gaddis will not let readers forget that Reagan’s more sentimental side sometimes failed to impress his own staff. When Reagan once wanted to soften his rhetoric, he revised a speech by adding his own homespun account of how an American couple might discuss foreign policy with “Ivan and Anya.” Gaddis takes us to the sleeve of a White House staffer looking over the revised draft and wondering aloud: “Who wrote this sh—?”

Sometimes Gaddis stretches so far for a fresh perspective on the Cold War that he teeters at the top of shaky metaphors. Yes, Ronald Reagan was a professional actor before he entered politics; yes, John Paul II was an amateur playwright and actor in his native Krakow. But, does this mean that every figure from the transformative 1980s, from Lech Walesa to Margaret Thatcher, must have their careers recast in theatrical language? All the world may well be a stage, but these men and women liberated 300 million souls and overthrew the most enduring tyranny of the 20th century. Surely they were more than just players?

More successful are Gaddis’ unusual comparisons in the course of more traditional political analysis. Rarely in an account of the Cold War, for example, has Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points played such a prominent role, but Gaddis, noting that Wilson hoped to counter the threat of international Communism, convincingly argues that one can frame the Cold War as a battle between the heirs of Wilson’s liberalism and those inspired by Lenin’s revolutionary tracts. We remember the damage done in the 20th century by the ill-advised application of the principle of “self-determination,” but do we give Wilson credit often enough for enunciating the principles of free trade and
democratic alliances that were to become tools of postwar containment? By starting with Wilson’s idealism, moreover, Gaddis has the chance to draw a clear line connecting the dots of 20th century American foreign policy with a simple idea: that America prevailed over the Soviet Union because it was grounded in principles that inspired strong alliances but also engendered good will among Americans towards their allies.

Chief among these was a certain humility toward the lessons of history – a humility that doctrinaire Communists could never match. Unlike the liberals, Gaddis writes, Communists were convinced that their theory of history “which cut through complexity while abolishing ambiguity” could “point the way” to history’s ultimate destination while “only dictators, who provided the necessary discipline, could ensure arrival at the intended destination.” Liberals, on the other hand, “never bought into any single, sacrosanct, and therefore unchallengeable theory of history.”

Gaddis’ careful enunciation of this simple, but important, lesson may well be the most important lesson that The Cold War has to teach to the first generation that did not grow up in the shadow of the Soviet Union. Having been liberated from the cruelest of the regimes to hoist his portrait above its parades, Marx, along with his monocausal vision of human history, is now very much back in vogue among a generation that sees economic interests behind the White House’s every foreign policy choice. We can only hope that undergraduates who read Gaddis will learn that simplistic explanations of history can be as deadly as they are dull.