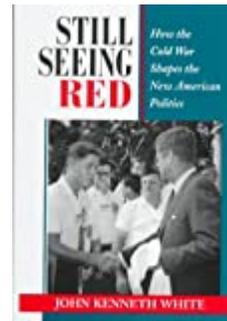




**John Kenneth White.** *Still Seeing Red: How the Cold War Shapes the New American Politics.* Boulder, Colo. and Oxford, England: Westview Press, 1997. xii + 387 pp. \$37.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-1889-9; \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-1888-2.



**Reviewed by** Roger Chapman (American Culture Studies Program, Bowling Green State University, Ohio)

**Published on** H-USA (June, 1999)

## From Cold War to Cold War: The Legacy of Commie Phobia in American Politics

John Kenneth White's *Still Seeing Red* suggests that fear of communism not only shaped the internal politics of the United States during the Cold War, but left a legacy that endures to this day. The author argues that Democrats from 1952 to 1988 lost the White House seven out of ten elections because Republicans were considered by the American public to be stronger in dealing with the perceived Soviet threat. In essence, the Cold War did for the Republicans what the Depression did for the New Deal Democrats. But after the demise of the Soviet government, the GOP has failed to update its campaign playbook, and so it is no accident that the Cold War has been followed by a Democrat winning the White House two elections in a row for the first time in three decades.

White's book is a thorough piece of research, similar in style and depth to Richard M. Fried's excellent work on the McCarthy Era, *Nightmare in Red*.<sup>[1]</sup> The details in White's work, as substantiated by 1,610 footnotes, are a wealth of information that make seemingly clear that the Cold War greatly shaped the dynamics of presidential election campaigns and the outcomes of those races. The structure of *Still Seeing Red*, based on a narrative format,

is arranged as follows:

Part One, Cold War Fears and Party Response Chapter One, 1945-1946: Lost Innocence Chapter Two, 1947-1950: The New Politics of Old Fears Chapter Three, 1952: The Transforming Election

Part Two, The Cold War Party System Chapter Four, The Nationalistic Republicans Chapter Five, The Divided Democrats

Part Three, Diminished Parties in Search of a New Politics Chapter Six, High Anxiety: Post-Cold War Politics Chapter Seven, The Collapse of the Old Order

According to White, the fear of communism stymied political debate from the Left, resulting in an American party system without real parties. Republican candidates had a better knack than the Democratic for making their opponents appear "soft on communism," but since this became the main issue at the national level other important concerns were relegated as secondary. Democrats usually did better at the Congressional level because the public perceived them to be more versed at handling domestic issues and the Representative was supposed to

look after his or her district. A Senator was more likely to be chosen for the White House than a state governor because the public felt that experience in dealing with foreign affairs was one of the most important prerequisites for a president. For years Republicans advanced a negative agenda, one which saw the main issue as that of standing up against the overt and covert Soviet threat. In contrast, Democratic successors of the New Deal tried to advance a positive agenda, one which was based on a vision of domestic social reform (such as Harry Truman's Fair Deal, John F. Kennedy's New Frontier, and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society). But with the Cold War now over, Republicans have had a difficult time coming up with a theme, and promises of lowering taxes or not raising taxes do not give a political party much of a *raison d'être*. Bob Dole's trouncing in the most recent national election was largely due to the fact he lacked vision to offer and could do little more than accuse Bill Clinton of being "soft on communism" (p. 272).

Ironically, Republicans during the Cold War continued the tradition of big government, even though they were on record as being opposed to New Deal-type spending. National security became a justification for many public projects and social programs, such as Dwight Eisenhower's National Defense Education Act and the Federal Aid Highway Act (pp. 112-13). When Eisenhower left office he warned about the "military-industrial complex" that he had helped nurture, but it continued to grow long after he passed from the scene. By 1991, there were 375 American military bases around the globe, staffed by a half-million people (p. 15). The nuclear-industrial complex occupied the land size of Delaware, Rhode Island, and the District of Columbia combined (pp. 193-94), representing a public project that dwarfed all New Deal initiatives. It seems clear that if it were not for the Cold War the United States would have spent considerably less on public programs—but the justification of "national security" enabled such big spending to take place. Indeed, when the Cold War ended there were many job cuts and the resulting sluggish economy largely contributed to George Bush's defeat by a relatively unknown Democratic governor from Arkansas (pp. 213-15).

The Cold War has left many legacies in American politics. The shift of the voting patterns in the South is one of them. The party of Lincoln now dominates Dixie. Several factors can be noted for explaining that change in regional political affiliation. First, the people of the South (the white voting majority) were very concerned about the problems of race and the threat of

the Civil Rights Movement. It was Kennedy and Johnson, both Democrats, who pushed for Civil Rights legislation. And going back to 1947, when Truman's special Civil Rights Commission issued its report, Democrats were addressing racial problems and making them a national issue. The 1964 election in which Johnson achieved victory saw a shift in the Southern States to vote for the GOP (p. 132).[2] Also, and more importantly, the Civil Rights Movement was unjustly equated with communist subversion (pp. 133, 135). Second, during the Cold War many military bases were established in the South, greatly stimulating the local economy in areas that would have otherwise remained impoverished, and the "Dixiecrat" politicians (Southern Democrats who would eventually defect to the Republican camp) were largely responsible for arranging this federal assistance (pp. 133-34). The Southern admiration toward warriors (a legacy of the Civil War) no doubt intensified a general gravitation to the Republican Party, the politicians with the popular reputation of being tougher toward the enemy, the Soviet Union. Third, religion became a part of the Cold War, as symbolized by the 1954 change in the flag pledge in which "under God" was added to the chant (p. 138), and this certainly resonated in the South, particularly the Bible Belt. According to the popular imaginations of the insular and parochial, Republicans had God on their side because they were the most serious about opposing godless communism. With Ronald Reagan, Judeo-Christian values were used to contrast "the evil empire" of the Soviet Union.

Another legacy of the Cold War is the paralysis of political courage, the fear of doing what is right according to one's convictions. Everyone remembered what happened to Henry A. Wallace who suggested that the United States try to understand the international situation from the Soviet perspective (pp. 38-40). A vice president under Franklin Roosevelt who was replaced by Truman and then later ran as a third-party candidate, Wallace became a symbol of the discredited New Deal liberal who failed to understand the times he was living in. When Eisenhower wanted to denounce McCarthy, his cautious advisors urged him not to do so and as a result Eisenhower found himself at the podium literally embracing the man he so greatly despised (p. 97). Kennedy would not pull American troops out of Vietnam because he feared it would revive McCarthyism (p. 164). Johnson could not end Vietnam because he feared it would cause him to lose his presidency (p. 165). In December 1987 Bush forewarned Mikhail Gorbachev not to pay any attention to the anti-Soviet rhetoric in the upcoming

presidential campaign, explaining how it was politically necessary to say certain things in order to win (p. 154). Clinton felt that he had no choice but to continue the economic embargo against Cuba or otherwise appear soft on communism, and likewise he felt that he had to support the unnecessary expansion of NATO (p. 230). Perhaps it is this fearful approach to politics that contributed to the “national arrhythmia” and societal “funk” which seemed to characterize the United States in the wake of the Cold War (pp. 266-67).[3]

Perhaps the biggest legacy of the Cold War is the war over cultural values (p. 278), which has been described as an “internal Cold War.”[4] According to White, “Lacking a common communist enemy, many Democrats and Republicans have found one in each other” (p. 268). One result of the Cold War is that, in politics, the public has become private and the private has become public. The public aspect of government was made private out of concern for national security. Prior to the Cold War the American government did not have so many secrets and it did not even have the Central Intelligence Agency. Also, prior to the Cold War politicians did not have to subject so much of their private lives to public scrutiny. Republicans first equated the L-word (Liberal) with being soft on communism, but later they were able to extend the definition to include social hedonism (p. 243). As the GOP leaders maliciously misconstrued the New Deal as “the spawning ground of organized communism” (p. 53), so today liberal intentions are equated with being subversive or socialistic, whether those initiatives be reform in health care, an increase in the minimum wage, environmental protection, or gun control. In the past, many Republicans accused their worthy opponents of being soft on communism, whereas today they are likely to question their family values. By overly emphasizing values, Republicans make the private public and keep the public private because ideas on how to run the country do not get adequately discussed when so much attention is being paid to issues of character. What is genuinely political gets masked (p. 191). The Monica Lewinsky scandal and the subsequent debate about the public-private lives of politicians could be seen as a legacy of the Cold War, even though it does not even come close to excusing the less than savory conduct of Clinton. It was during the process of Clinton’s impeachment that it was suggested that the “politics of slash and burn” must come to an end, but before that will ever happen America will have to exorcise its Cold War demons.[5]

*Still Seeing Red* is very much worth reading, but it is so packed with information that White’s thesis is some-

times difficult to follow. It is a book that must be studied, not just read, in order to be understood. Perhaps the greatest weakness of the book is its lack of theoretical underpinnings. Also, there is probably too much emphasis on opinion polls. If White is correct in his analysis, then he needs to explain why during the height of the Cold War more Democrats were elected president than when after the tensions eased into Detente. (If Republicans were perceived as being most qualified at standing up against the Soviet Union, then it is only logical that they would have been preferred over the Democrats when the Soviet threat seemed most grave.) White laments that the American political system has suffered as a result of the Cold War because its distinctive party system has been rendered ineffectual, but there could be a more positive interpretation. It could be noted that during the Cold War American voters kept their cool and rejected the extremists. The Democrats could not win with the so-called Wallace faction (Henry A. Wallace, Adlai Stevenson, William Fulbright, and George McGovern), and neither could the Republicans win with Robert Taft, Barry Goldwater, or Patrick Buchanan. I was curious to read on the book’s jacket that White serves as cochair of the Committee for Party Renewal and as vice president of the Center for Party Development. It made me wonder to what extent, if any, the author’s personal political activism has imposed itself on the research findings. Those criticisms aside, the book is to be recommended. For any person interested in the Cold War and its impact on American culture, *Still Seeing Red* will be an excellent resource.

#### Notes

[1]. Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York and Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[2]. Also, see Michael Barone, “Our Country: The Shaping of America from Roosevelt to Clinton,” in Byron Shafer (ed.), *Present Discontent: American Politics in the Very Late Twentieth Century* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House Publishers, Inc., 1997), p. 40.

[3]. It certainly can be acknowledged that the issue of American post-Cold War “funk” is probably larger than the political landscape. According to Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation* (London and Washington, D.C.: Cassell, 1997), all of today’s societies in general have a fear of taking risks, which may be a symptom of larger trends of uncertainty, such as globalization.

[4]. See Hilton Kramer, "The Second Cold War," *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 April 1999, p. W13. In his polemical article, Kramer writes, "Most of us have been slow to understand that the so-called culture war of the past two decades is itself a by-product of the Cold War and now constitutes what is, in effect, an internal Cold War that has already achieved significant victories in some key institutions of American life—most of the academy, most of the entertainment industry, the entire liberal media, large segments of artistic and intellectual life, many of the churches, and virtually all of the liberal foundations. Call it Cold War II or the Cultural Revolution or whatever you please—the culture war now commands a far greater influence on American life than communism ever did." Kramer's rhetoric is a type of Red Scare discourse, only

the word communist has been changed to liberal. In this game, who qualifies as a liberal is probably determined by whether or not they share Kramer's cherished views.

[5]. For an interesting read focusing on values in American politics, see Kenneth J. Heineman, *God Is a Conservative: Religion, Politics, and Morality in Contemporary America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998). Heineman, although probably not divine, is also a conservative.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-usa>

**Citation:** Roger Chapman. Review of White, John Kenneth, *Still Seeing Red: How the Cold War Shapes the New American Politics*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. June, 1999.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3161>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).