

**RETHINKING
THE NEW LEFT
AN INTERPRETATIVE HISTORY**



VAN GOSSE



Rethinking the New Left

RETHINKING THE NEW LEFT

An Interpretative History

Van Gosse

palgrave
macmillan



RETHINKING THE NEW LEFT

© Van Gosse, 2005.

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2005 978-1-4039-6694-0

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

First published in 2005 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS

Companies and representatives throughout the world.

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-4039-6695-7

ISBN 978-1-4039-8014-4 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-4039-8014-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gosse, Van.

Rethinking the New Left : an interpretative history / by Van Gosse.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Radicalism—United States—History—20th century.
2. New Left—United States—History—20th century.
3. Social movements—United States—History—20th century.
4. United States—History—1945— I. Title.

HN90.R3G66 2005

303.48'4'097309045—dc22

2004060109

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: October 2005

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Transferred to digital printing in 2007.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
Preface: Why This is not Another “Sixties Book”	ix
1 DEFINING THE NEW LEFT	1
2 AMERICA IN THE 1950S: “THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS”	9
3 THE NEW LEFT’S ORIGINS IN THE OLD LEFT.	19
4 THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE: FROM “WE SHALL OVERCOME” TO “FREEDOM NOW!”	31
5 CHALLENGING THE COLD WAR BEFORE VIETNAM: “BAN THE BOMB! FAIR PLAY FOR CUBA!”	53
6 THE NORTHERN STUDENT MOVEMENT: “FREE SPEECH” AND “PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY”	63
7 UNDERGROUND FEMINISTS AND HOMOPHILES: “THE PROBLEMS THAT HAVE NO NAME”	73
8 VIETNAM AND “THE WAR AT HOME”	85
9 BLACK POWER: “A NATION WITHIN A NATION?”	111
10 RED, BROWN, AND YELLOW POWER IN “OCCUPIED AMERICA”	131

11	WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND SECOND-WAVE FEMINISM: "THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL"	153
12	GAY LIBERATION: "OUT OF THE CLOSETS AND INTO THE STREETS!"	171
13	WINNING AND LOSING: THE NEW LEFT DEMOCRATIZES AMERICA	187
	A Selected Bibliography	211
	Index	221

Acknowledgements

This book was made possible in large part by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, where I enjoyed a fellowship in 2000–2001. I thank Rosemary Lyon, Kimberly Conner, and the rest of the WWIC staff for their gracious and highly professional support.

It was completed while I was teaching at Franklin and Marshall College. I thank my chairs (Ben McRee, Ted Pearson, and Abby Schrader), my department as a whole, and Provost Bruce Pipes and Dean Ann Steiner for their unstinting support. I owe a special thanks to Peggy Bender, administrator of the History Department, who makes all things possible.

Various people read parts of the manuscript over the years, or offered useful guidance, including Max Elbaum, Lise Vogel, Jeffrey Escoffier, James Miller, Ellen Schrecker, and Allen Smith. None of them are responsible in any way for its errors of fact or idiosyncrasies of interpretation.

Special thanks also go to Patricia Rossi, who suggested I bring the manuscript to Palgrave, and Brendan O'Malley, a first-class editor who made it considerably better. As always, I express my appreciation to Johanna Gosse, my brilliant daughter, and her brilliant mother, Eliza Jane Reilly.

This book is dedicated to Jack O'Dell, whose life has transcended the left in the twentieth century—old, new, and newer. From him I have learned about patience and the long view. We need more Americans like him.

Van Gosse
April 2005

Preface: Why This is not Another “Sixties Book”

Since the late 1980s, an extraordinary number of books have been published about that nebulous decade or era we call “the Sixties.” Clearly there is a demand, and clearly, there is much to say. Still, I feel considerable unease about this cottage industry, even though I have contributed to it with a recent volume co-edited with Richard Moser, *The World the Sixties Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America* (Temple University Press, 2003).

My concerns are twofold, and both are reflected in this book’s focus not on a period, but on the collection of movements, episodically united, that made up the New Left. First, an examination of a period in this country’s history through temporal parameters is almost always a short-term solution, soon made anachronistic. Such works make the impossible claim of capturing the entirety of an era. How many books simply describing “the Twenties,” “the Thirties,” or “the Forties” have survived? Indeed, even this nomenclature suggests a common assumption about which century one is describing, which seems quite dated as we move into a scary new world post-2001. Of course, books about the American Revolution, Reconstruction, the Great Depression, or the Cold War will remain essential to how we interpret the past, but those topics have a certain specificity which “the Sixties” lacks. Simply put, the poor decade cannot carry the freight—it’s at best a convenience, a political trope, and trying to burden it with the whole weight of social change in the post-World War II era does not work. Inevitably, the best historians feel compelled to widen their scope as they attempt to write a comprehensive general history where there is no self-evident beginning or ending, no Fort Sumter, Pearl Harbor, or Black Friday. The result is that more and more historians of the Sixties now try to balance social movements on the left with those on the right, massive change with underlying continuity, and so on. To what end? One solution would be to accept that the Sixties, however one dates them, are really a phase in the history of Cold War America, part of a period that begins approximately 1945–1947, and runs to 1989–1991. But if one does not want to write a general history, with all its difficulties of compression and generalization, the alternative is to focus on a particular dynamic of the period, and that is what I have attempted to do here.

My goal in this book is to offer a new synthesis of older and recent scholarship on all of the movements of the New Left, stretching back to the post-World

War II years, and forward into the 1970s. This brings to the fore my second concern with “Sixties” books—that they require a temporal shortening and highlighting of those events, movements, and personalities that fit neatly into the purely abstract border of 1960 at one end, and 1970 at the other. Again and again, this decadal (to coin a word) mystification has contributed to the elevation of a particular wing of the New Left, its white student vanguard, while pushing other, larger movements into the background. Since I have made this argument many times elsewhere, I will not belabor it, but it is vital to acknowledge that the New Left began earlier and lasted longer than a focus on the Kennedy and Johnson years will permit.

Any book of this sort can offer only summary accounts of major events and a compressed analysis at the level of national politics, leaving out enormous local variations. I have also chosen to examine each movement in terms of its own inner development, which at best reproduces the enormously diverse and plural character of the New Left, but also downplays how movements overlapped with each other and the creative tensions between them. However, I think chronological approaches to the New Left suffer even more, turning into lists of one thing after another, year-by-year. In fact, most activists *did* have a primary allegiance to a particular movement, and, focusing on each movement’s distinctive trajectory is the clearest way to narrate what happened.

The reader will find here an argument for a longer, broader view of what constituted American radicalism at the height of the Cold War. But this argument is necessarily conditional because the scholarship upon which it relies is itself so provisional; entire movements, like gay and lesbian liberation, are vastly under-studied. What will be needed eventually, when much more research into local movements and less-celebrated organizations is at hand, is a complete, probably multivolume, history of radicalism in the Cold War era, from the roller-coaster years after World War II—the Indian summer of the old Communist and progressive left—to the steady-state movement mobilizing of the later 1970s and 1980s, framed by defeat in Vietnam, the rise of the New Right, and the so-called “culture wars.” Until then, this a book for those who did not live through the Sixties, or who find current accounts insufficient. At least in compact form, it’s all here, and that is perhaps something new.

Chapter 1

DEFINING THE NEW LEFT

Is this America? The land of the free and the home of the brave? Where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hook, because our lives be threatened daily?

—Fannie Lou Hamer, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party leader,
Speech to the Credentials Committee,
Democratic National Convention, August 1964

What kind of a system is it that justifies the U.S. or any country seizing the destinies of the Vietnamese people and using them callously for our own purpose? What kind of a system is it that disenfranchises people in the South, leaves millions upon millions of people throughout the country impoverished and excluded from the mainstream and promise of American society, that creates faceless and terrible bureaucracies and makes those the place where people spend their lives and do their work, that consistently puts material values before human values—and still persists in calling itself free and still persists in finding itself fit to police the world? . . . We must name that system. We must name it, describe it, analyze it, understand it, and change it.

—Paul Potter, President of Students for a Democratic Society, speech at the
April 1965 rally against the war in Vietnam

We define the best interests of women as the best interests of the poorest, most insulted, most despised, most abused woman on earth. Her lot, her suffering and abuse is the threat that men use against all of us to keep us in line. She is what all women fear being called, fear being treated as and yet what we really all are in the eyes of men. She is Everywoman: ugly, dumb (dumb broad, dumb cunt), bitch, nag, hag, whore, fucking and breeding machine, mother of us all. Until

Everywoman is free, no woman will be free. When her beauty and knowledge is revealed and seen, the new day will be at hand.

—Statement of Purpose, New York Radical Women, 1967

From the 1950s through the 1970s, a series of social movements surged across America, radically changing the relationship between white people and people of color, how the U.S. government conducts foreign policy, and the popular consensus regarding gender and sexuality. Together, these movements redefined the meaning of democracy in America. Indeed, a commitment to a radical form of democracy, and “power to the people,” is what linked them together. They constituted a New Left, a “movement of movements” that was considerably greater than the sum of its parts.

There are many fine studies of the movements that made up the New Left and the politics of the time, as well as of “the Movement” (as it was sometimes called) in specific towns and cities. The full history of the New Left impinges upon everything significant that happened in the United States in these years—the presidencies of Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon; the Cold War and the terrible “hot war” in Vietnam; and the intimacies of family life. This book is an attempt at synthesis and interpretation, focusing on the social movements themselves. It presumes that, however constrained by circumstance, resources, and ideology, people do attempt to make their own history. The history of the New Left is an example of how they succeeded, and how their success marked a radical change in this country’s direction.

WHAT THE NEW LEFT ACHIEVED: A DEMOCRACY—IF WE CAN KEEP IT

Looking back at the legal, social, cultural, and electoral transformations that took place in barely twenty years, the New Left’s achievements seem quite extraordinary—if one keeps in mind the America that existed before.

In states ranging from Maryland to Texas, a way of life based on white supremacy (the legal, economic, and physical subjugation of African Americans) was broken up by nonviolent mass protest in the decade after 1955. At the same time, black activists and their white allies in the North and West organized systematic challenges to pervasive *de facto* discrimination. Facing enormous pressure, in 1964 and 1965 Congress enacted first a Civil Rights Act making illegal any kind of racial, ethnic, religious, or gender-based discrimination in employment and all public accommodations, and then a Voting Rights Act striking at disfranchisement by race in all fifty states. By the

late 1960s, blacks were voting in large numbers in the South, the walls of official segregation mandating separate-and-unequal schools were crumbling, and in the North black people had begun taking over city governments. Inspired by the black freedom movement, other movements for racial equality spread across America in the late 1960s, demanding political power and dignity for Mexican Americans (Chicanos), Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. Elected office ceased to be an exclusively white prerogative. Thousands of blacks, Latinos, and Asians entered politics. Because of new opportunities and government programs to combat discrimination in education and employment, millions of people of color achieved middle-class security. And the open racism that had always been part of American life was forced underground, though it hardly disappeared. For the first time in its history, the United States officially became color-blind.

An equally momentous change took place in how Americans perceived the actions of their government around the world. For generations, a small elite of upper-class white men controlled U.S. foreign and military policy—how the most powerful nation in history used its enormous power. After World War II, there was overwhelming public support for a military strategy to contain communism and other revolutionary upsurges anywhere on the globe. The only significant dissent came from hardline conservatives who felt the United States should risk all-out war to destroy communism in the Soviet Union and China.

In the late 1950s, the danger of a nuclear holocaust spurred a new peace movement demanding restrictions on nuclear weapons. Other Americans reacted positively to the revolution against a U.S.-backed dictatorship in Cuba, demanding “fair play” for the new government of Fidel Castro. Meanwhile, presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy quietly intervened in Vietnam’s civil war between nationalist Communists and right-wing, pro-U.S. forces. In 1965, to prevent a Communist victory, President Lyndon Johnson sent a massive army to Vietnam. To Johnson’s surprise, this full-scale ground war provoked a nationwide antiwar movement, which tore apart the Democratic Party and forced him from office. With its armed forces locked in a stalemate and demoralized, the United States was compelled to withdraw from Vietnam by 1973. The antiwar movement, which spread into Congress, the churches, and other important institutions, had demonstrated the impact of grassroots citizen protest on foreign policy. Ever since, what President Richard Nixon denounced as the “Vietnam syndrome” has acted as a potent brake on American interventionism.

The final challenge to established authority was twofold. Women challenged patriarchy—the right of all men to rule over women, and some men to rule over other men. Gay men and lesbians challenged the entire apparatus of

normative heterosexuality that undergirded patriarchy. Earlier in the century, a powerful feminist movement had thrived, but by the 1950s feminism was mocked. It survived underground, in women's professional groups and trade unions. By the early 1960s, however, women were questioning their exclusion from "men's" jobs, higher education, and politics, and initiated a civil rights movement of their own. At the same time, young women active in the black freedom and student movements analyzed their confinement to supporting roles. Inspired by the call for Black Power, in the later 1960s they started a Women's Liberation movement through local groups emphasizing "consciousness raising." By the 1970s, the new feminist movement had grown enormously into multiple, separate feminisms of white, black, and Latina women. Within a few years, legal codes were amended to end discrimination and enforce reproductive freedom, as embodied in the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion.

Meanwhile, a related movement demanding dignity and legal protections for gay men and lesbians gathered force, bursting onto the national scene after rioting against police harassment broke out at New York's Stonewall Inn in June 1969. Gay Liberation took off nationwide, and then rapidly turned toward challenging discrimination and building political influence in the 1970s. From a stigmatized, invisible minority, gay people suddenly emerged and "came out" into the streets.

Taken together, these movements represent the essence of those years we call, somewhat inaccurately, "the 1960s." And because each sought to overturn existing structures of racial, gender, and economic privilege in favor of a radical vision of equality and democracy, they are defined as movements of the left. Collectively, they called themselves the New Left to underline their separation from the Old Left of the century's first half, based in the labor movement and focused on the struggle of workers against capitalists. And collectively, they built a new democratic order, based on the legally enforceable civil equality of all people, which has survived and extended itself since the sixties—even as the New Right born during those same years mounted its own massive "movement of movements" that surged to power in the 1980s and 1990s.¹

WHY A NEW LEFT, AND WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

It is important to specify clearly at the outset what this book means by the term New Left (the original usage was by former British Communists in the late 1950s, who were seeking an alternative to the model of a hierarchical

¹ See my essay, "Postmodern America: A New Democratic Order in a Second Gilded Age," in Gosse and Moser, eds., *The World the Sixties Made*.

political party). In the United States, the term was used in an inclusive manner for most of the 1960s to encompass the black, student, antiwar, and other movements. Later, when historians began writing about the period in the 1980s and 1990s, many defined the New Left as just one of the movements of that time, limiting its scope to young whites in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In the view of these scholars, the white-student New Left coexisted alongside all the other radical causes. However, it is highly problematic to make age, whiteness, and student status the defining characteristics of the New Left; however unintended, the consequence is to put those white youth at the center of the narrative, with other movements at the margins. Certainly, young people of all races played a central role in activism, and predominated in movements like Black Power and Women's Liberation. Often they served as the shock troops of the larger New Left, as in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer and the Berkeley Free Speech movement that same year. Gripping, televised images allowed the news media to cast radicalism as a generational battle, a perception shared by many on all sides. But too many key activists from the 1950s through the 1970s were over thirty, or even fifty, to permit us to equate the New Left solely with a "youth revolt." The typical local leader of the antiwar or Civil Rights movements was a middle-aged woman or a Protestant minister, not a college student.

While recognizing that the term "New Left" was always ambiguous, this book returns to the original and more inclusive definition as a "movement of movements" encompassing all of the struggles for fundamental change from the early 1950s roughly to 1975.² This broader definition allows us to focus upon the connections between different forms of activism—for instance, how civil rights organizing in the South radicalized some whites, who then went on to lead the antiwar and women's movements. All of these movements overlapped, and each saw itself as part of a challenge to the established order. Therefore, it seems valid to assign them equal shares in what the New Left did and did not accomplish.

The next task is to trace the New Left's origins. First and foremost, it was a confrontation with the existing political, social, and cultural consensus in American life during the 1950s. Politically, it questioned the premises of what scholars call *Cold War liberalism*, the prevailing ideology linking a bipartisan majority of Democrats and moderate Republicans in a commitment to New Deal-style big government at home and aggressive anticommunism abroad.

² For a fuller discussion of how the term New Left came into usage in the United States, and how until the late 1960s it was used broadly to encompass all of the radical movements of the time, see Van Gosse, "A Movement of Movements: The Definition and Periodization of the New Left," in Roy Rosenzweig and Jean-Christophe Agnew, eds., *A Companion to Post-1945 America* (London: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 277–302.

Socially, it confronted the deep, enduring inequalities built into America's history—the second-class status of African Americans and other people of color; the economic marginality and powerlessness of women; the hatred and contempt directed at homosexual men and women; the ostracization and selective repression employed against political dissenters; and the invisibility of the poor. Finally, the New Left was also a cultural revolt, a decentralized, flamboyant upsurge against the new, affluent suburban way of life in postwar America. Whether as Beatnik folksingers, civil rights protesters, or “homophile” activists for gay rights, New Leftists refused to play by the rules, and that refusal became overtly political. Chapter 2 describes the Cold War politics and middle-class conservatism of the 1950s that, in combination with the social changes resulting from World War II, stimulated the New Left's many movements.

The assertion of a “new” left presumes that there was an “old” left preceding it. Yet many writers have discussed the so-called Old Left only to emphasize how the “newness” of the New Left discarded everything that came before. This perspective ignores the deep continuity between the movements of the New Left and the diverse Marxist, radical, and pacifist organizations that managed to survive during the Cold War, despite considerable repression. While the New Left's focus on radical democracy and its diffuse, decentralized character were genuinely new it had deep roots in the fragmented movements of the apparently outdated Old Left. As we shall see in chapter 3, these organizations influenced the development of the New Left throughout its history.

RADICAL REFORM, CULTURAL REVOLUTION, AND THE MANY COUNTERCULTURES

Two final points need to be made about this book's focus on the New Left as a constellation of overlapping but distinct movements. First, the history of the New Left cannot be neatly confined to the ten years between 1960 and 1970; I see its history as broken into two distinct phases, each roughly a decade long. This book follows that periodization, covering first 1955 to 1965, when radical dissent slowly re-emerged as a current in American life, and then 1965 to 1975, when a militant, vastly larger New Left demolished the old system of Cold War liberalism. Some historians refer to the waves of radical change spread out over parts of three decades as the “long 1960s,” a useful way of defining the period.

Second, amid the extraordinary diversity of New Left movements, there is one fundamental distinction to keep in mind. Certain of these movements functioned with explicit and immediate policy goals, which may have been

very radical, but could be met by specific governmental actions. To the extent those goals were met, the movements ceased to exist, or at best transformed themselves into something new. One example of this kind of movement seeking *radical reform* was the Civil Rights movement, which demanded federal action (binding legislation or judicial rulings backed up executive force where necessary) to abolish discrimination and segregation and suppress the various mechanisms used to keep black people from voting. Another example is the anti-Vietnam War movement, which for eight years reiterated its call for “Out Now!,” the withdrawal of all U.S. military forces from Southeast Asia. Eventually these movements met their goals and then rapidly dissipated, although significant segments of those movements extended their dissenting activism into new areas. In both of these cases, the movement’s history is defined by the trajectories of different national organizations, coalitions and campaigns seeking to force a confrontation with governmental power, so as to produce major policy changes.

Quite different were those movements aiming at longer-term and more diffuse *cultural revolutions* that would change the actual character of American society by abolishing an entire structure of oppression. These movements’ goals could not be met by any specific government measures; typical examples were Black Power and Women’s Liberation, which profoundly altered the consciousness of millions of Americans and instigated massive social changes, without ever defining themselves through the achievement of specific reforms, or coming together in structured national coalitions or campaigns. Highly localized, focused often on charismatic personalities (writers and orators rather than organizers), constantly expanding into new areas of life, it is much harder to say when these movements ended. However, their achievements are clear.

Finally, there is a major part of the “long 1960s” which this book only barely touches: the ongoing liberalization of American culture and society. As old standards of propriety and hierarchy were relaxed, a vastly greater array of intellectual, artistic, spiritual, and pleasurable experiences and pursuits became available, from religion to music to organic food to recreational drugs. Often, this was the environment in which radicals operated, and the countercultural search for new experiences brought many people into contact with these various movements. The mass media marketed a crude image of radicalism as synonymous with “hippies,” the stereotype of alienated white youth. In fact, there were many countercultures overlapping with the many radical movements, and when one looks at Women’s and Gay Liberation, or Black, Brown, Red, and Yellow Power, it is hard to say where politics ends and culture begins. Whether in a new, open understanding of sexuality, the extraordinary explosion of creativity in popular music, or the development of

a distinctive Hollywood Left, culture was a vital aspect of the long wave of radicalization from the 1950s on. In this book's concluding chapter, I will discuss how the counterculture connected to the New Left at various points, and how during the 1970s—just as the movements of the left became part of a new, more democratic political order—the various countercultures merged into the mainstream of American society to create something quite new.

Chapter 2

AMERICA IN THE 1950s: “THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS”

At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one. One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.

—President Harry S Truman, Speech to Joint Session of Congress,
March 1947

[T]he State Department, which is one of the most important government departments, is thoroughly infested with Communists. I have in my hand fifty-seven cases of individuals who would appear to be either card-carrying members or certainly loyal to the Communist Party, but who nevertheless are still helping to shape our foreign policy.

—Senator Joseph McCarthy, Speech in Wheeling, West Virginia,
February 9, 1950

These have been the years of conformity and depression. A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of

nerve. The only courage, with rare exceptions, that we have been witness to, has been the courage of isolated people.

—Norman Mailer, “*The White Negro*,” 1957

Two contrasting narratives sum up the paradox of the 1950s: on the one hand, marvelous consumer abundance and the realization of the “American Dream” for millions of families; on the other, political anxiety and enforced unity, all under the shadow of the Cold War. Two images are often used to represent this incongruity, that of new suburban lawns all over America being dug up to build bomb shelters, and of happy, well-fed children learning to “duck and cover” in their classrooms as a futile protection against Soviet nuclear attack.

To understand the radical social movements that made up the New Left, we have to first understand the 1950s, when America seemed triumphant and united. Much of the New Left’s passionate rebelliousness was a reaction to the authoritarian style of 1950s politics and culture. Ultimately, however, the New Left’s origins can be traced to the sweeping social changes brought about by the wartime mobilization of 1941–1945, which penetrated into every level and crevice of American society with profoundly disruptive effects.

COLD WAR LIBERALISM AND THE POLITICS OF PROSPERITY AND CONSENSUS

There are a few dominant facts about life in the United States during the 1950s that are so familiar, they have become clichés. Even now, most Americans associate those years with great material affluence, social caution and political consensus, and aggressive anticommunism at home and abroad.

In this case, most historians are in agreement with popular opinion, because the clichés are rooted in reality. America *was* the most prosperous nation in the world, with no significant economic competitors. The white majority reached a level of comfort and disposable income never seen before in any country. From 1946 to 1964, the United States underwent the most sustained period of economic growth in world history, effectively tripling the average income of Americans. Any white male high-school graduate could reasonably expect to support a family with his paycheck, to own a home, a car, and plenty of other goods, and to send his children to college. Given that only a few years before, Americans had faced a crippling depression in which more than a quarter of adults were unemployed, this middle-class lifestyle seemed miraculous. Up until World War II, the middle class had been a distinct minority in America. Now, thanks to unprecedented government subsidies, millions of veterans took advantage of the G.I. Bill to go to college.

The quadrupling of university enrollments in a single generation was paralleled by a boom in home construction and home ownership, mainly in vast new suburbs outside of the major cities, again subsidized by government loan guarantees.

Using government funds and policies to intervene in the economy and raise the living standards of ordinary people is the essence of what conservatives denounce as "big government liberalism," but both Republicans and Democrats knew these programs were overwhelmingly popular with voters. Only a minority of conservatives in both parties continued to rail against Social Security and government aid to education as "creeping socialism." In terms of domestic policy, therefore, this is considered a liberal era, even if this version of liberalism had conservative political consequences: the rapid consolidation of a suburban, middle-class, white electorate as the largest bloc of voters. There was no deliberate conspiracy to tame the militant working class of the Thirties and the war years, but that was the practical effect. In the words of William Levitt, the pioneer builder of new suburban housing developments, "No man who owns his own home can be a Communist."

Levitt's comment points towards the other overriding fact of postwar American society—the anticommunist imperative that ran straight through all domestic and foreign policy. During the 1930s and early 1940s, when the modern era of tax-and-spend liberal government began with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, liberals viewed Communists and other radicals as part of the solution rather than a problem. Anticommunism remained a powerful element in U.S. political life, given the deep enmity of traditional conservatives like FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and the southern wing of the Democratic Party, but the Great Depression created an opening for radical innovations. Leftists were welcome under the big tent of New Deal liberalism as long as they were loyal to Roosevelt, though their position was always vulnerable. Internationally, Communists in the Soviet Union and elsewhere were not seen as major threats to the United States. Not only were the Soviets relatively weak; before World War II, America had no defined international enemies, and spent little time or money on foreign affairs or military might. As late as 1939, the U.S. Army was seventeenth in the world in size.

World War II and its aftermath changed all that, leading to fundamental changes in American liberalism. Most liberals moved to the right, in terms of their willingness to contemplate structural reforms to America's political economy, and in their attitude towards activists further to their left. During the war years, liberals had seen leftists and Communists as acceptable allies for the moment in the fight against Nazi Germany. Once the Cold War heated up in 1946, with the Soviet Army occupying Eastern Europe, powerful Communist parties agitating across Western Europe, and revolutionary

movements surging across Africa and Asia, Communists became the main enemy to be “contained” abroad and at home. This shift towards a resolute anticommunism was undergirded by overwhelming evidence of Soviet repression from the 1930s on. Liberals remained “liberal” in their willingness to use federal spending and tax policies to spread prosperity and correct social ills. To this traditional form of liberalism, however, they added a new commitment to a large, permanent military establishment and huge defense budgets to stimulate the economy. By the late 1950s, this militarization of the American economy and government policy led President Dwight Eisenhower to warn against the power of a “military-industrial complex” that could warp decision-making and undermine democracy. His warnings were ignored.

The dominant style of cautious, anticommunist politics was eventually dubbed *Cold War liberalism*. It was the official policy of the Democrats, the majority party from the 1930s to the 1970s. Many Republicans like Eisenhower were also Cold War liberals, favoring aggressive government spending on both the military and expensive social programs, combined with the containment of communism. Both parties still had conservative wings that opposed an activist Federal government (southern Democrats who feared civil rights legislation, Midwestern Republicans who had never accepted the New Deal), but the glue of anticommunism and prosperity cemented a powerful bipartisan consensus.

Agreement on both domestic and foreign policies meant there was little real debate about either. Eisenhower himself so perfectly represented the consensus that he could have had the nomination of either party in 1952. Throughout the 1950s, congressional Democrats like Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson worked closely with Republicans like Eisenhower. In 1960 the platforms of Republican Richard Nixon and Democrat John F. Kennedy were remarkably similar in their moderation, so much so that Kennedy invented national security crises, such as a so-called “missile gap” with the Soviets, to outflank Nixon on the right. The era’s leading historians, such as Richard Hofstadter and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., maintained that the absence of political conflict was nothing new, since American politics since the Revolution had been dominated by a powerful consensus that was broken only briefly by the Civil War. Schlesinger did double-duty as a leader in the main organization of anticommunist liberals, the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). Starting in 1949, he promoted the necessity of a pragmatic “vital center” to fight a two-front war against extremes on either right or left; he later became a prominent aide to President Kennedy. No wonder that in one of the period’s most influential books, Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell argued that there had been an “end of ideology,” with intellectuals giving up their historic role as critics of power.

MCCARTHYISM AND THE RED SCARE

Given the bipartisan consensus regarding most policy issues, it is surprising how much political bitterness persisted between Republicans and Democrats. The cause of this infighting was not the present, let alone the future, but settling scores from the recent past. In the name of ferreting out hidden reds plus the "pinkos" who had sheltered them, the minority Republicans smeared the Democrats, trying to discredit the New Deal and the towering figure of FDR. Their evidence derived from two sources: first, the fragmentary but accurate evidence of Soviet espionage, involving some high-level New Dealers; second, the fact that many liberal Democrats had allied themselves with radicals and Communists during the Depression and war years. This was the phenomenon dubbed McCarthyism, for the demagogic Wisconsin Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy, who attacked some of the most prominent men in America—including architects of the Cold War like secretaries of state George Marshall and Dean Acheson—with charges of "softness" and even treason. McCarthy's baiting of elites was especially popular with conservative Irish and German Americans, who liked his venomously sarcastic attacks on the Ivy Leaguers controlling foreign policy. In many states, McCarthyism kept the Republicans viable as an opposition party, even though they enrolled less than a quarter of registered voters.

McCarthy's version of McCarthyism lasted only from 1950 to 1954. In 1952, he was riding high, giving the keynote speech at the Republican National Convention in which he attacked the Democrats for "twenty years of treason." But by 1954, Republican Party leaders like Eisenhower had finally had enough of McCarthy. The Senate censured him after he attacked army generals for supposed softness on communism, and by 1957 he was dead of alcoholism. By that time, however, his rampaging investigations and wild charges had left a deep imprint on American politics, encouraging self-censorship and extreme wariness among liberals. McCarthy and his allies, including senator and later vice president Richard Nixon, had repeatedly demonstrated they could wreck any career, from an obscure government office, union local, or university campus all the way up to the Senate. The result was that a whole generation of Democrats, from Harry Truman to Lyndon Johnson, felt they had to prove themselves as tough anticommunists by putting down subversion around the world and here at home. Liberal leaders like Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey authored bills to set up concentration camps for leftists. In colleges, schools, workplaces, churches, and unions across the country, liberals campaigned to get rid of people who refused to answer questions in front of congressional committees or had any associations with the Communist Party USA (the CPUSA or CP).

McCarthy burst into prominence in 1950 with his accusations of secret Communists infesting the State Department, but McCarthyism's importance can easily obscure that the Cold War Red Scare had already begun years before. Deliberate repression on the basis of people's beliefs and associations was initiated not by vengeful Republicans, but by liberal leaders themselves, who genuinely believed in the Communist threat and wanted to clean house at home. More important though less dramatic than McCarthy's televised witch hunts was Truman's 1947 executive order setting up official loyalty boards to check on the political associations of all federal employees, which was followed by the creation of similar bodies at the state level. Millions of civil servants were investigated and thousands lost their jobs, without any guarantees of due process. Government loyalty investigations were followed by systematic purges of leftists in industry after industry, from the big steel and automobile plants and shipyards to Hollywood film studios, and finally to most public school systems and colleges. In 1947, Congress passed over Truman's veto the Taft-Hartley Act, which required every trade union official in the country to sign an affidavit swearing he or she was not a member or supporter of the Communist Party, if his or her union wanted recognition by the National Labor Relations Board.

The final blow to whatever power the Communists had in America came in 1949, when eleven leftwing trade unions with almost one million members were expelled from the CIO (the Congress of Industrial Organizations), the labor federation that radicals had helped establish in the Thirties. This was the decisive defeat of the Old Left, coupled with the disastrous showing of former Vice President Henry Wallace's Progressive Party in the presidential campaign of 1948. Supported by the CP and the most devoted New Dealers, Wallace had advocated seeking peace with the Soviets, an immediate end to segregation, and a wide range of liberal programs; he got 2 percent of the vote. In 1949, eleven top Communist Party leaders were convicted under the Smith Act, which made it a felony to "conspire to advocate the overthrow" of the government. Over the next five years, almost two hundred more local and state Communist leaders were prosecuted. In these trials, the main government evidence was leaflets and newspaper articles advocating the eventual abolition of capitalism. In tandem with the 1950 McCarran Act establishing a Subversive Activities Control Board to monitor and sanction "Communist-controlled" and "Communist-front" organizations, the Smith Act prosecutions established clear limits on free speech. Communism was not formally outlawed, but its supporters were tightly quarantined, and any association with "subversive activities" carried obvious risks.

The relevance of the Red Scare to the New Left is not just that it broke up the broad radical movement of the 1930s, the "Popular Front" that once had