The devil we knew: Americans and the Cold War, H. W. Brands, Oxford University Press, 1993, 0195074998, 9780195074994, 243 pages. In the late 1950s, Washington was driven by its fear of communist subversion: it saw the hand of Kremlin behind developments at home and across the globe. The FBI was obsessed with the threat posed by American communist party--yet party membership had sunk so low, writes H.W. Brands, that it could have fit "inside a high-school gymnasium," and it was so heavily infiltrated that J. Edgar Hoover actually contemplated using his informers as a voting bloc to take over the party. Abroad, the preoccupation with communism drove the White House to help overthrow democratically elected governments in Guatemala and Iran, and replace them with dictatorships. But by then the Cold War had long since blinded Americans to the ironies of their battle against communism. In The Devil We Knew, Brands provides a witty, perceptive history of the American experience of the Cold War, from Truman's creation of the CIA to Ronald Reagan's creation of SDI. Brands has written a number of highly regarded works on America in the twentieth century; here he puts his experience to work in a volume of impeccable scholarship and exceptional verve. He turns a critical eye to the strategic conceptions (and misconceptions) that led a once-isolationist nation to pursue the war against communism to the most remote places on Earth. By the time Eisenhower left office, the United States was fighting communism by backing dictators from Iran to South Vietnam, from Latin America to the Middle East--while engaging in covert operations the world over. Brands offers no apologies for communist behavior, but he deftly illustrates the strained thinking that led Washington to commit gravely disproportionate resources (including tens of thousands of lives in Korea and Vietnam) to questionable causes. He keenly analyzes the changing policies of each administration, from Nixon's juggling (SALT talks with Moscow, new relations with Communist China, and bombing North Vietnam) to Carter's confusion to Reagan's laser-rattling. Equally important is his incisive, often amusing look at how the anti-Soviet struggle was exploited by politicians, industrialists, and government agencies. He weaves in deft sketches of figures like Barry Goldwater and Henry Jackson (who won a Senate seat with the promise, "Many plants will be converting from peace time to all-out defense production"). We see John F. Kennedy deliver an eloquent speech in 1957 defending the rising forces of nationalism in Algeria and Vietnam; we also see him in the White House a few years later, ordering a massive increase in America's troop commitment to Saigon. The book ranges through the economics and psychology of the Cold War, demonstrating how the confrontation created its own constituencies in private industry and public life. In the end, Americans claimed victory in the Cold War, but Brands's account gives us reason to tone down the celebrations. "Most perversely," he writes, "the call to arms against communism caused American leaders to subvert the principles that constituted their country's best argument against communism." This far-reaching history makes clear that the Cold War was simultaneously far more, and far less, than we ever imagined at the time..

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Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts Charting the Future of Teaching the Past, Samuel S. Wineburg, 2001, Education, 255 pages. Whether he is comparing how students and historians interpret documentary evidence or analyzing children's drawings, Wineburg's essays offer rough maps of how ordinary people .


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A Time for Peace:The Legacy of the Vietnam War , Robert D. Schulzinger, Jul 19, 2006, History, 288 pages. The Vietnam War left wounds that have taken three decades to heal--indeed some scars remain even today. In A Time for Peace, prominent American historian Robert D. Schulzinger .

The Strange Death of American Liberalism , H. W. Brands, Sep 1, 2003, History, 200 pages. In this provocative book, H. W. Brands confronts the vital question of why an ever-increasing number of Americans do not trust the federal government to improve their lives and .
In the late 1950s, Washington was driven by its fear of communist subversion: it saw the hand of Kremlin behind developments at home and across the globe. The FBI was obsessed with the threat posed by American communist party—yet party membership had sunk so low, writes H.W. Brands, that it could have fit "inside a high-school gymnasium," and it was so heavily infiltrated that J. Edgar Hoover actually contemplated using his informers as a voting bloc to take over the party. Abroad, the preoccupation with communism drove the White House to help overthrow democratically elected governments in Guatemala and Iran, and replace them with dictatorships. But by then the Cold War had long since blinded Americans to the ironies of their battle against communism.

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In this thought-provoking, controversial study, Brands charges that the responsibility for fomenting the Cold War, and especially for its prolongation, rests heavily on the United States. The Cold War, he argues, was fueled by the endless search for foreign enemies by which Americans need to affirm their identity and basic goodness. The American desire to save the world, according to Brands, determined the fervor with which the Cold War was waged. He highlights the economic aspect, which, he notes, can be seen in retrospect as a massive effort to open foreign markets to U.S. products, and analyzes the Cold War as a long-running "issue" in American politics. With sly wit, Brands describes how Mikhail Gorbachev deprived this country of "an enemy that could hardly have been improved upon" and discusses the current awkward, enemy-less mode in which the U.S. finds itself as the government strives to develop a new national security agenda and politicians work out new campaign rhetoric to replace obsolete anticommunism. Brands is an assistant professor of history at Texas A & M and the author of Inside the Cold War.

For most Americans, the abrupt end of the Cold War created a feeling of relief mixed with anxiety for the future. By the late 1980s, the U.S.-Soviet relationship had settled into an almost comfortable middle age. We knew them, and they knew us. Both Pessen and Brands devote much of their works to an overview of how the Cold War developed. Pessen, one of our foremost Jacksonian scholars, is harshly critical of American foreign policy during the past 40 years. He argues that the United States consistently misrepresented Soviet intentions, with serious damage to American domestic freedoms.
Brands (Inside the Cold War: Loy Henderson and the Rise of the American Empire, 1918-1961, LJ 4/15/91) is more even-handed in his criticism, believing that American policy-makers were influenced by psychological, strategic, economic, and political factors that came into play at different times throughout the Cold War era. Both books should be considered valuable extended interpretive essays that, separately or together, would be good choices for any library.

On the final page of this brief, but provocative, rumination about the United States' Cold War experience, author H.W. Brands, professor of history at Texas A & M University, presents this paradox: In 1945, nearly all Americans and probably a majority of interested foreigners had looked on the United States as a beacon shining the way to a better future for humanity, one in which ideals mattered more than tanks. During the next forty years, American leaders succeeded in convincing many Americans and all but a few foreigners that the United States could be counted on to act pretty much as great powers always have. To the extent that Brands is correct, the question, of course, is: Why? This is not merely an intellectual exercise. During the Cold War, Brands reminds us: "More than 100,000 Americans died fighting wars that had almost nothing to do with genuine American security." Practically all of them died in the barren hills of Korea and the steaming jungles of Vietnam. The question, again, is: Why?

Brands posits the "dual character of the Cold War - being both a geopolitical and an ideological contest" and explains: "The ideological gulf between the United States and the Soviet Union gave the geopolitical rivalry unprecedented urgency." In Brands's interpretation, the origins of the Cold War were partly the dynamics of conventional international relations: The United States and the Soviet Union emerged from the Second World War as the only world powers, so, practically by definition, they had to be rivals. But, as Brands, observes, geopolitical competition was intensified by extreme ideological differences. Read more ›

The book could have been a four star for me if it weren't for the author's sarcasm. I couldn't figure out why it bothered me so much until I realized it was because it showed arrogance—an "I don't have to convince you because my correctness is so obvious" attitude. It was an otherwise interesting look at how Americans came to see the world in black and white (or communist or non-communist).

Not something I'd read of my own choosing, but it was interesting and informative. Many of the events mentioned in passing by the author I wish he would have explained at least the basics of, like the Iran-contra affair. I simply had no knowledge of them whatsoever, besides maybe hearing the name once or twice.

Henry William Brands was born in Portland, Oregon, where he lived until he went to California for college. He attended Stanford University and studied history and mathematics. After graduating he became a traveling salesman, with a territory that spanned the West from the Pacific to Colorado. His wanderlust diminished after several trips across the Great Basin, and he turned to sales of a different... more Henry William Brands was born in Portland, Oregon, where he lived until he went to California for college. He attended Stanford University and studied history and mathematics. After graduating he became a traveling salesman, with a territory that spanned the West from the Pacific to Colorado. His wanderlust diminished after several trips across the Great Basin, and he turned to sales of a different sort, namely teaching. For nine years he taught mathematics and history in high school and community college. Meanwhile he resumed his formal education, earning graduate degrees in mathematics and history, concluding with a doctorate in history from the University of Texas at Austin. He worked as an oral historian at the University of Texas Law School for a year, then became a visiting professor of history at Vanderbilt University. In 1987 he joined the history faculty at Texas A&M University, where he taught for seventeen years. In 2005 he returned to the University of Texas, where he is the Dickson Allen Anderson Centennial Professor of History and Professor of Government. ~ He has written twenty-two books, coauthored or edited five others, and published dozens of articles and scores of reviews. His books include Traitor to His Class, The Money Men, Andrew Jackson, The Age of Gold, The First American, TR, The Strange Death of American Liberalism, What America Owes the World, and The Devil We Knew. His articles have appeared in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, the International Herald Tribune, the Boston Globe, the Atlantic Monthly, the Smithsonian, the National Interest, the
American Historical Review, the Journal of American History, the Political Science Quarterly, American History, and many other newspapers, magazines and journals. His writings have received critical and popular acclaim. The First American was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the Los Angeles Times Prize, as well as a New York Times bestseller. The Age of Gold was a Washington Post Best Book of 2002 and a San Francisco Chronicle bestseller. Andrew Jackson was a Chicago Tribune Best Book of 2005 and a Washington Post bestseller. What America Owes the World was a finalist for the Lionel Gelber Prize in international affairs. The Wages of Globalism was a Choice Outstanding Academic Book winner. Lone Star Nation won the Deolece Parmelee Award. He is a member of various honorary societies, including the Society of American Historians and the Philosophical Society of Texas. He is a regular guest on national radio and television programs, and is frequently interviewed by the American and foreign press. His writings have been published in several countries and translated into German, French, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean.

Historian H. W. Brands of Texas A&M University writes that the fundamental question addressed in this book is: Why did the United States act as it did in the Cold War? His answer is, not surprisingly, for a variety of reasons. By no means does he go into them all, or into any of them in much depth. As he rightly states, the book is an essay rather than a history. No theme ties the essays together, other than to concentrate on some of the mistakes the United States made and the price the country paid for victory in the Cold War, a victory Brands sees as ambivalent at best. This early entry in the race to assess the Cold War offers opinions on a variety of matters, some insightful, some witty, too many cliché-ridden. The hero is Mikhail Gorbachev. In one of his most effective images, Brand writes: In a stunningly short period, deprived Americans of the only major enemy most of them had ever known, and, like the half of a two-person tug-of-war who unwarily lets go, he threw America's Cold War apparatus abruptly out of balance.

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The Cold War, Texas A&M history professor Brands argues, "was no war at all, but simply the management of national interests in a world of competing powers . . . the sort of thing great powers had done as long as there had been great powers." The Cold War "metaphor", however, "once established and institutionalized . . . developed a life of its own." Both internally and externally, the bipolar worldview's "conceptual simplicity" satisfied a shifting mix of U.S. needs and objectives, while obscuring the real threats and weaknesses of what President Reagan used to call "the Evil Empire." Brands' study deftly probes the interplay of psychological, strategic, economic, and political factors in forming--and then freezing--U.S. policy from the Marshall Plan to "Star Wars," from loyalty oaths to the Gulf War. Having lost the oversimplification that defined the last half-century, all the usual suspects now call for new paradigms: "The Devil We Knew" convincingly demonstrates the cost--to the U.S. and other nations, in lives and dollars, human rights and moral principle--of an unchallenged and unchallengeable paradigm that is "better as a literary device than as a description
A critical history of the American experience of the Cold War, from Truman's creation of the CIA to Reagan's creation of SDI, and on to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In the end, the US claimed victory, but, according to Brands "The call to arms against communism caused American leaders to subvert the principles that constituted their country's best argument against communism."

A sophisticated interpretation of America's involvement in the cold war that appears calculated to draw fire from the left as well as right. In assessing the conflict's origins and costs, Brands (History/Texas A&M) provides a wide-ranging survey of US foreign policy from Yalta through the Berlin Wall's collapse. Following WW II, he argues, perceived political imperatives on the home front induced US leaders to take a balance-of-power approach to global security. Positions soon hardened, with the result that containment doctrine dominated American strategies in Western Europe, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere. In time, Brands recounts, the US/USSR confrontation (which proved a bonanza for the military/industrial complex) acquired a life of its own—a life that conceptual simplicity made acceptable, even soul-satisfying, to the domestic electorates. While stopping short of claiming that the Kremlin posed no threat (nuclear or otherwise) to the national interest, Brands concludes that American antagonism prolonged a deadlock that, he suggests, could have been resolved as early as Stalin's death in 1953, as well as at several subsequent junctures. But as the author makes clear, the superpowers managed to avoid direct face-offs (except in Cuba) in the course of their protracted hostilities. Nor does Brands ignore the irony of reactionary Republicans like Nixon and Reagan doing more for the cause of détente than such liberal Democrats as JFK and LBJ, who felt obliged to take a hard line against Communist aggression. In his mildly contrarian reckoning of the Red menace's socioeconomic and geopolitical implications, moreover, Brands displays an impressive flair for vivid phrasing: "The arena of American political debate during the early 1950s was slick with half-truths and smaller fractions"; "during the autumn of 1989, history hopped a fast train West...." A provocative audit of an adversarial world order whose passing, in retrospect at least, seems to have been long overdue.

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