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## **‘Your Vigilance is the Price of Your Freedom! Volunteer for Civil Defense Now!’: Shaping U.S. Public Opinion Using Television as a Propaganda Tool**

*By Manivone Sayasone*

**T**he conclusive year of World War II showcased a terrifying reality that the people of the United States were forced to confront. Once they entered the Cold War in 1947, Americans faced an era where oceanic barriers could no longer prevent “potential aggressors” from devastating the United States with “long-range bombers, aircraft carriers, and atomic weapons.”<sup>1</sup> The majority of Americans perceived the Soviet Union as a major aggressor because the incompatibilities of their political and economic ideologies could have led the Soviet Union to attack the United States with nuclear weapons. Since the Soviet Union also felt the need to defend against the United States’ nuclear weapons, the two global powers compete to establish a national security state by creating alliances through foreign intervention and by increasing the quantity and quality of their weapons. The ability to establish a national security state was dependent on the utilization of a nation’s domestic resources including raw materials and the labor of its “citizen soldiers in farms and factories.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the U.S. government augmented its efforts to generate public support for the development of a national security state by using various forms of propaganda. One of the effective forms of propaganda the government used to shape public opinion about the Cold War in the 1950s was televised, informational films with themes that emphasized the United States’ vulnerability to communist threats, the importance of civic duty, and the preconceived undertones of capitalist and communist societies.

### **National Security Ideologies of the Truman Administration**

Many of the informational propaganda films released during the early years of the Cold War featured themes based on ideologies that are found in political documents including George Kennan’s 1946 long telegram, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct;” Clark Clifford’s and George Elsey’s 1946 Clifford-Elsey Report, and President Harry Truman’s 1947 speech, the “Truman Doctrine.”<sup>3</sup> As modern viewers would notice in U.S. televised propaganda, each document had an ideology that depicted the Soviet Union and its communist regime as terrifying and tremendous threats that must be contained by the United States before they “encroach upon the interest of a peaceful and stable world.”<sup>4</sup> If the U.S. failed to contain communism globally, Harry Truman stressed in the Truman Doctrine that the U.S. risks endangering the “welfare of [its] own nation” as well.<sup>5</sup> Many propaganda films also depicted the Soviet Union and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945-1954* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945-1954* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10-12.

<sup>4</sup> George Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, (New York, Council on Foreign Relations, Inc.: July 1947), n.p.

<sup>5</sup> Harry Truman, “Address Before Joint Session of Congress (Truman Doctrine Speech)” (Washington, D.C., U.S. Congress: March 12, 1947), n.p.

communism as a great threat to the security of American civilians. To emphasize the strength of their threat, the films often played unsettling background music as a speaker with an authoritative voice of an older Caucasian male introduced viewers to the probability of enemy threats from international and domestic sources including American communists and nuclear attacks.

Another ideology modern viewers would notice in both televised propaganda and the documents is how both items used dualism between the United States and Soviet Union to describe their political and economic structure. In *A Cross of Iron*, Michael Hogan explains, “In the Truman Doctrine, . . . the president had declared that people ‘must choose between alternative ways of life,’ in effect, the American way and the Soviet way, and this declaration had implied that any criticism of American policy amounted to an act of disloyalty.”<sup>6</sup> Explicitly, the patriotism of an American citizen is measured by how he or she viewed the government’s foreign and domestic policies and how well he or she lived by what the government defined as American norms. Any thought or behavior that was considered un-American was immediately labeled as pro-Soviet and pro-communist.<sup>7</sup> People who were accused of possessing pro-Soviet and pro-communist thoughts and behavior were considered to be a threat, determined to destroy the democratic government and capitalist way of life. To emphasize the harm these people could bring to American civilians, propaganda films usually depicted these people to be aggressive and cruel.

Alternatively, the idea that people who demonstrated patriotism helped fulfill domestic duty derived from an ideology that claimed the United States’ “struggle for survival with the Soviet Union” required “military preparedness.”<sup>8</sup> Hogan explains how the Clifford-Elsey Report states that “[the] mere fact of preparedness’ might be enough to deter Soviet aggression.”<sup>9</sup> In addition, the report states how the Soviets only communicated militarily, “[the] language of military power is the only language which [the] disciples of power politics understand.” For this reason, the U.S. government believed that “negotiations were pointless.”<sup>10</sup> The emphasis on military preparedness is very perceptible in propaganda films, which informed viewers about the importance of civic duty. After a nuclear attack, the films stressed how able-bodied civilians should resume their occupations to contribute their labor to the war effort in retaliating against their enemy.

### **The U.S. Government’s Utilization of Television as Propaganda Tools**

Televised informational films became propaganda tools because networks generally sought sponsorship from the U.S. government as television emerged as a new medium during the early years of the Cold War. The Civil Defense Department produced many informational films that were distributed to the American public. The films that broadcasted in television focused on the United States’ subjective views on the Soviet Union and as a result, television was expansively used to generate public support for the development of their national security state.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hogan, *Cross of Iron*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> The Freshy Theme. “The Cold War,” *The History of Media Use for Propaganda Purposes*. n.d. <http://manspropaganda.wordpress.com/the-cold-war/>.

Through the broadcasting of informational films that showed viewers how to protect themselves from communist threats, the government instructed the public to live in a way that supported the government and its Cold War agendas. In other words, the U.S. government controlled how the public should think and behave using propaganda that ironically promoted freedom and democracy. In addition to being sponsored by the government, a good number of informational films reached public view because they were also produced by pro-American and pro-capitalist film studios. The Motion Picture for the Preservation of American Ideals stated that “[m]otion pictures are inescapably one of the world’s greatest forces for influencing public thought and opinion” and should aim to “dedicate [their] work . . . to the presentation of the American scene” including its standards and freedoms as well as its beliefs and ideals.<sup>12</sup> By producing films that reinforced American norms, the film studios demonstrated their patriotism while informing the viewers to show their patriotism as well. Thus, not only did the U.S. government lead the public to support its Cold War policies, it also controlled the media industry and partially what the public viewed in their television sets at home.

### **The United States’ Vulnerability to Communist Threats**

When a television set was switched on during the early 1950’s, American families were treated to informational, propaganda films that dramatized communist threats including American communists and atomic bombs. One example of these propaganda films is titled “He May Be a Communist,” a 1950 Armed Forces Information Film that informed viewers of ways to recognize communists. The film begins with a non-diegetic speaker instructing his viewers with a concerned tone of voice:

In recognizing a communist, physical appearance counts for nothing. If he openly declares himself a communist, we take his word for it. If a person consistently reads and advocates the views expressed in a communist publication, he may be a communist! If a person supports organizations that reflects communist teachings or organizations labeled communists by the department of justice, she may be a communist. If a person defends the activity of communist nations while attacking the domestic and foreign policies of the United States, she may be a communist. If a person does all of these things over a period of time, he *must* be a communist.<sup>13</sup>

The speaker implies that it is safer to assume people who do any or all of the activities the speaker mentioned are either communists or have a probability of being communists than it is to make any further observations of which economic ideology the people in question truly favors. By analyzing the first set of scenes in the film, one can see how the film depicts communists as dangerous people the American public must recognize for the sake of their own security and the United States’. Since the United States frequently associated communism with the Soviet Union, the public saw individual communists as threats determined to divide the U.S. by influencing members of the public with communist ideologies. In addition to labeling communists as a dangerous group, the speaker’s way of labeling a person who “defends the activity of communist

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Honsa, "Dr. Benson's Cold War Prescription: How a Cartoon Series Presaged America's Cold War Lifestyle." *Journal Of Popular Film & Television* 40, no. 4 (December 2012): 204.

<sup>13</sup> Armed Forces Information Film. “He May Be a Communist,” YouTube video, 3:17, posted by “rdekema,” March 32, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWeZ5SKXvj8>.

nations while attacking domestic and foreign policies” as a communist demonstrates another way the U.S. government used propaganda films to shape public opinion. The speaker indicates that a person who voices his or her opinion may risk being a communist. More specifically, the person could be considered a possible threat to the United States. Therefore, most members of the public preferred to keep their opinions private than to risk being labeled a communist and as a result, there were not many people who had the audacity to question or comment on the government’s Cold War policies.

The government also scared the public into thinking and behaving in ways that supported its policies with a 1953 informational propaganda film titled, “Target You.” The film begins with unsettling background music that helps viewers “interpret the mood” of the frightening message the speaker is about to give.<sup>14</sup> The speaker’s authoritative tone is likely used to lend credibility to the information being provided, thus warning his viewers of their vulnerability as a black crosshair centers on the television screen:

You are the target of those who will trample over the liberties of free men. You are in the crosshairs of the bomb site, an enemy centering on you. You are the citizen of the free world. A citizen of the United States of America. . . Our president has told us that even with the most powerful defense, an aggressor in possession of an effective number of atomic bombs could cause hideous damage.<sup>15</sup>

The ominous message and the animated crosshair is meant to arouse fear in the viewers because the viewers are consistently being addressed by the speaker as “you” as they follow the crosshair, an object that often evokes an image of something being shot or even killed. The film attempts to instill fear in its viewers as a way to motivate them to watch for advice on how to reclaim their security from foreign threats. A minute and a half into the film, the speaker begins to provide advice on how to reclaim security from foreign threats by giving instructions on what to do before and during an incoming nuclear attack. After the speaker finishes providing instructions, he expresses how the efficiency of his instructions enables his viewers to help themselves and those who require aid, stating “This is the plan to help you and others who need you. A plan to live, to work, and fight as did your forefathers.”<sup>16</sup> The speaker attempts to empower his viewers by making a reference to early U.S. history to indicate that his viewers can overcome their obstacles as triumphantly as the Americans who fought against British imperialism in America. Precisely, the speaker implies that his viewers can have as much capacity and can show as much patriotism as their forefathers as long as they follow his instructions on how to act before, during, and after a nuclear attack. The speaker then shows his confidence in the viewers at the conclusion of the film: As an optimistic background music plays to express hopefulness, the speaker concludes, “You will be prepared. You will know what to do instantly to help ensure the survival of you, your family, your country.”<sup>17</sup> Since the film authoritatively instructed its viewers to act in a way that demonstrates patriotism, “Target You” is another propaganda film

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<sup>14</sup> Maria Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis. *Film: A Critical Introduction*. (London: Laurence King, 2005). 257.

<sup>15</sup> Philip Ragan Production. “Target You (1950s Nuclear propaganda US Govt. film)” YouTube video, 8:37, posted by “Thom Bone,” Nov 4, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOQswEHV5hE>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

that is part of a “psychological ‘scare campaign.’”<sup>18</sup> Conclusively, “Target You” and “He May Be a Communist” were used by the government to not only manipulate public opinion to eradicate communist influence and fear of attack, but to heed the government’s warning in exchange for national security.

### **The Importance of Civic Duty**

The government also generated public support by televising propaganda films that provided “public information” about emerging victorious in the Cold War.<sup>19</sup> Guy Oakes explains in “The Cold War Ethic: National Security and National Morale” how public information intended to inform its viewers that “victory in the Cold War depended upon the American people” and their ability to “conquer the new and terrible fears created by the possibility of nuclear destruction.”<sup>20</sup> Overcoming fears of nuclear destruction enabled the public to fulfill their civic duty by returning to their occupations after a nuclear attack. Ultimately, the fulfillment of civic duty enabled the public to maintain their democratic and capitalist lifestyles as well as the United States’ political and economic structure.

The importance of civic duty is emphasized in a 1951 informational film titled, “Our Cities Must Fight.” In this film, a newspaper editor and his friend, Fred, discuss reasons why civilians should not desert the cities for fear of an atomic attack. During the men’s discussion, the film shows well-directed dramatizations of events civilians would encounter after an attack. Fred says, “After an attack, our first responsibility will be to keep our heads and get back to our jobs. For each of us have a job to do. And no matter what happens, the people of our city must be fed, clothed, supplied with electricity and heat. The city must be kept alive.”<sup>21</sup> Here, Fred uses an emotional appeal to argue that every American civilian is obligated to perform a task. With his argument, he is motivating viewers to think about the necessities of others because it is the goodness of the American public as a whole who makes the United States the country they glorify. His usage of an additional emotional appeal in his argument aims to keep viewers of 1950s from deserting the cities and to keep them contributing their efforts in maintaining a stable society in the United States. Additionally, Fred reveals the reason civilians to return to their occupations:

The enemy knows that a city deserted by its people, is a city robbed of its power to resist, its power to produce ... Our biggest job will be to continue to putting out equipment and fighting gear our nation depends on. To desert will be to throw away our most feared weapon: America’s power to produce.<sup>22</sup>

Hence, not only will civilians fail to maintain their lifestyle and a stable society in the United States if they desert the cities, they will also fail to retaliate against the enemy and emerge victorious through “military preparedness.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Guy Oakes, “The Cold War Ethic: National Security and National Morale,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Spring 1993, 401.

<sup>19</sup> Oakes, “Cold War Ethic,” 401.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>21</sup> Archer Productions Inc., “Our Cities Must Fight (1951)” 1951. YouTube video, 8:56, posted by “rx,” Sep 4, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2kdpAGDu8s>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Hogan, *Cross of Iron*, 13.

Another 1951 film presented by the Civil Defense Administration, “Survival Under Atomic Attack,” delivers a similar argument made in “Our Cities Must Fight.” The speaker announces the importance of civic duty as an unsettling background music plays:

...mass evacuation is disastrous. An enemy would like nothing better than to have our cities empty and unproductive. If an emergency would come, our factories will be battle stations. Production must go on if we're to win. Our offices and homes will also be posed to duty, not to be deserted.<sup>24</sup>

The speaker indicates that evacuation of the city is a form of surrender to the enemy. To fulfill their civic duty, the speaker states that civilians are obligated to return to their occupations for the United States to win the Cold War. At the end of the film, a message appears as patriotic music plays in the background, revealing that the viewers can also fulfill their civic duty by volunteering for civil defense. The message reads, “If we are prepared, we can come back fighting. Your vigilance is the price of your freedom. Volunteer for civil defense now!”<sup>25</sup> Although the message is short and straightforward, it may have led viewers to imagine jeopardizing their freedom if they did not volunteer as the film recommended. When examined, the message at the end of the film, the argument the speaker makes in the same film, and the argument Fred makes in “Our Cities Must Fight” all aimed to motivate their viewers to avoid “[acts] of disloyalty” and show their patriotism through their fulfillment of civic duty as defined by the Civil Defense Administration.<sup>26</sup> Like the films that emphasized the U. S.’ vulnerability towards communist threats, “Our Cities Must Fight” and “Survival Under Atomic Attack” aimed to shape public opinion in ways that would lead the viewers to help increase the military power the U.S government needs to enforce its foreign policies.

### **The Preconceived Undertones of Capitalist and Communist Societies**

The U.S. government’s and its citizen’s strong determination to retain their American values of democracy and capitalism are the reasons why there were many propaganda films that emphasized the United States’ vulnerability towards communist threats and the importance of civic duty to counter it. In addition to broadcasting informational films that instructed civilians how they should defend themselves against communist influence and attacks in ways that proved their patriotism, television networks also showed animated films that celebrated the benefits of the United States’ democratic and capitalist society. John Sutherland Production’s “Make Mine Freedom,” for example, aimed to “create a deeper understanding of what has made America the finest place in the world to live.”<sup>27</sup> The film begins with tranquil background music and a speaker explaining to its viewers how different people perceive America as the film present cartoonish and humorous depictions of American civilians:

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<sup>24</sup> Castle Films. “Survival Under Atomic Attack 1951.” 1951. YouTube video, 8:51, posted by “industryfilmarchive,” May 7, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAtDpr0KcsU>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Hogan, *Cross of Iron*, 18.

<sup>27</sup> John Sutherland Productions. “Make Mine Freedom – 1948 Anti-Communist Propaganda Cartoon” 1948, YouTube video, 9:30, posted by “Charles Nuckolls,” Aug 5, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8D6d6\\_Vngo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8D6d6_Vngo).

American is many things to many people ... It's freedom to work at the job you like. Freedom of speech and to peacefully assemble. Freedom to own property. Security from unlawful search and seizure. The right to a speedy and public trial. Protection against cruel punishments. The right to vote. And to worship God in your own way. It is these freedoms that have made America strong.<sup>28</sup>

Not only does the film introduce its viewers to the benefits that make America a preferable country to live in, it reflects the benefits its viewers value as well. The film emphasizes that the United States grants its civilians self-determination, private ownership, and legal protection. By placing emphasis on these three aspects, viewers become more aware and appreciative of their American privileges, which in turn ripens their determination to safeguard them from communist threats through their fulfillment of civic duty. Subsequently, the film presents additional benefits enjoyed by civilians under the United States capitalist economic system. As the character, John Q. Public lectures five other characters in the film, he talks about the benefits America's "system of free enterprise" has created.<sup>29</sup> For example, Public explicates how the system "sends more young people to high school and college than all of the rest of the world combined" and how the United States "has a national income equal to the total national income of any six nations in the world..."<sup>30</sup> Public's explications help the film's viewers develop a greater awareness and appreciation for benefits that were made possible by the United States' economic system.<sup>31</sup> As a result, viewers would be motivated to safeguard their democratic and capitalist lifestyles.

Public information the government distributed to its civilians, however, were often in the form of fear-mongering propaganda. An early example of a fear-mongering propaganda is a 1947 film simply titled, "Cold War Anti-Communism Propaganda." The film presents a dramatization of how the United States would look like if communism became the nation's political structure. As dramatic, unnerving music plays, the film's speaker forebodingly presents how the town of Montney, Wisconsin would look under the communist rule:

...the chief of police is hustled off to jail. Banks, public utilities are seized by communists. Watch carefully what happens to an editor who operates under a free press. He goes to jail, too, and his newspaper is confiscated. Exit: freedom of thought. Yes, this is life under the Soviet form of government. The little town of Montney is made this experiment of 24 hours of public service to all America. It can happen here. Well, this is what it looks like if it should.<sup>32</sup>

As the speaker narrates the dramatization, the communists who drag the policeman and editor to jail are portrayed as aggressive and cruel people. The civilians of the town are then shown living in poverty as they line up at an outdoor soup kitchen. Despite living in poverty, the following scene shows civilians praising communism as they march on the town's streets. As the music switches to a much ominous score, the film then treats its viewers to a scene with a metaphoric depiction of how communists would destroy the United States. The scene begins with an

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> "Cold War Anti-Communist Propaganda," YouTube video, 2:04, posted by "Footage File," Feb 22, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jF5YFiCyX2A>.



explosion of the Statue of Liberty. Afterwards, the film shows an animated colossal hand with a Red Army star on its sleeve smashing buildings including the White House and a church. The final shot shows a man triumphantly holding a black flag with the communist symbol of the hammer and sickle and the word, “leadership” under the symbol.<sup>33</sup>

Overall, the film argues that the Soviet Union’s communist regime could destroy the United States. The live-action dramatization enables its viewer to experience fear as they imagine living in a town with no legal protection, no free speech, and no escape from poverty. The metaphoric depiction uses symbols like the Statue of Liberty, White House, and church to symbolize valued American freedom, democracy, and faith while explosions, the crushing hand with a Red Army star, and the hammer and sickle symbolize communist aggression and communist rule. By using a live-action dramatization and a metaphoric animation that depicted communist rule in the U.S., the film built resentment among its viewers against communists and communism.

### Conclusion

The preconceived undertones of capitalist and communist societies expressed in “Cold War Anti-Communist Propaganda” and “Make Mine Freedom” are ideologies that resonated in the United States before the Cold War.<sup>34</sup> For this reason, the government was able to use propaganda films to motivate citizens to defend against communist threats through their fulfillment of civic duty in ways that supported the government’s Cold War policies. Televised informational films were effective propaganda tools because the films notably use authoritative voices of older Caucasian males, a great quantity of information viewers believed would help them outlast communist threats, well-directed dramatizations that gave viewers reasonable visualizations, and symbolic imagery and sounds that evoked strong imageries of capitalism and communism. Like many other forms of U.S. propaganda during the Cold War, informational films were used to shape public opinion because it created “the fear of losing . . . cherished values” made possible by U.S. democracy and capitalism.<sup>35</sup> Most significantly, the U.S. government’s utilization of propaganda and the public’s wiliness to accept ideologies presented in the propaganda showcased the government’s and public’s desperate effort to ensure their security through what they conceived as civic duty. As a result, televised U.S. propaganda became one of the major factors that contributed to the historiography of the Cold War.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>35</sup> Anup Shah, “War, Propaganda and the Media,” *Global Issues*, March 31, 2005.

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