

**Ralph B. Levering.** *The Cold War: A Post-Cold War History*. The American History Series. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016. 288 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-118-84840-1.

**Reviewed by** Vivien L. Chang

**Published on** H-FedHist (January, 2018)

**Commissioned by** Thomas Reinstein (Temple University)

For Ralph B. Levering, the three seminal and interlocking processes of the second half of the twentieth century are economic globalization, political democratization, and the Cold War. The recently updated third edition of *The Cold War: A Post-Cold War History* addresses one of these: the bipolar conflict spanning the period roughly between 1945 and 1991 but whose ramifications continue to reverberate in today's world. In particular, Levering argues that the Cold War's endpoint, namely, the triumph of democratic capitalism, ushered in an era of American-led globalization and the proliferation of "free" states. "What was the Cold War about?" he asks, and "what were some of the main beliefs, goals, fears, and concerns on both sides that underlay the surface manifestations of the conflict?" (p. xv). For both American and Soviet policymakers, the Cold War was a competition between two opposing yet equally totalizing and deterministic ideologies. It was also, as Levering makes clear, characterized by proxy wars, changes in the international system, and domestic struggles for power.

*The Cold War* begins with the "uneasy alliance" between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Second World War, made possible by Franklin Roosevelt's conciliatory approach and the imperatives of the Grand Alliance. While FDR's death and the combination of Harry Tru-

man's insecurities and Joseph Stalin's paranoia contributed in part to the start of the Cold War, Levering stresses that "even Roosevelt, for all his political dexterity in placating a variety of domestic and foreign constituencies, might well have failed to prevent a sharp downturn in US-Soviet relations" once the war ended (p. 17). The dynamic fusion of diverse causal factors—deep-seated ideological differences, geostrategic concerns, and the actions and decisions of American and Soviet elites, which, by turns, alleviated and exacerbated East-West tensions—constitutes the common thread running powerfully through Levering's narrative. Often, when US leaders made inroads in reducing international tensions, such as détente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with China, they were predicated less on a shared understanding of the nature and extent of cooperation than on the "diplomacy of ambiguity." In confronting the Soviet Union, American elites "did not try to define in advance what 'détente' meant; nor did they risk the loss of negotiating leverage by giving the impression that America was overly anxious to improve relations." Similarly, in the US dealings with China, "they sought to create a favorable atmosphere by taking small steps and emphasizing common interests rather than by immediately tackling explosive issues like Taiwan" (p. 150). Only by avoiding the thorniest questions of

the Cold War and shrouding their aims in vague language, then, were American officials able to achieve a more cooperative relationship with their chief adversaries. What transpired in effect was the persistence of the superpower rivalry, exemplified by continued US involvement in Vietnam, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the nuclear arms race, despite a temporary—and ostensible—thawing of hostilities. After all, “a large part of the competition in US-Soviet relations during the Cold War grew out of ideological differences that the two sides ultimately could neither compromise about nor ignore” (p. 211). If ideology proved to be the organizing principle that shaped American choices in the Cold War era, it is unsurprising that no Shakespearean denouement accompanied the end of the conflict in Levering’s retelling of the now-familiar story. Indeed, the collapse of the Soviet Union—and the Cold War order—owed at least as much to changes in technology, communications, and the international economy as to the agency and imagination of US and Soviet decision makers.

Levering’s account is at once ambitious in scope, analytically precise, and welcomingly concise. While his analysis is based almost exclusively on secondary literature, his accessible and lively prose renders *The Cold War* an engaging overview of US-Soviet relations that undergraduates and graduate students alike would be well served to peruse. Meanwhile, his nuanced and often sympathetic portrayals of US presidents and their inner circles are refreshing, though, at times, could be misconstrued as too charitable. “The overall direction of [Truman and his successors’ anticommunist policies] ... was admirable,” while “the efforts of numerous officials and private groups to improve conditions in the third world ... should not be forgotten” (pp. 56, 80). Here, the reader might wish to supplement Levering’s analysis with studies on the imperialist ideas undergirding modernization theory and the ecological consequences and human costs of such development schemes as the Alliance for Progress and the

Strategic Hamlet Program.[1] Nevertheless, Levering’s synthesis of the primary themes and events of the Cold War makes his work an essential guide to a tumultuous chapter in the international history of the twentieth century. As nation building, human rights, and nuclear disarmament once again dominate contemporary policy debates in the post-9/11 era, the insights of this updated edition are certainly worth revisiting.

#### Note

[1]. See, for instance, Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-fedhist>

**Citation:** Vivien L. Chang. Review of Levering, Ralph B. *The Cold War: A Post-Cold War History*. H-FedHist, H-Net Reviews. January, 2018.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49384>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.