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Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era

By: Caitlin Moser

Elaine Tyler May received her B.A. (1969), M.A. (1970) and Ph. D. (1975) in United States History from the University of California in Los Angeles. She is currently Regents Professor of American Studies and History at the University of Minnesota. Prior to joining the University of Minnesota, she taught at Princeton University from 1974 to 1978. An extraordinary vitae, May was the Distinguished Fulbright Chair in American History at University College in Dublin, Ireland in 1996. In 2008, she was the Douglas Southall Freeman Visiting Professor of American History at the University of Richmond. A distinguished twentieth-century historian, her specialties include the Cold War Era as well as gender, sexuality and politics. May has received numerous prestigious awards, the most recent being the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship for the 2015-2016 year.¹ In addition to teaching, she has held the position of President of the American Studies Association from 1995 to 1996 and of the Organization of American Historians from 2009 to 2010.² *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* maintains the common theme of her research, focusing on aspects of twentieth-century public and private life, found throughout May's additional

¹ This fellowship is being used on her latest research project and soon to be book, "*Gimme Shelter: The Quest for Security in America*".

² Patricia Nelson Limerick, mentioned in Stephen Aron's "*What's West, What's Next*" article from OAH Magazine of History, was the President from 2014 – 2015.

publications.³

First published in 1988, the 20th anniversary edition of *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* has been fully revised with an epilogue pertaining to America in a post 9/11 world. In the acknowledgements, May states, “earlier versions of chapters were presented as papers at meetings of the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the American Studies Association.”⁴ Restating how the 20th anniversary edition has been revised, it is still a notable observation because the chapters flow consistently into each other, compared to previous works examined in class where it is apparent how the book was previously the author’s dissertation or an assemblage of essays. The purpose of May’s work is twofold in a sense. She presents the reader with several questions of which she credits to the research of this book, such as: Why did postwar Americans turn to marriage and parenthood with such enthusiasm and commitment? More importantly, what accounted for the endorsement of “traditional” family roles by young adults in the postwar years and the widespread challenge to those roles by their children?⁵ In answering these questions, May excitingly illustrates an uncommon [and unfamiliar] relationship between the Cold War’s foreign and political policies and family dynamics. May suggests domestic containment stemmed from containment and as a result, this powered the growth in marriage and childbearing during post World War II years.

May examines her sources in the introduction, all of which contribute significantly to her

³ Additional publications include: *America and the Pill: A History of Promise Peril and Liberation* (2010); *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness* (1997); *Pushing the Limits: American Women, 1940–1961* (1996); and *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (1980). She is the co-editor of *Here, There and Everywhere: The Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture* (2000); *Created Equal: A Social and Political History of the United States* (2002) and *Tell Me True: Memoir, History, and Writing a Life* (2008).

⁴ Elaine, Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), xi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4-8. “These questions stimulated the exploration that led to this book.”

research. May notes the wide range of sources from popular culture (movies, mass circulation periodicals and newspapers), the writings of professionals in numerous fields, as well as the papers and statements of those who influenced and formulated public policies.⁶ Undoubtedly, her most remarkable source used is the Kelly Longitudinal Study (KLS) “which consists of several surveys of 600 white middle-class men and women who formed families during these years.”⁷ University of Michigan psychologist, E. Lowell Kelly, conducted the KLS questionnaire. Beginning in the 1930s, Kelly sent the surveys to the 300 couples every few years. The most detailed surveys were completed in 1955 hinging on a decade’s worth of these couples marriage and child bearing experiences. The KLS questionnaires are an intriguing source as they contain thorough accounts of family life, ranging from, “the decisions they made concerning their careers and children, the quality of their marriages, their family values, their sexual relationships, their physical and emotional health, and their major hopes and worries.”⁸

The tables represented throughout the introduction and various chapters help visualize the statistics May is discussing, however they are not easily accessible, often located on the upcoming pages resulting in the reader having to search for the table being referred to. More tactically placed are the remaining sixteen photographs that adequately supplement each chapter with thorough explanatory notes. Following Alan Trachtenberg’s style, these photographs, though not many, speak to the text. Specifically, the photographs used within chapter two, relating to Hollywood and the media’s portrayal of women, greatly contribute to proving May’s arguments. Critiquing the style of an author’s bibliography is more of a personal preference than solid rule, but instead of footnotes, May uses endnotes. Nonetheless, they are impeccably

⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁷ Ibid., 14. As significant of a source the KLS surveys are, they lack accuracy which May acknowledges herself. Only surveying a group of middle class white Americans, the results are skewed. African Americans are left out as well as immigrants.

⁸ Ibid., 14.

organized and extensive in detail.

May captivates readers from the very beginning with her introduction. It is here she conveys the story of a recently married couple who spent their two week honeymoon period underground in a backyard bomb shelter. Acknowledging that this was merely a publicity stunt, it bears great significance. The years following the end of World War II were meant for times of happiness and prosperity however the impending fear of a nuclear war with Russia became quite a hindrance. Chapter one begins with the examination of the early stages of the Cold War and the ideology behind the concept of containment⁹. During the 1959 Kitchen Debate between Vice President Nixon and Soviet premier Khrushchev, the focus was not on the impending nuclear war and hazardous weapons, but more so on American consumer goods; the idea was to romanticize how perfect postwar American life could be. Over exaggerating, in a sense, to make Communism unappealing to Americans, “Nixon insisted that American superiority in the cold war rested not on weapons, but on the secure, abundant, family life of modern suburban homes.”¹⁰ The Kitchen Debate and consumerism, which will be further examined in an upcoming chapter, complement Suellen Hoy’s *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* and the notion of what it means to be American – being clean is the only way to fight communism.

Chapters two and three observe the decline of marriage and pregnancy from the time of the Depression; the reason being men were fearful to start families with the possibility of being unable to provide security financially. Within chapter two, May traces the transition of female Hollywood stars from their declining popularity of childlike innocence to the new experimental

⁹ Ibid., 16. Concept created by George F. Kennan, in 1946, regarding the Soviet Union. The idea of containment was that the Soviet Union would not be a threat to national security if it could be contained within a defined sphere of influence. Also pertained to containing use of an atomic bomb and domestic communism.

¹⁰ Ibid., 21-2. Nixon promoted the ranch-style home as a means to defeat communism; it epitomized the secure lifestyle postwar Americans desired.

women, who were strong, autonomous, competent, and career-oriented.¹¹ Throughout chapter three, a sense of conflicting feelings are portrayed about females and the various roles they played, such as wartime workers. The Hollywood films at this time seem to walk a fine line between supporting women in their new roles and still trying to contain them in domesticity. The female war hero was short lived, as May remarks, and women's roles soon took a different direction – the one towards sexuality. Perhaps the most famous of these sexually destructive women was Marilyn Monroe, though others include: Betty Grable, Rita Hayworth and Lena Horne. One final conclusion from chapter three is the iconography used to decorate fighter planes during the war; the association of sexy women and aggressive power was only acceptable to unleash on enemies, but unleashing it within the United States would be disastrous, May says.¹²

The next three chapters focus on the central roles women played, as well as the developing fear regarding women's sexuality. Harvard physician, Charles Walter Clarke, theorized the devastating aftermath of a potential atomic attack – not in regards to physical destruction, but more so about the promiscuity that would ensue after families had been separated from the confusion and chaos. The fear of women's sexuality parallels Carolyn Kitch's chapter, "Dangerous Women and the Crisis of Masculinity", regarding the Vamp Girl, among other feared women.¹³ In addition to fearing women's sexuality, a strange correlation between communism and sexual immorality was conjured up with many high-level government officials, among others, firmly believing only "strong, manly men" would be able to resist

¹¹ Ibid., 43-4. Contributing to May's initial questions leading to her research, it is crucial to note the transition of women at this time. "During the war and postwar years, single women would be viewed with suspicion as potential corruptors of the home, but during the 1930's, they were glorified."

¹² Ibid., 68.

¹³ Carolyn, Kitch, *The girl on the magazine cover: the origins of visual stereotypes in American mass media* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 56. Chapter 3.

communism's threats and temptations.¹⁴ As a consequence of this suggestion, a widespread homophobic fear would result in a 'lavender scare', very similar to the 'red scare' though far more people would lose their jobs. This fear also relates to the importance of being a "good mother" and raising a "normal" child, for if the child suffered from lack of attention *or too much*, the common thought of the time was they would either be a criminal or a "passive, weak, effeminate pervert."¹⁵ This concept stems from a 1942 term created by Philip Wylie, known as "momism".

May returns to the Kitchen Debate in chapter seven, focusing on the ideology of promoting the American Dream and consumerism as a means to combat communism not just in the United States but also in Italy. As a result, a "Win a Future" contest was created in which American's wrote letters about why living under capitalism is better than communism; these letters were sent to Italian's on the brink of voting for communists but were convinced otherwise and Italy remained communist free.¹⁶ Tracing what appears to be the peaks and valleys of women's roles throughout this period is one of the most fascinating aspects of this book. Chapter eight concentrates on different couple's marriages, especially the factors that contributed to their successes and failures as a couple. Introduced here is an interesting idea of female independence as a disease, as narrated through Carol Sears who, one can assume, struggled with subordinating domesticity. Continuing to prove its remarkable contribution as a source, the KLS bring forth a new discovery regarding psychology. Answers depict how accepting couples were \ seeking professional help as they openly referred to advice given in their open ended questions. The acceptance of psychology helped married couples put their frustrations into words; it

¹⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹⁵ Ibid., 93.

¹⁶ Ibid., 154. "Win a Future" contest: the winner would receive a new house, full of appliances to combat communism, as well as a car AND a job.

essentially helped ‘explain their problems away.’¹⁷

The tempestuous years of the 1960s and 1970s witnessed domestic containment slowly begin its demise. The most famous critique of domestic containment occurred in 1963 with the publishing of *The Feminine (Feline) Mystique* by a former political activist, Betty Friedan, who was one of the many women who had given up her career for marriage. Friedan called for women of the domestic age to break the chains of domestic containment: to return to school, pursue a career, to revive the independent female pre-World War II; this was achieved through *The Feminine Mystique* which empowered women to find their voices.¹⁸ Opinions still varied but for the most part women flooded Friedan with their personal testimonies containing general themes of resentment and hopes of a ‘better’ life for their children.

The 20th anniversary edition brought forth a thrilling epilogue concerning the September 11th attacks in 2001. Rightfully titled “*Echoes of the Cold War: The Aftermath of September 11, 2001*”, May proclaims striking similarities between September 11th, i.e., the War on Terror and the Cold War.¹⁹ A forthcoming revised edition of *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* would be of even greater interest now, fourteen years after the attacks and eight years after the publishing of the [revised] book. In a personal e-mail communication with Elaine Tyler May, when asked about a future revision to the epilogue, she stated, “As for your question, I do plan to incorporate a “post-9/11” discussion into my current book project, and at some point after than [sic] I will probably do another revision of *Homeward Bound* (the publisher would like me to do that, and I’ll be interested in thinking about those issues again a few years down the road). The 2016 election might open up some new national discussions about how we as a

¹⁷ Ibid., 182.

¹⁸ Ibid., 199. As May states: it only took one for the chorus to join in support.

¹⁹ Ibid., 217-23. Like Nixon, Bush identified consumerism as the weapon to defeat the enemy. Interrogations on campuses nationwide resembled that of the ‘Red’ and ‘Lavender’ scares. The Bush administration even borrowed language from the cold war era.

nation have responded, over time, to 9/11, in our own country as well as in the world. We shall see!”²⁰ A fascinating subject and a unique work of its kind, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* can only improve as future revisions are published.

²⁰ Elaine Tyler May, e-mail message to author, October 12, 2015.

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