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Making a homefront without a battlefield: The manufacturing of domestic enemies in the early Cold War culture

Jean-Paul Gabilliet

- 1 Although the Cold War was an undeclared conflict without actual battlefield one of its earliest characteristics was the emergence in the United States of a homefront-based “war culture” targetting domestic enemies. 1947 witnessed the rise in news media of anxieties over alleged threats to domestic stability: in the first few months of the year, a Crime Scare reactivating pre-war concerns about the Mob and, in the summer, the first reported UFO sightings. In both cases the media and public responses to these events evidenced a collective interest triggered by news stories that singled out exaggerated or fictitious domestic threats and produced scapegoats (ethnic mobsters and alleged extra-terrestrial visitors) that implicitly confirmed the Americans’ perception of their country as an embattled homefront.
- 2 In 1945 most Americans looked forward to the postwar time as an age when stability and prosperity would finally thrive after the fifteen-year-long hiatus of the Depression and Second World War. The hardships of the 1930s, which were very real — unemployment hit a quarter of the white working population at the worst time of the depression — while the social changes that became increasingly conspicuous under the Roosevelt administrations, such as women’s employment and juvenile delinquency, fostered collective self-representations of a fragilized and threatened society that could find salvation only in the return to an ideal, if entirely mythical, status quo. The idea that loomed largest in the period’s popular culture was that of an implicit return to normality, to the prosperity of the idealized “Jazz Age” or “Roaring Twenties.” This belief was shored up by the consensus about Americanism, i.e. the equation of American collective identity with a superior moral value system and uniquely abundant American way of life. In its most extreme manichaeian expression Americanism was

singling out Communism as the epitome of un-Americanism and economic failure while subscribing to a neo-Victorian public ethos based on the wholesale promotion of the nuclear family ideal, the sexual division of labor between female homemakers and male breadwinners, and a worldview of “domestic containment” to use Elaine Tyler May’s phrase.¹

- 3 In his classic study *The Culture of the Cold War* Stephen J. Whitfield documented the rise in post-World War II US culture of a consensual public opinion that prompted Americans to unconditionally believe in the necessity to protect themselves from domestic enemies, a multifarious notion that referred to both American and foreign Communists but also any and all individuals or groups liable to be described as “subversive.” Although the Cold War was not an armed conflict *per se* but a half-century-long power struggle between two geopolitical blocs it still provides us with a very interesting example of an era in which a country, the United States of America, developed a corresponding “war culture.” This complex notion² refers to all collective representations correlated to the state of war which a given country experiences at a given time and the practices shaping the social world that stem from it. This definition predicates the prevalence of reality effects: a war culture may arise and grow in a country that is not experiencing warfare on its soil.
- 4 In this respect the USA may be regarded as the emblematic example of a country where successive war cultures thrived long after it was last ravaged by armed conflict – as in the Revolutionary War (1776-1783), its War of 1812 (1812-1815), following the Civil War (1861-1865), the 1898 Spanish-American War, and the First and Second World Wars – which, though geographically distant conflicts, nevertheless impacted American collective representations by generating mechanisms of enemy identification, homefront-battlefront dialectics, and postwar celebration rituals.³ The specificity of the Cold War in its early phase, i.e. until the Korean War broke out in the summer of 1950, was its ability to fuel a war culture that, in the absence of a clearly identified battlefield, relied on the implicit notion of an endangered homefront threatened by a multipronged fifth column.
- 5 1947 is considered by most historians of the United States as the year when the Cold War began with the implementation of the “Truman Doctrine” to contain the propagation of world Communism, which give rise to the anti-communist hysteria of the following years. Nevertheless this essentially political periodization deserves to be nuanced in the light of arguably “minor” historical facts which still convey particular significance in the context of cultural history and which will be the focus of the following analysis. 1947 was the year when a low-key Crime Scare occurred in the wake of a renewed surge of media interest in organized crime and when the first UFO sightings were reported in the summer. In both cases these phenomena triggered different public and governmental reactions that can be analyzed in retrospect against the backdrop of the Cold War’s endangered-homefront dynamics. The United States entered the Cold War not only through political agency but also because the American population were mentally disposed, if not predisposed, to enter this momentous phase of their history. As noted at the time, it was the “Age of Anxiety”.

1. The 1947 Crime Scare

- 6 The Crime Scare publicized by a substantial segment of the American press early in 1947 is forgotten in most US history books. The surge of media interest in organized crime that occurred in the first half of the year should be placed in a double context. Since Prohibition (1920-1933) the press had typically described organized crime as a nationwide conspiracy engineered by foreign criminals—essentially Irish, Jewish, and Italian immigrants. Federal authorities, on the contrary, denied how “organized” it was and insisted – via the influence of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in particular – that the delinquency the country should worry about was really a matter of various examples of “Public Enemy Number One”. The view of a nationwide conspiracy engineered by foreign criminals ironically contradicted the official position of both the New Deal administrators and the FBI itself, which blamed the permanent rise of crime statistics not on ethnic mobsters but on American-born bandits (*à la* Bonnie and Clyde or John Dillinger). America’s highwaymen and women were presented by federal authorities as former juvenile delinquents produced by the weakening of parental authority, a persistent concern in the traumatic contexts of the Depression and World War II.⁴
- 7 The second important contextual element was the then current debate on the nationwide legalization of gambling. Since the late 1930s Americans’ rising purchasing power (following the end of the depression and simultaneous onset of the wartime economy that restricted the availability of consumer durables into the second half of the 1940s) had mechanically led to an increase in illegal gambling. Millions of dollars were spent on off-track race-betting and local lotteries (numbers, policy) thanks to which even the poorest households could hope to hit the jackpot. The huge income thus generated was pocketed by gangsters and partially used to bribe local law enforcement into looking away, partially used for self-serving, communitarian philanthropic projects (in the manner of the old, urban political “machines”). While many in the postwar context called for a moralization of society, the economic arguments voiced by the supporters of legalization ran up against the moral arguments of very well-organized lobbies, such as citizens’ crime commissions or religious associations.⁵
- 8 After years of relative discretion organized crime made headlines again in the first days of 1947. According to “The Heirs of Capone,” an article published in the January 13 issue of *Newsweek*, Al Capone’s criminal empire was once again a hotbed of violence. The Chicago police had made public the 1946 testimony of James M. Ragen, the gangster who controlled Continental Press, one of the illegal wire news services that provided off-track information on dog and horse races. Such services were very lucrative operations for which gangsters were prepared to fight with extreme violence. In his 98-page testimony to the Cook County District Attorney Ragen revealed he had received death threats from members of the former Capone outfit who supported his main competitor Trans-American. This information was all the more sensational and apparently relevant since Ragen was murdered in mysterious circumstances soon after testifying and the two rival news services subsequently merged (not without a great deal of mob violence) under the leadership of Jake Guzik, a former Capone acolyte who had risen in the organization’s ranks since the boss’s demise. On top of this the *Newsweek* piece described Guzik’s attempt to bribe a Dallas, Texas, sheriff-elect and police lieutenant when he tried to take control of the local gambling scene. According

to this story the Chicago Outfit seemed to be back in business with a vengeance. By pure coincidence it was back in the limelight two weeks later: on January 25 Al Capone died of a stroke at the age of 48 in his Palm Beach mansion where he had lived as a recluse since leaving Alcatraz in 1939.⁶

- 9 If newspapers and magazines devoted considerable copy to Capone in February another prominent mobster attracted public attention two months later. In a lengthy article published in two consecutive issues of the weekly muckraker magazine *Collier's* in April, Herbert Asbury, a journalist specializing in underworld affairs, presented the career of Frank Costello. Unlike his famous peers Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky, this key figure of the New York City mob had remained out of law's reach since 1926. For a quarter century Costello had methodically constructed the public image of an Italian-American philanthropist with close ties to the local Democratic Party machine — which meant criminal collusion with Tammany Hall's Irish-controlled patronage system. Asbury's very well-informed exposé described how for two decades Costello's exemplary daily life had concealed the behind-the-scenes activities of the crime family formerly led by Lucky Luciano and Vito Genovese. The revelations about his life upset Costello so much that—more than a half-century before HBO's Tony Soprano—he eventually consulted a psychiatrist in 1948.⁷ But his health issues were minor by comparison with those of his long-time Jewish associate Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel, who was found murdered in his mistress Virginia Hill's Beverly Hills home on June 20. Also at issue here was not just lurid gang tales and infighting, but the newer, postwar factor of these criminals' need to convert illegitimate to legitimate businesses and, while doing so, create new ways to launder illegal profits and secure tax evasion.
- 10 The attention paid by the media to organized crime in the first half of 1947 had several objective consequences. In popular cultural terms, for instance, the comic book industry experienced a boom in crime titles whereas this genre had been marginally successful since its appearance in 1942.⁸ This domain had previously been mainly the realm of American movies as the gangster or criminal film, starting with D. W. Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), a medium which had virtually monopolized the production and diffusion of criminal legends in twentieth century US popular culture (preceded by American dime novels telling city tales of high life and low life crime in the second half of the nineteenth century).
- 11 In the political field several significant decisions were made in postwar America regarding crime. The California Legislature finally appropriated funds for a special study group on organized crime first requested by Governor Earl Warren in 1945. In Washington, DC Attorney General Tom Clark's Justice Department created a so-called “racket squad” to be sent to major cities preparatory to initiating grand jury investigations. Across the country the various crime commissions, local citizens' groups monitoring underworld activities, developed renewed visibility and started growing in number.⁹
- 12 Although underworld activities had never ceased since the highly publicized mob trials of the 1930s — featuring such big names as Capone and Luciano and driven on the East Coast by New York County's District Attorney Thomas Dewey — the year 1947 witnessed an actual, if subdued, panic about the alleged rebirth of the Mafia. It triggered off a new surge of public concern that eventually culminated in 1950-51 with the then unprecedented media coverage of the Tennessee Democrat Estes Kefauver's “Special Senate Committee on Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce,” whose

televised hearings were the very first politically significant use of the TV screen in US politics.

- 13 The American public's post-war responses to the resurgence of organized crime in 1947 call for two remarks. First, note the paradox: the media engaged in a campaign touched off by facts of admittedly limited gravity — neither bloodshed nor civilian casualties were deplored as often happened during Prohibition. Second, whereas the view of organized crime as a foreign conspiracy eating away at the US economy was widely disseminated in the press in the 1930s, it was not until the end of the following decade that most Americans responded to the stigmatization of mobsters — next to Communists — as scapegoats of the troubles experienced by US society. (And one should note in passing that there was soon a spill over in this renewed fear about mobsters which was affiliated to a new social anxiety about young, white, middle-class American teenagers becoming juvenile delinquents — as in James Dean's movie *Rebel Without a Cause* of 1955.) By the early 1950s the Kefauver Committee, whose actual goal was to serve the Tennessee Senator's presidential ambitions, managed to instil into US public opinion a view of organized crime as a national conspiracy engineered by foreign gangsters — whereas all independent investigations conducted by journalists or academics underscored the largely local nature of this criminality. In the late 1940s' Crime Scare the American public seemed less prepared to listen to the truth than to propagandist interpretations diffused by opinion-makers. Both gangsters and Communists were literally reshaped as scapegoats for various societal issues in a period of excessive susceptibility to collective anxieties.

2. The first UFOs

- 14 Yet even collective anxieties must be put in their historical context.¹⁰ Although flying saucers were among the first cultural products of the Cold War era they, unlike mobsters, did not elicit much response from the American public at first. According to a June 25, 1947 Associated Press dispatch, Kenneth Arnold, a young pilot, spotted nine unidentified flying objects over Mount Rainier in Washington State at 3 PM the previous day. He estimated the saucer-shaped aircraft were flying at 1,200 mph around 10,000 feet high. In those days when there were no circular airborne vessels, five months before Chuck Yeager broke the sound barrier in southern California on October 14, Arnold's sighting sounded perfectly extraordinary. Even more surprising was the multiplication of similar testimonies across the country in the following weeks. In a July 8 statement the US Army announced that a flying disc found by a local farmer at Roswell, New Mexico, had been brought to the local air base. After being shipped to Fort Worth, Texas, for further analysis, the rubber strips, tinfoil, tough paper, sticks and flower tape making up the "disc" turned out to be the remains of a weather balloon. This arguably unimportant incident sparked limited media interest for a few days, just long enough for the local *Roswell Daily Record* to make a couple of headlines and get the farmer who had discovered the saucer to candidly confess that he had come across the debris by chance and never seen anything resembling a flying saucer.
- 15 Early in August Jack Wilcox, an FBI agent stationed in Washington State, wrote an official report about alleged sightings of "doughnut-shaped" flying discs off Maury Island near Tacoma on June 21 which, he concluded, were a hoax. On July 30, a few days before Wilcox filed his report, the USAF and FBI had initiated a cooperation program to

investigate flying disc sightings after General George Schulgen, a Pentagon high-ranking officer, convinced J. Edgar Hoover that the FBI should interrogate anyone who claimed to have sighted UFOs to ensure they were not Communist sympathizers attempting to touch off collective hysteria by taking advantage of the public's fear of Soviet secret weapons. The un-natural alliance of the military and the Feds petered out in less than two months when Hoover came across a for-your-eyes-only Air Force letter which made it clear that the Army relied on the Bureau to look into the increasingly numerous probable UFO hoaxes while the military intelligence worked on the more "serious" cases. After the FBI unilaterally terminated the cooperation agreement, military investigations into UFO sightings were handed over to "Project Sign," a program under the supervision of Air Materiel Command (the Army services in charge of research, development, and logistics), which never ruled out any of the three main hypotheses to account for the phenomena—Soviet weapons, ultra-secret US weapons, or extra-terrestrial spaceships.

- 16 A Gallup poll conducted from July 25 through 30, one month after Kenneth Arnold's first flying disc sighting, sheds light on the public's reaction to the enigma that seemed to matter so much to the military. To the question "Have you heard of flying saucers or read about them?" 90% of respondents gave a positive answer. The second question "What do you think these saucers are?" the responses were more diverse: 42% said they did not know what they were, 29% thought they were optical illusions or mirages, 15% believed they were secret US weapons, 10% viewed them as hoaxes, 3% as weather devices, 2% as searchlights on airplanes, and only 1% believed they were Soviet weapons!
- 17 This poll undermines several present-day preconceptions about the Cold War mindset. First it implies that the hypothesis of alien visitors was not relevant to the general public then—a point that justifies the necessity to qualify the would-be collective panic stirred up by Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast a decade before the first UFO sightings. Hence, US mass media was trumpeting and distorting its own effects. It also suggests that in the summer of 1947, while the United States still had its nuclear monopoly, the fear of secret Soviet weapons was practically non-existent whereas the belief in the existence of advanced US-made weapons was shared by one out of six Americans.

3. Domestic enemies for want of a battlefield

- 18 What do these phenomena tell us? The feared resurgence of mob violence and the first alleged UFO sightings are perfect examples of the representations that were to structure the Cold War *zeitgeist* in the coming years. The media's ostensible rediscovery of the Mafia stimulated anxieties about a foreign domestic enemy engaging in clandestine activities, largely the same anxieties as those the conservative opponents to the New Deal had cultivated since the previous year's mid-term election campaign ending in a Republican landslide in Congress. As America entered the Cold War and the public was becoming increasingly sensitive to the issue of domestic subversion it was difficult for both FBI and the Truman administration to continue to downplay the hold of organized crime on American society and economy that had been building up since the Twenties — though in a more discreet way since the repeal of Prohibition.

- 19 In the summer of 1947 the impact of the first alleged UFOs on the American public was at best limited, actually in inverse proportion to the Army intelligence's concerns about the true nature of "saucers." Only after 1949 did the number of stories about encounters with extra-planetary aliens start increasing, along with radio shows, movies or comic books dealing with invasions of the planet by Martians and their likes. In US cinema alone a few outstanding examples would be the beguiling *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (1951), the chilling movie *The Thing* (1951), and the truly spooky socio-political scifi thriller *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). The chronological discrepancy between the initial phenomenon and its widespread assimilation by popular culture likely results from gradual changes in the American mindset following the ending of the US nuclear monopoly (August 1949), the founding of the People's Republic of China (October 1949) and the Korean War (summer 1950). This discrepancy may also be understood as *culture lag*: the difference between the appearance of a true or false phenomenon and the time it takes for a society to catch up and deal with it.
- 20 Moreover, the flying saucer sightings of 1947 mattered little to the public because Americans had not experienced wartime bombings, unlike their distant European neighbors, but had internalized trust in the United States' nuclear monopoly after the destructions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Only when the Soviets finally mastered atomic power did flying saucers assume a new significance as vessels supposedly carrying extra-terrestrial weaponry and life-forms. This representation of UFOs seems self-evident to early 21st-century Westerners, particularly those raised on a steady diet of CGI-laced big-budget science-fiction Hollywood movies. But it was foreign to the American public of 1947 who were indoctrinated into dreading a domestic enemy in disguise on US soil rather than unidentified (albeit necessarily alien) foes swooping down from the skies.
- 21 The scapegoating of genuine and virtual disruptive elements has been a constant in American history, as Michael Rogin demonstrated when he tracked down the recurrence of "political demonology" phenomena in the United States since the country's origin.¹¹ In this respect the media and public responses to these admittedly minor events of 1947 perpetuated traditional reactions to "sensational" news stories. Beyond their anecdotal and often entertaining dimensions the Crime Scare and UFO sightings of 1947 exemplify how the American early Cold War culture manufactured domestic enemies, either by putting in the limelight actual subversives that had inconspicuously infiltrated the country's economic and political fabric for decades or by echoing the analysis of inexplicable atmospheric phenomena as possible signs of extra-terrestrial life. In both cases the facts and incidents highlighted by American media were interpreted by the press, the authorities, the public and the popular culture as phenomena that confirmed the implicit necessity for Americans to view their country as an embattled homefront and act accordingly. They were also preludes to the subsequent victimization into the 1950s of writers, academics, artists, intellectuals, homosexuals, essentially all the individuals liable to public stigmatization not because of any crimes they had committed but of their failure to comply with the appearances of the mainstream American way of life.
- 22 As specifically post-war phenomena the Crime scare and UFO sightings exemplified no fresh start in public paranoia however. They were rather classic collective responses to the emergence of elements potentially disruptive to the national well-being and prospective long-term prosperity. It is worthwhile noting that the temporal anchorings

of both issues were poles apart. Mob-related anxieties were rooted in the not-too-distant pre-war past of the Twenties and Thirties and ethnic gangsters had been largely overshadowed by Japanazis as the nation's most convincing public enemies during the war years. Conversely UFOs, which were not yet futuristic mainstays of popular culture, initially stirred concern mostly among the military whereas the public was still basking in the confidence of a perpetual US nuclear monopoly. To make a final comparison the Crime Scare was a resurgence, a sort of collective return of the repressed in which society peered into itself at real bogeymen who had been shunning publicity with what amounted to the active complicity of federal authorities for over fifteen years. The early flying disc sightings, on the contrary, adumbrated future visions of armed menace, in which threats would assume the form of extra-powerful flying weapons instead of invading armies. In sum post-war Americans experienced the transition from hot war to cold war in the context of a permanently reconfigured war culture as they looked inward at organized crime and outward to strange vessels allegedly zooming across the skies.

NOTES

1. Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (NY : Basic Books, 1990), 16-36.
2. The notion of war culture (*culture de guerre*) came into currency among European World War I historians Annette Becker, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, John Horne in the 1990s. Cf. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, "Guerre et cultures de guerre" in Christian Delporte *et al.* (eds.), *Dictionnaire d'histoire culturelle de la France contemporaine* (Paris : PUF, 2010), 373-377; Leonard V. Smith, "The 'Culture de guerre' and French Historiography of the Great War of 1914-1918," *History Compass* 5.6 (2007): 167-179; Pierre Purseigle, "A very French debate. The 1914-18 'war culture,'" *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 1.1 (2008): 9-14.
3. Unsurprisingly similar mechanisms were activated following 9/11. Cf. French historian Bruno Cabanes and journalist Jean-Marc Pitte's description of the disaster's early cultural fallout, "Choses vues à Manhattan. Le 11 septembre 2001 et l'émergence d'une culture de guerre," *Esprit* 279 (November 2001), 39-48 and the book in which they expanded their analysis, *11 septembre. La Grande Guerre des Américains* (Paris : A. Colin, 2003).
4. Claire Bond Potter, *War on Crime: Bandits, G-Men and the Politics of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1998), 169-195.
5. William Howard Moore, *The Kefauver Committee and the Politics of Crime, 1950-1952* (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 1974), 33-41.
6. Moore, *The Kefauver Committee*, 26-29.
7. Moore, *The Kefauver Committee*, 29-33.
8. Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 2009), 36-37.
9. Moore, *The Kefauver Committee*, 37-43.
10. The information about the 1947 UFO sightings is drawn from "Été 1947, l'invention des soucoupes volantes," chapter 1 of Pierre Lagrange's *La Rumeur de Roswell* (Paris : La Découverte, 1996), 13-36.

11. See Michael Rogin's enlightening collection of political history essays *Ronald Reagan The Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987).

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