

Thornton, Martin

***Times of Heroism, Times of Terror: American Presidents and the Cold War***

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In *Times of Heroism, Times of Terror*, Martin Thornton superficially assesses the performance of America's Cold War presidents from Harry Truman to George H. W. Bush. The subtitle is the actual description of the work, which is long on the descriptive and short on analysis. Moreover, the book leaves out too many important details of the Cold War narrative, which is an inherent problem with condensed surveys of this nature. The writing is very readable, though, and the author makes use of a fair selection of sources. The main title, a bit idiosyncratic, is inspired from the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Times of heroism are generally times of terror.... But whoso is heroic will always find crisis to try his edge." In short, Thornton offers a shallow and wide overview of the Cold War, tilted to the right, and he nearly stoops to romanticize the era's presidents with his contrived theme of "heroism."

The Cold War, it is stated up front, "was beset with a number of crises that tested the mettle of those directly involved and the institutions they worked with" (x). Not only is it a less than useful construct to frame the Cold War as a testing ground of masculinity, such an approach implicitly downplays any missed opportunities for promoting genuine peace. For example, in his conclusion in which he summarizes the ten Cold War presidencies, Thornton categorizes nine of the chief executives, the exception being Jimmy Carter, as men who avoided "appeasement." The ideological implication is that anti-appeasement (aggression and counter-aggression) is about the heroic.

The word "appeasement" is politically charged and is synonymous with weakness, but wisdom often dictates muted responses to complex, troubled situations. Peace does not necessarily follow the flexing of muscles, but the making of peace often requires acts of courage. Thornton could be accused of passing on to the reader the clichés of popular imagination. Carter the so-called appeaser imposed a grain embargo against the Soviet Union in response to the invasion of Afghanistan, but Ronald Reagan the so-called anti-appeaser cancelled the embargo soon after arriving at the White House (119, 125). Had Carter instead of Richard Nixon changed the United States' relationship with China, ceasing to recognize Taiwan as the People's Republic, would that have been construed as appeasement? Carter, the only Cold War president to have won a Nobel Peace Prize, is relegated as the non-heroic in the "times of terror." The author does admit, however, that had Carter been conferred the prize sooner it might have changed the historian's perception of his presidency, apparently because such an award (in Thornton's mind) legitimises what would otherwise be viewed as "appeasement."

It can also be noted that Thornton interjects a British connection to Cold War events, seemingly whenever possible. Perhaps this is because the author, a history professor at

the University of Leeds, is a British subject. Even so, he conveniently leaves out some less than noble British doings. For example, when he reviews the tenure of Dwight Eisenhower there is no mention of the 1953 CIA coup in Iran to reinstall the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. This covert operation, which disposed a democratically elected government, was done at the bequest of the British government and the oil company that would later bear the name British Petroleum. Considering that the author begins his work by reflecting on the attacks of September 11, which he seems to regard as unrelated to the Cold War (other than following in its wake), this omission is a grave one. Later, because he continues to avoid any mention of the 1953 coup (an operation that had been orchestrated from inside the U.S. Embassy compound), context is lacking when he covers the Carter administration and its response to the Iranian student takeover of the American Embassy in Tehran (1979-1981).

Also, in the author's review of the senior Bush there could have been some focus on Margaret Thatcher's instigation for the United States to not allow the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (August 1990) to go unpunished. Instead, Thornton writes, "Saddam Hussein, the military dictator of Iraq, was likened to Adolf Hitler by President Bush, and clearly the Bush administration believed that appeasement was not the answer and that Iraq's blatant aggression had to be opposed" (140). Thornton leaves out the fact that the Bush administration had earlier signalled to Hussein, through diplomatic channels, that it would not stand in the way if Iraq invaded Kuwait. As with many episodes discussed in his book, the author offers no explanation for the cause of the conflict.

The Reagan administration's meddling in the Middle East during the Iran-Iraq War could have been discussed as background to the subsequent U.S. invasion of Iraq. Although earlier the Iran-Contra scandal is covered, the focus is mostly on Reagan's management style. After the Persian Gulf War a contingent of American troops continued to be stationed in Saudi Arabia, provoking the wrath of Osama bin Laden, a figure who was connected with the CIA-backed jihad movement that fought against the Soviet invaders of Afghanistan. These events, if properly covered, would provide a fuller picture. They would link American anti-appeasement efforts with negative international consequences. Such background would make the post-September 11 world seem less incomprehensible and it might suggest that the Cold War was actually times of foolishness.