

The historiography of Modern America could invariably cover a myriad of topics in a very broad time period. This paper will focus upon the three topics of four University of Nebraska, Kearney classes that largely intertwined with each other: women's history, the Cold War, and civil rights. In reviewing such a broad topic, the primary theme that ties all of these works together are new perspectives. As the subjects of these books and articles were playing out, the historical perspective of those times were highly biased towards a white, male, affluent, and pro-American view. The high school textbook history regarding these eras is rife with generalizations and singular viewpoints. Readers today now have a wide variety of perspectives to study that show what should have always been apparent; women, minorities, and alternate viewpoints have always existed even if they were not written about. This singular viewpoint should never be a problem again as historians rush to find new angles and theories to publish. Invariably these new perspectives will be criticized as "revisionist history", but the evidence overwhelmingly supports these viewpoints have always existed.

Further, these three topics also intersect in many interesting ways. Readers should quickly find that when writers expanded their research and sought these new perspectives, the three issues began to mesh together. Women have always been present for both the Cold War and Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement impacted the Cold War. The Cold War shaped the way women were treated during the Civil Rights Movement. As a result it might often be hard to decide which topic a work should be classified as. Like the new perspectives that show a multifaceted world and complex viewpoints, many of these works also stretch across topics and add to the depth of understanding a reader should reach. This paper will attempt to roughly classify each work into one of the three topics, but clearly many of them will cover more

than one. Each work will be covered in chronological order, but separated into a topic so as to add to the clarity of the changes that have come about over the chronology of time.

Women's History

Although this paper only reviews works from a single class titled *American Women's History*, the historiography of women was covered across the entire Modern American field. The historiography of women was often overlooked and really started to gain traction with the “second wave of feminism” that started in the 1960s. The works reviewed in this paper start in that time as women began to write about important women in history. These women were often overlooked in prior historiographies, but their stories had always existed and the research used to tell their stories was sound. The claims that women were not important or not significant in the early days of American history are unfounded and these new writings refute such claims.

Gerda Lerner's *The Grimke Sisters from South Carolina* was originally written in 1967. Lerner was a writer before she became a historian in order to publish this book. She originally considered the Grimke sisters as social reformers that led dramatic lives. When Lerner wrote a revision in 2004, she mentioned how she now thought the Grimke sisters were pioneering thinkers for feminism.¹ Written arguably before the new era of women's history, Lerner's own perceptions of the Grimke sisters evolved as Grimke and the movement evolved. Lerner was a groundbreaker for showing that women had important and dynamic roles in the abolitionist movement and at a time when authors needed inspiration to seek these new perspectives.

Nancy Cott's *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* was written in 1987 and is an early work that shows that the historiography of the women's movement was anything but settled. Cott

¹ Gerda Lerner, *The Grimke sisters from South Carolina: Pioneers for Women's Rights and Abolition* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009), xviii.

believed that many people saw the success of the suffrage movement in the 1920s as the end of feminism. Cott wrote her book to educate people that the movement did not end, but simply transitioned. Suffrage succeeded, but feminism moved on in its varying modern forms of diverse interests. Now feminists face the paradox of finding language, organization, and goals adequate to describe these diverse women who will remain labeled as women no matter what they think, say, or do.² The amount of scholarship debating the stages and status of the women's movement has grown exponentially since.

Part of that movement to expand women's studies was Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale* written in 1990. Thatcher contended that Martha Ballard's diary was ignored for so many years because it was just a diary of a midwife. Martha's diary was like other diaries of the time that doubled as almanacs and daybooks listing business transactions and other goings-on. Martha Ballard kept meticulous records for 27 years in her diary, but most historians looked right past it calling it "brief and with some exceptions not of general interest" and "trivial and unimportant".³

However, Ulrich believed there was power in Martha's diary and used it along with other diaries and records of the time to offer her interpretation of the diary. Ulrich thought that the diary introduced more stories that could possibly be recovered and absorbed. Yet she thought the consistent detail Martha wrote down can also be extraordinarily revealing to larger themes in eighteenth century history.⁴ Martha's diary tells us about a female-managed economy, sexual

² Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (Yale Univ. P., 1987), 10.

³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on her Diary, 1875-1812* (Vintage Books, 1991), 8.

⁴ Ibid., 25.

behavior, birth records and delivery practices, imprisonment for debt, aging in the pre-industrial world, and the pull of traditional values in an era of economic and social turmoil.⁵ Again, although it can be argued that Martha Ballard is not in the modern American era, Ulrich's book written in 1990 was pivotal in spurring other authors to take fresh and new approaches to studying and publishing historical accounts outside of the traditionalist mold.

Blanche Wiesen Cook published the first volume of *Eleanor Roosevelt* in 1992. Cook states that no one is neutral towards Eleanor Roosevelt. People caricaturize her, despise her politics, think of her as a united-front communist, and she even had an extensive FBI file. Her friends and her detractors have made extravagant claims of goodness and mercy, foolishness and naïveté.⁶ Cook attempts to accurately portray Roosevelt in her biography, but the task is challenging. Despite Roosevelt's education in a more modern era where she would write long letters to so many people expressing her thoughts and feelings, most of them were burned by her friends after her death. Cook's biography was instrumental in showing that Eleanor Roosevelt was not just a dutiful politician's wife, but had discovered her own agency and knew that she had the power to push back against her unfaithful husband. Although she still had to keep up the appearances of proper decorum, in private she had great influence and the capability of having her own policy positions. She was not shy in pushing them with or without her husband's approval. Cook is another author who was crucial in providing new perspectives of the influence of powerful women while dispelling many of the myths that had been written about Roosevelt's life.

Ruth Rosen's *The World Split Open* was written in 2000 and is her attempt to educate

⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt* (Viking, 1992), 3.

future generations about the Cold War's impact on the women's movement.⁷ Rosen starts her work by addressing the discontent of many women in the 1950s and 1960s during the era of containment. Although some characterize those decades as the idyllic, family centered, American life, Rosen contends that seething beneath the surface were homemakers and wives that were anything but content. As the baby boom generation came of age, they rebelled against the domestic containment that had incarcerated their mothers and sought new avenues of liberation and independence. Rosen tells the stories of the Civil Rights Movement and how it energized and exploited women, causing women to seek a movement of their own. She pulls no punches in describing the challenges and fractures of the women's movement's decentralized leadership that often turned on their own. Rosen covers the various feminist movements of the 1970's before transitioning into describing the "superwoman" of the 1980s.

Rosen's book is well researched and uses a variety of sources such as letters, magazine articles, media interviews, statistics, and books as sources. Rosen's most valuable efforts came in showing the inequality of gender relations throughout the Cold War era. She wrote the book because she was concerned that women today did not know about the struggles of the feminists of her day. She wanted the women of the modern era to recognize that they are free to study, to speak, to write, and to choose their occupation because of the efforts of their mothers and grandmothers before them. She wanted the new generations of women to show their gratitude by being involved in the reforms of the present. She contended the revolution for women's rights is well under way and has no end in sight.⁸

⁷ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (Penguin Books, 2000), xiv.

⁸ Ibid., 344.

Although this paper's samplings of women's history stops nearly 20 years ago, the works about women will continue in the other topics. Women's history has become so ingrained in modern researcher's writings that women's perspectives do not need to be singled out as their own topic. Instead readers and researchers expect women's perspective to be covered and modern authors have seamlessly woven women's experiences into their works. It is because of these earlier works that looked at women's experiences singularly and in new ways that authors realized the power and contribution women have had on American historiography. Women's perspectives will be covered in depth in many of the following works across the two remaining topics.

The Cold War

One aspect of history is that it should correct the misconceptions and biased stories of the past. The development of Cold War historiography provides an excellent example of this correction in a few ways. This paper will explore the changing historiography of Dwight Eisenhower as his Cold War legacy is looked upon more favorably than it previously was. Other articles will look at the use of the Central Intelligence Agency now that the dogma of the fight against the threat of global Communism is over and a more objective evaluation can be conducted. The new research will show that many of the stories from the Cold War's past were skewed for a variety of reasons. Again, historians are not attempting to revise history, but are discovering that through research and retrospection the previous singular perspectives were not the only way to view the subjects of the Cold War.

The presidency of Dwight Esienhower was heavily criticized by the Kennedy administration as a means to justify their new policies. As a result the long standing historical

narrative placed Eisenhower as a simplistic and do nothing president. Robert Griffith's 1982 "Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Corporate Commonwealth" was an early look at the new historiography of the Age of Eisenhower. Although Griffith thought Eisenhower was anything but an intellectual, he did recognize that Eisenhower's military experience and personal philosophy made him a moderate conservative that believed in corporate responsibility.⁹ Griffith recognized Eisenhower's "middle way" and that Eisenhower resented partisan politics and despised "pressure groups" or special interests.¹⁰ Griffith showed that Eisenhower was hesitant to engage Senator Joseph McCarthy due to his desire to unify the Republican Party and to avoid demagoguery. Griffith recognized Eisenhower's efforts to administratively support Civil Rights, but he attributes this desire to Attorney General Herbert Brownell and believed that Eisenhower shared the common prejudices of the time.¹¹ He believed that Eisenhower thought the *Brown* decision was a mistake and that Eisenhower would not take a political stance on the issue and was forced to act in Little Rock.¹²

Melvin Goodman was a former CIA employee that criticized the CIA's failures in the 1980s in a *Foreign Policy* article, "Ending the CIA's Cold War Legacy" in 1997. Goodman paints a politicized CIA under the leadership of William Casey and Robert Gates that fabricated and altered intelligence assessments in order to support their policy desires with President Reagan and Bush.¹³ The CIA's utter failure in claiming Gorbachev was just up to usual

⁹ Robert Griffith, "Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Corporate Commonwealth" (*The American Historical Review*, 02 1982. doi:10.1086/ahr/87.1.87), 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹² *Ibid.*, 116.

¹³ Melvin A. Goodman, "Ending the CIA's Cold War Legacy," *Foreign Policy*, no. 106 (1997), 130.

communist tricks and their failure to see the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union greatly hamper its credibility. Goodman believed that the CIA must get back to their roots as an intelligence agency and not a policy making group, an espionage organization, or tactical intelligence agency for the military.¹⁴ Goodman's perspective of a flawed and dangerous CIA directly contradicts the popular notions that the United States was the moral leader of the Cold War against the evil Soviets.

It is important for readers to understand that despite these alternative viewpoints, they are just a piece of the larger picture in a very complex and nuanced historiography. No matter what the subject or topic concerns, there is often no "smoking gun" that will confirm or disprove entire ideologies or alter the facts of history. Goodman's argument that the CIA was manipulated and should not be proud of their late Cold War accomplishments does not prove that capitalism was wrong and that the Soviets should have won. History is not a zero sum game. It was possible for the Soviet system to be flawed and destructive just as much as it was for the United States. These alternative perspectives should not be feared and often do not need to be countered. They should simply be acknowledged and learned from.

Elaine May's *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* written in 1988 and revised in 2008, studies the 1950s centered on a social, political, and domestic life that revolved around the Cold War theory of containment. May contends that the generation of the 1920s was not much different than the generation of their grandchildren in the 1960s. This leads to the question of what made the generation of the 1950s so focused on family and security and that was the goal of *Homeward Bound*. May believed that as the United States took a role of

¹⁴ Ibid., 143.

containing Soviet aggression abroad and also the Soviet nuclear threat, containment also applied in domestic political and social life as well. Outside the home racial, homosexual, and Communist influences represented a threat to domestic tranquility. As a result, postwar adults wanted to retreat into the walls of their home to contain this threat. Containment also meant conformity and outside the home the political culture rewarded its adherents and marginalized its detractors.¹⁵

Homeward Bound was a required reading in multiple classes because May's book directly challenged the idyllic 1950s American domestic homelife. The 1950s is still often revered as a happy and splendid period of American history. May made it abundantly clear that there were deep seated issues seething under the surface and that many marginalized groups were not as happy with the 1950s. Again, this does not mean that there were not happy Americans that did find contentment, success, and stability in the 1950s. However, the struggle for civil rights was real, the persecution of anyone viewed as a Communist happened, and women were fighting to find their voice in a male dominated world.

Two more books were published a year apart that sought to add new perspectives of the Eisenhower Presidency. In 2006 Steven Wagner wrote *Eisenhower Republicanism: Pursuing the Middle Way*. Wagner believed Eisenhower molded a "middle way" where he would not seek to take either extreme on an issue and instead seek a rational and restrained response.¹⁶ Wagner correctly observed that the middle way was often mistaken as being unable to take a stand or lacking political sophistication. Wagner showed that Eisenhower's reaction to the *Brown*

¹⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books, 2008), 16.

¹⁶ Steven Wagner, *Eisenhower Republicanism: Pursuing the Middle Way* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 5.

decision was not indifference, but carefully crafted as his middle way approach. He was not a segregationist, but believed that reform would take time.¹⁷ As Wagner's title suggests, he was a firm believer in Eisenhower as the cautious and unpolitical administrator.

David Nichols wrote *A Matter of Justice: Eisenhower and the Beginning of the Civil Rights Revolution* in 2007 to "set the record straight" about Eisenhower and Civil Rights. Nichols believed that it was only a myth that Ike was "no leader at all" in the Civil Rights realm. Instead Nichols contended that Eisenhower was a complex President that was not a professional politician that governed by sound bites, but through concrete actions.¹⁸ As a result the record on Eisenhower had been horribly represented by a clear political bias until more documents were available with the passage of time. The full scholarship available in the archives had only become available over the last decade and has encouraged new ways to look at the Age of Eisenhower.

William Hitchcock's 2018 *The Age of Eisenhower* presented a very favorable view of the Eisenhower Presidency. Hitchcock believed that Eisenhower was vilified by the Democratic Party and the Presidency of John Kennedy nearly buried Eisenhower's legacy.¹⁹ Eisenhower was described as an amateur in politics that was disinterested in governing and more interested in golf and bridge. With the passage of time and a presidential library, the documents showing Eisenhower's true thoughts and directives showed anything but an aloof automaton, but a

¹⁷ Ibid., 74.

¹⁸ David Alan Nichols, *A Matter of Justice: Eisenhower and the Beginning of the Civil Rights Revolution* (Simon & Schuster, 2007), 2.

¹⁹ William I. Hitchcock, *The Age of Eisenhower America and the World in the 1950s* (Simon & Schuster, 2018), xiv.

complex president that was wholly engaged in the issues of his time.²⁰ Hitchcock's recent work provides a capstone for the more nuanced view of the Eisenhower Presidency. The scholarship regarding Eisenhower perfectly illustrates how with additional research new perspectives of history can change in less than a generation. This is not "revisionist history" as some might suggest, but carefully sourced historiographies that look at the past in different ways.

Civil Rights

The Civil Rights Movement has probably suffered the most from a single-perspective historiography in the past. However, over the last 30 years the historical record has witnessed an explosion of new material that has challenged the textbook narrative of the past. The mainly white perspective on the Civil Rights Movement has been successfully countered by the observations of blacks, women, and black women. These historiographies show a complex movement that was not unified, but also struggled within itself. Ultimately the push for civil rights began to take a turn towards class struggle and that is where the singular white perspective diverged and created its own historiography.

Robert Weisbrot's *Freedom Bound* was written in 1990 and serves as an in depth history of America's Civil Rights Movement. He believed that a liberal coalition of whites and blacks existed to make the well known civil rights victories of the 1960s. However, this coalition was still controlled by whites and only went as far as was required without upsetting the status quo of white power. As blacks continued to live in segregation and poverty, the coalition began to unravel as African Americans sought more reform than whites were willing to concede.²¹

²⁰ Ibid., xvi.

²¹ Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: a History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (Plume, 1990), 189.

Weisbrot concluded that despite the progress made up to his writing in 1990, there was still segregation outside of the law and that Jim Crow was not entirely dead.²² Weisbrot's work was important to show that white America's belief that the Civil Rights Movement had won, was far from over. Certainly the recent increase of racial tension during and following the presidency of Barack Obama vindicates Weisbrot's contentions.

Michael Klarman published his backlash theory about the *Brown* decision in 1994 in an article titled, "How Brown Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis". Klarman believed that the *Brown* case was not the pivotal moment in civil rights history that many modern historians claim. He contended that after *Brown*, segregation continued and most blacks did not see the end of Jim Crow. He argued that southern whites became more incensed and more active in resisting the coming change.²³ Klarman posits that it was this often violent and oppressive backlash by the white resistance that showed northern whites how bad segregation was and how necessary civil rights were at the time.²⁴ This perspective counters the often rosey textbook view that the *Brown* decision instantly changed America for the better. The violence and struggle in the South was far from over.

Mary L. Duziak wrote *Cold War Civil Rights* in 2000 as a means of exploring the international view of America's Civil Rights Movement and how that international view shaped the movement. Duziak believed the Civil Rights Movement started during the growing criticism of American segregation and racism during World War II as well as the NAACP's efforts to

²² Ibid., 316.

²³ Michael J. Klarman, "How Brown Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis," *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (06 1994), 82.

²⁴ Ibid., 91.

combat wartime production discrimination.²⁵ Many traditional narratives cover the individual efforts of Civil Rights leaders in combating racism in the 1950s and 1960s, but Duziak shows that they were assisted by pressure from the international view of America's race problems. The conflict was multifaceted coming from allies' views of American racism, potential allies from newly freed nations of Africa and their treatment in America, and from Communists who advocated their race neutral class struggle. Duziak books shows that often the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations were not concerned so much about doing what was right for Civil Rights, but doing what they could to appease internationalist condemnations of American democracy.

Lynne Olson wrote *Freedom's Daughters* in 2001 in order to discover the contributions of women in the Civil Rights Movement.²⁶ "From Sojourner Truth and the Grimke sisters, to Ida Wells and Mary Church Terrell, to Ella Baker and Pauli Murray, to Diane Nash and Fannie Lou Hamer, the tradition of defiance, commitment, and community had been passed along, from one generation of women to another, in a great, tightly linked chain."²⁷ Olson provided a fascinating look inside the movement from not just the view of black women, but white women as well. She acknowledges the conflict between women of different races and explains the origins in slavery and leading up to the women's rights movement of the 1970s. White women wanted to help the Civil Rights Movement because they too knew what it felt like to be a second class citizen.²⁸

²⁵ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 9.

²⁶ Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters* (Touchstone Ed., 2001), 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 409.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

David Howard-Pitney published *Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, and the Civil Right Struggle of The 1950s and 1960s* in 2004. He assembled the works and speeches of King and X in order to show their real range and depth and avoid the simplistic or false images that can mislead and support opposite agendas.²⁹ He cites scholarship that portrays King as trapped in his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech because it was what white people feel most comfortable with. In reality the last five years of King’s life showed he was critical of capitalism, imperialism, and militarism in America. Howard-Pitney believes that conservatives hide this image of King in order to use him against deeper movements for equality like affirmative action.³⁰ Similarly, X was portrayed in his earlier Nation of Islam days as a radical and not the more moderate activist he was after his international trips and split from the Nation of Islam. Howard-Pitney’s work supports that the textbook views of history are often at odds with expanded research and only show limited perspectives.

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall wrote “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past” in 2005. She cites the New Deal as a largely segregated program that still discriminated against blacks.³¹ She claims that it was the concessions from World War II and after that marked the start of progress of the Civil Rights Movement and also the backlash against it.³² Dowd Hall calls the 1960s the classical phase of the struggle and argues that the movement continues today as public schools and inner cities resegregate, the wealth and income gap widens, and the

²⁹ David Howard-Pitney, *Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, and the Civil Right Struggle of The 1950s and 1960s: A Brief History with Documents* (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 27.

³⁰ Ibid., 23.

³¹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (03, 2005), 1241.

³² Ibid., 1248

“prison-industrial complex” incarcerates disproportionate numbers of minorities.³³ Dowd Hall believed that the New Right had hijacked the Civil Rights Movement and made the movement’s goal “color blindness”. She contended that this allowed whites to claim that under this new legally equal system, any failures by black Americans to achieve the American dream are of their own making. Dowd Hall was clear that the Civil Rights Movement had begun to focus on the inherent inequalities of society and that the Civil Rights leaders were emphatic that the structural problems of racism were in fact class based.³⁴

“The Strange Career of Annie Lee Moss: Rethinking Race, Gender, and McCarthyism” was written by Andrea Friedman in 2007. Friedman illustrates the career of Annie Lee Moss, a black woman who worked for the United States government for over 30 years and was embroiled in the loyalty programs of the 1950s. Friedman believes that Moss was exploited by all sides of the loyalty debates and her agency was removed to protect white Americans racial views.³⁵ Friedman does an excellent job in researching and citing her work and wrapping the testimony of Annie Lee Moss into what it should be recognized today. Much like Rosa Parks’ activism was ignored and dismissed so she could meet the role of a poor working black woman who just wanted to sit down, Annie Lee Moss had a role to play as well. She was well aware what was at stake and she knew she had to play her role to continue to survive living and working in Washington DC. Friedman does a service in showing that Annie Lee Moss was not some simpleton as history portrayed her, but a sophisticated mother and activist that understood her

³³ Ibid., 1261

³⁴ Ibid., 1237.

³⁵ Andrea Friedman, "The Strange Career of Annie Lee Moss: Rethinking Race, Gender, and McCarthyism," *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 2 (2007), 447.

sacrifice was needed to serve the greater good.

Peniel Joseph's "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field" published in 2009 contended that the black power movement started earlier in the 1950s with local activism of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam and grew alongside the civil rights activists in the ten years after *Brown*.³⁶ He further showed that black power was not simply the militant dichotomy of the more rational civil rights movement, but a responsive and capable grassroots movement to serve black citizens in need.³⁷ Joseph believed that the media largely drove this militant image and historians largely followed suit.³⁸ He wrote that as new studies emerge, they will show that the black power movement was multiracial, multigenerational, and had a transnational impact.³⁹

Conclusion

Any current student of modern American history exists in a brand new world of expanded historiographies that offer a myriad of perspectives. These perspectives have always existed and have long been suppressed for a variety of political, socio-economic, and social reasons. Readers who grew up in the 20th century will find many of these new historiographies are not the history they read in their textbooks as they were growing up. As the layman is exposed to these new perspectives and without a complex understanding of history and the bias implicit in its application, their foundation is disturbed and doubts of authenticity form. However, the historiography of these new works is soundly sourced and most claims of "revisionist history"

³⁶ P.E. Joseph. "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field." *Journal of American History* 96, no. 3 (12, 2009), 767.

³⁷ Ibid., 763.

³⁸ Ibid., 757.

³⁹ Ibid., 775.

are without merit. It then becomes the modern historian's task to educate the older generations about these new perspectives through new works that highlight these once ignored or dismissed perspectives. More importantly, historians must educate the new generations about the historical bias of the past and that history has always contained these perspectives. These perspectives must be recorded and shared so a more complete understanding of the past can be attained. Given the proliferation of professional historians, there is a demand to discover and share these different perspectives in order to find topics with perspectives that have not been previously covered. These rich and diverse historiographies will continue to make the present an exciting time to study and present history.

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