

Jacob Josselyn
Cape Cod Collaborative
TAH
9/16/10

Book Review of *The Crucial Decade*

My recent study of Frederick Lewis Allen's book *Only Yesterday*, has piqued my interest in contemporary history. So when I came upon *The Crucial Decade: America, 1945-1955* by Eric F. Goldman, I decided to review it. Goldman writes about the ten years following the end of World War II, however, he does it, like Allen, the year after the period has ended, in 1956. Goldman focuses on the new prosperity of many Americans, the changing racial attitudes, the debate over the welfare state, and the beginning of the Cold War. Goldman witnessed these events and interviewed participants and includes details that most studies of this period have since left out, but the most interesting aspect of his writing is his lack of hindsight. Goldman does not know the successes of the Civil Rights movement or the conflicts with Cuba and Vietnam. This piece of historical writing is unique for its fresh, unedited viewpoint.

Author's Thesis

Goldman's thesis can be quickly surmised from his title. He argues that the ten years following World War II's conclusion were crucial to what the United States and its people would be. More specifically, this post-war period created aspirations, "the struggle of poor people or men of lower status to achieve more income and more of a sense of human dignity." It would be the people that demanded major changes and as Goldman explains, history is full of nations that have "tried to walk against a great tide of human aspirations and been swallowed ignominiously."

Goldman begins with the returning soldiers and the reunited families. If the Depression years were extremely hard, the war years were terrifying, and juxtaposed next to those, 1945 and beyond was full of promise. For the first time in fifteen years, Americans felt they could “consume without guilt.” Helping foster this new sense of prosperity was the fact that the New Deal policies continued by offering the G.I. Bill. The Depression and the War behind them and an invigorated economy brought enough changes in themselves, but college tuition for working class kids changed America in the most crucial way. It created hope for the poor.

Goldman goes on to explain that this post-war decade is when the United States had to finally embrace its position as an international power. He uses the example of Arthur H. Vandenberg to illustrate the change. As a powerful, Republican senator on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Vandenberg “had been an all-out isolationist.” He was for neutrality, against the Draft Act, and against Lend-Lease. He even downplayed Germany’s invasion of Poland. But during World War II he visited London and listened to the German bombs sailing over the city. He then said to a friend, “How can there be immunity or isolation when man can devise weapons like that?” Months later in 1945, Vandenberg gave a speech in Senate a journalist described as “the most important (speech) to come from the Senate chamber in the last 80 years.” Vandenberg closed his speech with the words, “I want maximum American cooperation...I want a new dignity and a new authority for international law.” This change of heart from the staunchest of isolationists highlights the changing views of most Americans. When the Senate voted on joining the United Nations, only two senators voted ‘no.’ The United States was now going to be a fixture in international debate. But Goldman could only guess how serious a fixture we would end up

being.

Goldman spends much of his book writing about containment and the Communist threat, especially during the Korean War. At the end of the Korean War Goldman writes, “(the U.S.) had established emphatically before the world that Communist advances could be resisted.” Goldman mentions a truce in Indochina but the failure to stop communism in the Vietnam War has not happened yet. Instead he writes that “on July 20, 1954, no shooting war existed anywhere on the globe for the first time since the Japanese invaded Manchuria twenty-three years before.” Goldman also believed that the Russian leaders after Stalin were changing and becoming more conciliatory. Both of these issues would end up being short-lived, but for the United States this time period allowed them to continue to push for a better, more normal life, far removed from war and depression.

The end of the Korean War saw new victories for African-Americans. Jackie Robinson was still an iconic baseball player but now the Supreme Court was helping to make gains by ruling in favor of integrating schools. Goldman writes with some hope but does not know there will be many tragedies and hardships before real change is achieved. For college girls, polls of the day reveal that they were more concerned with having children and families than pursuing careers. A rather humorous story revealed a new and peaceful norm for Americans. In 1954 the Water Commissioner of Toledo could not figure out why water was being used so much during certain three minute time periods. After some investigating, it was found that people were taking bathroom breaks during television commercials. TV dinners would also become popular in this year. Only now, over fifty years later, does the television seem to be at risk of being replaced by computer technology.

Goldman interviewed many of his contemporaries and also relied on his own first

hand accounts of this time period to write his book. He made a very clear case that Americans wanted and expected to better their lives with or without government help. He also established the many complications that the United States had to maneuver to embrace its role as an international power. And however incomplete these narratives are looking at them from six decades after the fact, Goldman makes the case that they did drastically change America during the “Crucial Decade.”

Application

As a text in the classroom, Goldman’s book would be limited but useful. Students in a high school class would find much of the book easy to read and in many parts entertaining. A good exercise in the classroom would be to have the students try to figure out which of Goldman’s assumptions ended up being wrong. For example, Goldman writes that people were so full of hope in 1945 that they believed they would have “dinner cooked by the flick of a single button,” their children would be educated by televised teachers, and vacations would be taken on different continents. Students could then discuss how none of those things are strange today but were not achieved anywhere near 1945. Students could also write a response to Goldman’s claim that the conservatives of the 1950’s accepted as normal many aspects of the New Deal such as social security and welfare. Students could include discussions of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan and how conservatives eventually became more conservative again. Contemporary history is always interesting and *The Crucial Decade* by Eric F. Goldman did not disappoint.