

Cold War Insecurity as Women's Opportunity: Sputnik, The National Defense Education Act of 1958, and Shifting Gender Roles in Eisenhower's America

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Cold War Insecurity as Women's Opportunity:
Sputnik, The National Defense Education Act of 1958, and
Shifting Gender Roles in Eisenhower's America

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Introduction

At first blush, the expression “Cold War feminism” seems a contradiction in terms. The widespread perception of American women’s experience during the Cold War era – especially its early stages – consists of images of women like June Cleaver and Donna Reed cooking and cleaning, trapped in that comfortable prison of domesticity so indelibly depicted by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*. Yet such stereotypes obscure more than they illuminate; in fact, the 1950s and early 1960s witnessed a dawning awareness throughout many sectors of American society that women were good for more than simply bearing children and tending house. The threat of communism, epitomized by the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik in 1957, created extreme anxiety in the United States, an anxiety that manifested itself in two contradictory fashions. First, American women learned that the nation’s best defense against communism began in the home, which was decidedly women’s domain. The second message that American women received during this time is unquestionably the lesser known. The federal government and much of American society identified women as an untapped resource in national defense, a source of innovation and advancement in science and technology, thereby implying that with the help of American women, the United States could match Soviet achievements in these fields.

Commonly held perceptions about the status of women in postwar America, though not comprehensive, are not entirely unfounded. The idealistic image of a happy wife and mother with a spotless home, dinner waiting when her husband arrived home from a long day at the office, and smiling, healthy children pervaded postwar American society. The popular media—television shows, movies, advertisements, newspapers, magazines, and

more—depicted American women as queens of all things domestic and ladylike. Women watched homemakers on television vacuuming while wearing skirts and high heels and read articles about looking their best for their husbands. Discussions of women’s higher education, even if addressed in the mainstream media, either emphasized it as a means of training for homemaking or discouraged it altogether. This discourse about how American women in the early Cold War ought to conduct themselves was ubiquitous in popular culture, and such messages and images continue to draw a great deal of attention today. Yet the reaction elicited in present-day America differs greatly from that of the postwar era. Magazine articles that promised to help women create the perfect jello mold or sew the finest curtains are now viewed largely as camp, but in the 1950s they clearly suggested to women that they were obliged to strive for perfection, especially in the home.

Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, first published in 1963, challenged many of the commonly accepted truths of postwar America. Friedan described “the problem that has no name” – the chronic unhappiness and lack of fulfillment among American women. Not all women were content in their lives as housewives, Friedan asserted, arguing against much of what many Americans held to be unequivocally true. *The Feminine Mystique* had a profound impact upon the millions of American women—and men—who read it in the 1960s and 1970s, and it continues to shape perceptions of the early postwar era almost half a century after its publication. Indeed, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Friedan’s manifesto is its durability: not only middlebrow but many scholarly treatments of 1950s womanhood tend to accept Friedan’s thesis without question. Three well-regarded histories of the United States in the 1950s—Douglas Miller’s and Marian Nowak’s *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, David Halberstam’s *The Fifties*, and J. Ronald Oakley’s

God's Country—paraphrase the central argument of *The Feminine Mystique*, insisting that the majority of American women were held in virtual captivity, their ambitions stifled by a close-minded “Father Knows Best” patriarchy incapable of imagining alternative roles for women.¹ While some historians have begun to challenge the scenario set forth by *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan’s analysis remains part of early Cold War orthodoxy, and there seems little doubt that her book is representative of the experience of at least a significant percentage—if not a majority—of American women during that era.

What was it that had made this gender ideology so pervasive in postwar America? According to Elaine Tyler May and other historians, more than the happiness and success of individual families were at stake. Much of American society viewed the home and the nuclear family which resided there as representative of the nation’s domestic superiority to the Soviet Union. Thus, the threat of communism carried significant implications for the 1950s homemaker, for many Americans hoped to compensate for the fact that their nation lagged behind the Soviet Union in science and technology by achieving the superior domestic life, which was, of course, woman’s domain. May dubs this notion “containment at home,” alluding to George Kennan’s famous containment policy in which the United States attempted to prevent the spread of communism. May cites the 1959 “kitchen debate” between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, where Nixon emphasized the superiority of American household appliances and the greater “femininity” of American women to compensate for the Soviets’ apparent advantages on the scientific front. Nixon explicitly cast the ongoing Cold War in gender terms, implying that American women could best serve the needs of their country by fulfilling tightly-

¹ Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1977), 147-181; David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 589-597; J. Ronald Oakley, *God's Country: America in the Fifties* (New York: Dembner Books, 1990), 407-408.

circumscribed roles in an imagined male-dominated, consumer-oriented nuclear family structure. The pressure on American women to achieve perfection in the home was far from trivial—the country’s security was in jeopardy, and the implication of Nixon’s argument in the “kitchen debate” was that if homemakers failed to adhere to their socially mandated roles, they would be classified as disloyal and subversive.

Throughout the 1950s, Americans’ Cold War anxiety grew, culminating in October 1957 with the Soviets’ launch of Sputnik. United States citizens had feared a somewhat intangible threat of Soviet domination up to that point, but with Sputnik they were able to *see* the danger of the Soviets’ power in very real terms. Prior to Sputnik, the Soviet threat had been more abstract, and asserting domestic superiority seemed like a viable way for Americans to compete; the launch of Sputnik, though, served as a reminder that the Soviet Union possessed technology that could very well be used against the United States. Hence, the impetus for women to challenge their allegedly restrictive domestic roles and enter the labor force increased even more, for Sputnik called attention to the technological advantage that the Soviet Union—a nation which considered women an important manpower resource—appeared to have over the United States. As the historian Barbara Clowse explains, “An atmosphere of crisis arose, generating in Americans a sense that the nation was losing the cold war. . . . By 1957, scientific and technological competition was stressed to a striking degree.”² The question of what would come next unnerved not only the public, but those within the government as well. President Dwight D. Eisenhower stated publicly that the United States had to meet the challenge of the Soviets “on the Communists’ own terms—outmatching them in military power, general technological

² Barbara Clowse, *Brainpower for the Cold War: The Sputnik Crisis and National Defense Education Act of 1958* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 3.

advance, and specialized education and research.”³ Thus, the emphasis on the importance of education increased greatly, for American national security would depend on the educational system in order to improve scientific and technological fields and defeat the Soviet Union.

A strategic shift in gender roles emerged, for women who had felt pressures to be purely domestic now felt that it was socially acceptable to enter the fields of science and technology. Instead of encouraging women to fight the Soviet threat solely in the domestic sphere, the American government chose to take a more hands-on approach. Beginning in 1955, the National Manpower Council, which had been established in 1951 at Columbia University with funding from the Ford Foundation, met to discuss the role of women in the workforce, issuing its final statement, entitled *Womanpower*, in 1957.⁴ In the report the council recognized the importance of women in making the United States a technologically competitive nation:

Potential ability ignores sex lines, and the proportion of those capable of high accomplishment is no smaller among women than among men. Our society’s needs for capable, highly trained persons are so great that we do ourselves a disservice by neglecting any reservoir of undeveloped talent and ability.⁵

Thus, American women constituted a “manpower resource” that the United States ought to stop ignoring.⁶ Instead of appreciating the variety of contributions that women made to the country, society emphasized their domestic roles. By employing the services of men and women in all arenas, based upon qualifications rather than gender, the nation as a whole would benefit greatly.

³ Cited in Clowse, 16.

⁴ Susan M. Hartmann, “Women’s Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994), 87.

⁵ National Manpower Council, *Womanpower* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), 32-33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

The National Manpower Council's primary objective in utilizing women in the workforce was to help the United States effectively compete with its communist opponent, the Soviet Union. *Womanpower* even directly compared the education and training of women in the United States to that of women in the Soviet Union, where many more women were educated and employed in scientific fields.⁷ Much of American society greatly feared the prospect of Soviet innovations, especially in the realm of science and technology. The Soviet Union had already exploded its first atomic bomb in 1949, and the notion that its citizens were continuing to make scientific advances was deeply threatening to many Americans. In addition to ensuring American security within individual homes and nuclear families, the *Womanpower* report noted, American women, like men, could be educated and utilized directly in the United States' efforts to compete with the Soviet Union in science and technology. In doing so, American women would help to prevent a Soviet victory in the so-called space race and the spread of communism that paranoid Americans figured would inevitably follow. Many Americans saw the Cold War as fundamentally a battle over the opposing political ideologies that the United States and the Soviet Union employed. It followed, then, that if the Soviets achieved victories in space, that could only mean that they would be more powerful and therefore successful in spreading their communist ideology. The *Womanpower* report did not offer suggestions for how to make these opportunities for women a reality, but by stating that such opportunities ought to exist and that they would benefit national defense, *Womanpower* helped to increase dialogue among Americans about the numerous valuable capabilities of American women.⁸

⁷ Ibid., 262.

⁸ Ibid., 37, 39.

The following year, the federal government passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958. This piece of legislation called for increased federal funding to support postsecondary education among American students, especially in the fields of math, science, and foreign language. The goal of this act, as implied in its title, was to aid in national defense, and it attempted to improve areas that the federal government considered crucial to national security. The act appropriated funding toward fields in which the United States lacked man- (or woman) power and was inferior to the Soviet Union, as demonstrated by Soviet advancements such as the launch of Sputnik. While the act was not aimed at women, it did respond to many of the same insecurities to which *Womanpower* had responded—namely, fears that the United States was not taking full advantage of its manpower resources. Whereas *Womanpower* was not published as a result of the Soviets’ launch of Sputnik (the National Manpower Council had begun meeting prior to its launch), historians identify the NDEA as a direct response to the Sputnik-induced panic experienced throughout the United States. Because the act was not gender-specific, women were just as eligible as men to receive federal aid if they chose to seek higher education in the specified fields—in theory, anyway.

Primarily due to the publication of the *Womanpower* report and the passing of the National Defense Education Act, historians commonly depict the years 1957 and 1958 as the turning point for American women’s educational and occupational opportunities.⁹ Yet notions of increasing opportunities for American women, especially in higher education, had been introduced long before the National Manpower Council even met to promote the

⁹ For examples of scholars who identify Sputnik as a turning point in women’s opportunities, see Susan Hartmann, “Women’s Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994), 93; and Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 95.

importance of women in national defense. Prominent Americans had campaigned for more opportunities for women in higher education before 1957. The notion of “womanpower” gradually developed, originating in the late 1940s and early 1950s and reaching its climax in the *Womanpower* report and the NDEA. Exhortations to improve the quality of women’s education with the goal of aiding in American defense also began to surface around the same time. In 1950, University of Illinois President George Stoddard wrote *On the Education of Women*, in which he encouraged higher education among American women and even concluded the book with a chapter titled “Can Women’s Education Save Us?”¹⁰ The following year, the American Council on Education issued a report, *Women in the Defense Decade*.¹¹

While these two works were certainly innovative, their publication did not bring about significant changes, at least not immediately. The issue of increasing educational opportunities for women was still not a prevalent topic in the discourse of most Americans. In other words, there was no sudden switch in common public sentiment from the support of complete domesticity to the encouragement of higher education degrees and professional careers among American women. Rather, it was a gradual progression, and early works such as Stoddard’s represented the evolution of support for women’s higher education, as he encouraged curricula specialized for women which emphasized home economics and fields which would not challenge accepted gender roles. This ongoing development of support for women’s higher education was hastened by the anxiety that Sputnik incited, resulting in more discernible advancements in women’s educational

¹⁰ George Stoddard, *On the Education of Women* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1950). 93-101.

¹¹ Raymond F. Howes, ed., *Women in the Defense Decade: Report of a National Conference of Persons Representing Schools, Colleges, Universities, Government Agencies, and Selected National Organizations, New York City, September 27-28, 1951* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1952).

opportunities. Before Sputnik, the growing support for women's education lacked federal backing; fearing that the Soviets posed a potentially lethal threat, however, the federal government suddenly felt more compelled to help make women's higher education possible.

Federal support that would help to make women's educational and opportunities a reality did not come in the form of legislation aimed specifically at women. While reports such as *Womanpower* did help to raise awareness of the ways that American women could contribute to national defense, mere suggestions that more opportunities for women ought to exist would not bring them about automatically. Federal financial support came in the form of the National Defense Education Act of 1958, in which the Federal Government allocated aid with the primary goal of improving the fields of mathematics and sciences – fields previously considered entirely off limits for American women.

The goal of this thesis is to explore the tension created by the conflicting messages of early postwar American society that sought to dictate how women ought to best serve their country. While many women felt pressured to adhere to “traditional” gender roles, a significant portion recognized the dawning realization of their fellow citizens that the United States needed to “catch up” technologically with the Soviet Union. Historians have tended to subscribe to the traditional conception that American women during the early Cold War were exclusively domestic creatures, whether by their own personal choice or because they had no alternative. More recent scholars have argued that the notion of women being “trapped” in the domestic sphere is a myth, and that in reality American women held jobs and played an important role in the public sphere of American society. Most of these historians view the launch of Sputnik as a critical turning point, but few

recognize that many notable figures recognized women's potential contributions years earlier. This thesis aims to unravel the complexities of the messages sent to women and their subsequent progress in educational and career opportunities in the 1950s. Popular culture certainly suggested to women that they belonged in the home, but the anxiety and insecurities brought about by the threat of the communist Soviet Union actually resulted in encouragement for women to become educated and contribute directly to the nation's effort to defeat the Soviets. Moreover, the connections between support for women's educational and occupational opportunities and the legislation that made such opportunities a reality reveal the evolving sentiment throughout 1950s America that women should not be limited to domestic lives, and that, if allowed to participate in the public sphere, they could help to strengthen the United States in the face of its Soviet enemies.

In the first chapter, I discuss the degree to which Friedan's depiction conformed to reality, especially prior to 1957-58. Much of the media and popular culture in the early fifties undeniably directed women towards domestic, non-academic lifestyles as wives and mothers. In Chapter Two, I counter that perspective by providing evidence to challenge those prevailing conceptions and demonstrate that women were actually identified as a tool valuable to national defense well before 1957. With works such as George Stoddard's *On the Education of Women* and the American Council on Education's report, *Women in the Defense Decade*, based upon a 1951 conference, many notable figures had begun to acknowledge women as a previously untapped resource. Chapter Three presents 1957 as the climax of awareness of women's newly identified role in American national defense. That year, the *Womanpower* report was issued and the Soviets launched Sputnik, which would further increase the already-rampant national anxiety and garner attention (and

funding) from the federal government. The fourth and final chapter addresses the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the piece of legislation in which the federal government took action to increase “manpower,” including womanpower, especially in fields of math and science. Through this act, women were given further incentive to pursue higher education for the sake of national defense against the United States’ Soviet adversaries.

Chapter One

Truth in the Mystique? Women of Virtue rather than Intellect

An advertisement for a Crosley electric range from a 1950 issue of *Life* magazine depicts a happy, lively woman standing beside her stove, dressed in a blouse and flowing skirt, wearing an apron and high heels and holding a spoon in one hand and a pot in the other. Musical notes float about her, and the ad reads “Crosley puts *fun* in your cooking!”¹² This fictional housewife represents many people’s conception of a typical American woman in the 1950s – serving the needs of her family and smiling convincingly all the while. For many, the postwar era in the United States evokes a “good ol’ days” nostalgia for a time when happy couples lived in newly built homes in suburban communities, husbands spent their days as breadwinners at the office, and wives were domestic goddesses, raising children, tending house, and delighting in their husbands’ success. Representations of the 1950s in popular culture have certainly encouraged these notions; images of exuberant postwar housewives such as June Cleaver and Donna Reed persist to this day, suggesting to audiences that all American women reveled in their lives as homemakers and never desired to pursue a life path that diverged from this so-called norm.

As a number of historians point out, such generalizations are not only humorous but false. They are myths, representative of very few women in the postwar United States. Yet they are not completely unfounded. In their zeal to revise our understanding of early Cold War American womanhood, some scholars ignore the very real social pressures that compelled mid-century women to be exclusively domestic creatures. These historians argue that, in the late 1940s and continuing throughout the 1950s, opportunities began to

¹² Crosley advertisement, *Life*, 13 February 1950, 61.

arise for women to enter higher education and utilize their intellectual—not simply domestic—capabilities. And it is unquestionably true that some women were able to pursue college and even graduate study, as well as enter the workforce. Nonetheless, such opportunities were few and far between. Yes, *discussion* of women’s potential role beyond the home became more widespread, but, by and large, throughout the popular media and mainstream society, the message communicated to women was explicit: their primary function was to be housewives. Women were incessantly reminded that this duty was vital to the security of their families and, in turn, the nation as a whole. Thus, women’s “education,” insofar as we can speak of it, emphasized domestic tasks, and America’s leading political figures affirmed that women could make their greatest contribution to the cause of national security by creating safe and comfortable nuclear families.

Popular Culture Encourages Stringent Gender Roles

American women found social pressures for domesticity not only in advertisements for home appliances during the early Cold War, but in nearly every form of media that they were likely to encounter. During the Second World War, the number of American women in the labor force increased by approximately 7.2 million because women held jobs that had previously been held by men who were serving in the war.¹³ Following the war, the nation experienced a backlash regarding gender roles. The days of Rosie the Riveter were suddenly a part of a very distant past, and rather than messages like “We can do it!” women encountered messages unequivocally exhorting them to assume their “proper” roles in the domestic sphere. Gone were the days of involvement in the working world, and

¹³ Marc Miller, “Working Women and World War II,” in *The New England Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (June 1992): 42.

while women's efforts had not been unappreciated, it was a given that women had served in the workforce exclusively due to the dire circumstances brought about by war. In 1945, however, the war finally ended, and the democratic United States had earned a convincing victory. Peace and democracy had triumphed, Americans believed, and the postwar era would surely be a time of contentment. There was no need for women – inherently moral and virtuous – to leave the comfort of home and enter the daunting world beyond their front steps, and for this many Americans rejoiced. Undoubtedly, some lamented the limitations placed on women's opportunities, but mainstream society – popular culture, government policy, and notable public figures – generally encouraged the strict gender ideology that the nation's success in World War II made possible.

In 1944, with the end of the war in sight, an article titled “You Can't Have a Career and Be a Good Wife” appeared in *Ladies' Home Journal*. The author of this article, who identified herself only as “a successful career wife” – meaning, of course, that being a wife *was* her career – stated that marriages were rarely successful when both spouses worked. “‘Successful career couples,’ so-called, try to keep up a glossy surface, hoping it will not crack and expose the disappointing makeshifts underneath,” she explained. She listed the common reasons that women might want to continue working after marriage—the desire for extra money, the yearning for stimulation and socialization outside the home, and the urge to express themselves through their work—and then dismissed them as selfish. Supplemental income, for example, would only bring about extravagant spending. “The wife who works to defeat loneliness,” she explained, “is only postponing, or sidestepping in cowardly fashion, the period of adjustment necessary to make her new life successful.” Marriage, the author implied, would not instantly be blissful, and a good wife would

selflessly devote herself to the success of her marriage. Her individual fulfillment could not take priority, for the most desirable source of fulfillment was a successful marriage.

The “successful career wife” did not stop her denigration of working wives there. “Most insidious of all is the danger threatening the girl who really finds her work stimulating,” she wrote. “The young woman who is giving her best to her work cannot give her husband and home all they deserve.” In making these assertions, the author unambiguously averred that a wife who worked or felt a strong desire to do so would be neglecting her husband and home. Upon marriage, she implied, a woman should put her own personal needs at the very bottom of her priority list—if she failed to do so, she was failing as a wife. The “successful career wife” described a series of scenarios in which a working wife would discomfit her husband, thereby weakening their marriage. If a husband did not receive the raise he had anticipated, for example, and came home to find his wife celebrating her newfound bonus, the very backbone of their marriage would suffer a severe blow. “A man wants comfort and someone to share his grouching at the boss at a low moment like that,” she explained, and “it hurts his male pride to have his woman winning, on her own, the business laurels he had hoped to lay at her feet.” The marriage would be “thrown off balance,” all because the wife had selfishly chosen to work for work’s sake. Adding children into the mix, the “successful career wife” stated, made a woman’s decision to work all the more perilous, and certainly more selfish. Not only did working women often neglect their children, but their marriages suffered as well. When mothers attempted to work, the author explained, there was “little time left for being a wife.” The author encouraged her readers to appreciate that their proper careers would be found in the home. Homemakers were “in business for themselves, and it doesn’t take a

psychologist to tell you that you can do twice the work, happily, under your own steam that you can be driven to do by outside forces.” In other words, those women who dared to complain about their lack of career should take pride the importance of their role and be appreciative of it.¹⁴

The postwar backlash against working women was by no means short-lived. The prevailing sentiment among women’s media concurred with the “successful career wife”: the role of housewife was critically important, and certainly nothing of which women should be ashamed. Dorothy Thompson’s 1949 article “Occupation—Housewife” exemplifies the manner in which the media encouraged the association of honor and pride with homemaking. In the article, Thompson, a very popular journalist who had her own monthly column in *Ladies’ Home Journal* from 1937-1961, recounted a conversation with a woman who doubted the significance of being a housewife. The woman shared a number of examples of her reservations about her role, but Thompson refuted them and explained the value of all that homemakers did. For example, the woman lamented that she had been a highly trained pianist years ago and could not play nearly as well as she had been able to; she also bemoaned her “wasted” college education. “All this vicarious living,” the woman sighed, suggesting dissatisfaction with her lifestyle. Intolerant of such negativity, Thompson retorted, “As vicarious as Napoleon Bonaparte. Or a queen. I simply refuse to share your self-pity.” Thompson’s message was clear: women ought to be proud of their accomplishments, and while often they were seen most clearly in the success of their children or husband, as housewives women played an irreplaceable role in the nuclear family. “The homemaker, the nurturer, the creator of childhood’s environment is the

¹⁴ “You Can’t Have a Career and Be a Good Wife,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, January 1944, 91.

constant recreator of culture, civilization and virtue,” Thompson concluded.¹⁵ Women reading this article, even if doubtful of their value as housewives, discerned the very clear message that they *should* be proud of their role.

Messages that women ought to exude happiness and pride as they went about their homemaking duties came not only from women’s magazines, but also from guidebooks instructing them on how to be the best possible wives, mothers, and, generally, women. The 1957 book *Dr. Schindler’s Woman’s Guide to Better Living 52 Weeks a Year*, for example, reads like an instructional manual or even a cookbook. Author John A. Schindler titled one chapter “A Predictably Pleasant Disposition and How to Acquire It,” and in it instructed women to cultivate a positive temperament so as to make daily activities and chores more enjoyable. “There is hardly any maturity a woman has greater need of in living with a husband and bringing up children than a mellow, mature disposition,” he insisted.¹⁶ A pleasant personality, then, was critical in achieving the obligatory happiness of Cold War womanhood. In a later chapter, “It Is Unnecessary to Be Irritated or Angry,” Schindler instructed, “You should constantly handle irritations without getting upset, so that it becomes a mature habit you do not need to think about.”¹⁷ Promoting cheerfulness and suppressing discontent, according to Schindler, were keys to leading successful and happy lives as women in the postwar era. Nowhere in Schindler’s guide did he encourage women to make changes to their lives – other than to their own temperaments – if they

¹⁵ Dorothy Thompson, “Occupation—Housewife,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, March 1949, 11.

¹⁶ John A. Schindler, *Dr. Schindler’s Guide to Better Living 52 Weeks a Year* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957), 36. Schindler’s book was one of many to emphasize women’s “proper” domestic roles and blame those women who claimed to be unhappy for denying their “natural” womanly roles. See Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg, *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (New York: Harper & Harper, 1947) and Lawrence K. Frank and Mary Frank, *How to Be a Woman* (New York: Maco Magazine Corp., 1954).

¹⁷ Schindler, 132.

were unhappy. The implication was clear: if a woman was discontent, it was due to her own deficiencies and shortcomings.

The Prevailing Conception of Proper Women's Education

Popular media of the early Cold War discussed not only the unambiguous messages about women's role as homemakers, but also the role (or lack thereof) that education should play in women's lives. Most sources were quite clear in their assertions that the purpose of education was to prepare women for lives of domesticity. In October, 1950, *Life* magazine included a number of articles dedicated to the discussion of women's higher education. "Girls: How to Teach Them Is a Matter of Dispute" addressed the debate about the functions of women's education, framing the issue in provocative terms: "should they be prepared for careers as wives and mothers, for careers as 'thinking adults' or for just plain careers?"¹⁸ The article's anonymous author did not take a clear stance on the issue, but did profile the programs offered for women at Bennington, Vassar, Stephens, and Mills Colleges; especially noteworthy was Mills' "marriage major," which trained women in skills such as managing a family budget, cooking, and childrearing. In the same issue of *Life*, another feature article profiled Gulf Park By-the-Sea, a junior college whose administrators prided themselves on teaching female students to be "feminine rather than feminist." The photographs included in the feature story displayed women sunbathing ("The average Gulf Park girl works on her tan at least 15 minutes a day"), practicing water ballet, and catching crabs that they would later learn to cook in their home economics

¹⁸ "Girls in College: How to Teach Them Is a Matter of Dispute," *Life*, 16 October 1950, 139.

course. Judging from the article, a day at Gulf Park appeared to be more like a summer day at the beach than an educational endeavor.¹⁹

Another article in the *Life* education special issue was titled “The Educated Man,” and the absence of the discussion of the educated *woman* revealed a great deal about the gender ideology of the time. Columbia University professor Jacques Barzun began the article by stating, “For a writer to express himself publicly about the Educated Man is perhaps as dangerous as for a lady to bring up the topic of the Virtuous Woman.” In fact, the only two references to the female sex came in that opening sentence and later in the article, when Barzun stated that the average “girl” was “too busy in the kitchen and nursery to read a book,” implying that education among women was a waste. Throughout the article, Barzun, a bestselling author, scholar, and cultural icon of the 1950s, argued that Americans undervalued educated men. The greatest shame of all, according to Barzun, was that this demise of men’s education represented the overtaking of high-brow society by the low-brow, uncultured masses. Education, then, was the domain of sophisticated and cultured men, and surely women—known for their virtue rather than their intellect—had no place in Barzun’s editorial.²⁰ In that same issue of *Life*, another article echoed Barzun’s sentiment. “Some Issues Are Debated” presented educators’ primary concerns as of October, 1950. Listing concerns such as military drafts and the detrimental effects of the television on students, it mentioned nothing of female students or their education, and the article’s photographs portrayed only male students.²¹ Clearly, *Life*’s editors did not

¹⁹ “Gulf Park By-the-Sea: A Junior College Teaches its Girls to be Feminine Rather than Feminist,” *Life*, 16 October 1950, 159.

²⁰ Jacques Barzun, “The Educated Man: He is Still Envied But No Longer Emulated,” *Life*, 16 October 1950, 179.

²¹ “Some Issues Are Debated: The Educators Worry About Draft, TV, and Their Goals,” *Life*, 16 October 1950, 44-45.

consider women's education a primary concern, most likely because mainstream society did not regard females as intellectual beings.

Life was not the only magazine to address women's education, whether explicitly or implicitly. In another of Dorothy Thompson's columns in *Ladies' Home Journal*, "The Moments That Educate," she spoke of the most formative experiences in her life as being events that had occurred outside of the classroom. She claimed that she had learned the most influential of life's lessons from her family, and especially from her father. She described the events that had shaped her as "moments that open windows, which never again are wholly closed." These experiences included her first encounter with differing social classes and the heart-to-heart with her father that taught her to appreciate that God loved people of all classes. What was most telling about Thompson's article was not that she credited her family with contributing to the grown woman she ultimately became; rather, it was the manner in which she dismissed her formal education. "As I look back upon my life," she wrote, "I realize that what I was formally taught in school or college has had a relatively small effect." Thompson implied, then, that because her daily activities and interactions had provided those "moments that open windows," her schooling had been unessential. It followed, then, that she would have been perfectly content and equally learned had a formal educational experience not been emphasized as a part of her upbringing.²²

Challenging the Mystique

Some did publicly oppose these implications that women did not require higher education and would be entirely fulfilled by their domestic roles. The most notable critic

²² Thompson, "The Moments That Educate," *Ladies' Home Journal*, April 1954, 11, 209.

was Betty Friedan, famous for her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan decided to write the book because of the dissatisfaction she felt as she reflected back on her experience as a woman in the postwar United States. In the book's preface, Friedan explained that in 1957, when she began analyzing questionnaires that she had distributed to her female former college classmates about their feelings regarding America's rigid gender roles, she came to a crucial realization: "There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique. I wondered if other women faced this schizophrenic split, and what it meant."²³ Those women from television shows and magazine articles who had shared their extreme pride in being housewives and happily minimized the importance of education for women, according to Friedan, were not representative of American women. Rather, they were mythical concepts to which women felt obligated to conform, but never could. These imaginary heroines who prided themselves on their meticulously sewn curtains, freshly baked cookies, and forever-smiling children, according to Friedan, caused *real* women to stifle their feelings of dissatisfaction. Thus, "the problem that has no name" emerged, for no woman wanted to admit that she had not been fulfilled by her life as a wife, mother, and homemaker. Friedan even specifically addressed Dorothy Thompson's article "Occupation: Housewife," ridiculing Thompson for inaccurately representing women. Thompson herself was a journalist, after all, not a housewife; therefore, she could not personally attest to the fulfillment that she claimed homemaking provided.

Friedan's criticism of the "problem that has no name" extended beyond the trap of domesticity; she discussed the "feminine mystique" in terms of education as well. She

²³ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963), 9.

stated that in her research “there was one thing that produced frustration in all women of this time who tried to adjust to the house wife image. . . . The key to the trap is, of course, education. The feminine mystique has made higher education for women seem suspect, unnecessary and even dangerous.”²⁴ Thus, women who felt obligated to conform to the norms— accurate or inaccurate – of mainstream society would not pursue higher education. Moreover, Friedan lamented the fact that most women in the 1950s and early 1960s did not have the opportunity to receive a decent education, referring to women’s “self-enrichment” courses as an example of the few educational opportunities available to women. “The dimension of reality essential even to ‘self-enrichment’ is barred, almost by definition,” she asserted, “in a course specifically designed for ‘housewives.’”²⁵ Undoubtedly, Friedan would have scoffed at Mills College’s “marriage major” or Gulf Park’s “feminine rather than feminist” curriculum. Women’s so-called education, according to Friedan, was only perpetuating the “problem that has no name.” Friedan noted that the few schools and educators who valued high quality education for women faced “disuse of” and “resistance to” higher education by American women:

Some women’s colleges went out of business; some professors, at coeducational universities, said one out of three college places should no longer be wasted on women; the president of Sarah Lawrence, a women’s college with high intellectual values, spoke of opening the place to men; the president of Vassar predicted the end of all the great American women’s colleges which pioneered higher education for women.²⁶

If institutions that considered academic educational pursuits important for women could not stay afloat, they would either have to close or change their course offerings to conform

²⁴ Ibid., 357.

²⁵ Ibid., 362.

²⁶ Ibid., 151.

to the gender ideology of mainstream society, even if that ideology was not, as Friedan insisted, representative of American women.

After hundreds of pages of analysis of the intricacies of the “problem that has no name,” Friedan finally addressed the question of its fundamental roots – not its origins in magazines or other forms of women’s media, but the underlying circumstances that allowed the “feminine mystique” to captivate American society to the point that, according to Friedan, it created universally held misconceptions about American women. “There was, just before the feminine mystique took hold in America, a war, which followed a depression and ended with the explosion of an atom bomb,” she wrote. “After the loneliness of war and the unspeakableness of the bomb, against the frightening uncertainty, the cold immensity of the changing world, women as well as men sought the comforting reality of home and children.” As Friedan acknowledged, however, a desire for the comforts of family life did not explain the many long-lasting negative effects that she maintained she and the majority of American women had experienced. Nor did it explain the disheartening trends in women’s education. “I suppose a girl today, who knows from statistics or merely from observation that if she waits to marry until she finishes college, or trains for a profession, most of the men will be married to someone else, has as much reason to fear she may miss feminine fulfillment as the war gave the girls in the forties,” Friedan posited. “But this does not explain why they drop out of college to support their husbands, while the boys continue with their education.”²⁷ The uncertainty in the wake of the war explained the push for domesticity and family life, then, but Friedan could not explain why women would feel that education was not worth pursuing.

²⁷ Ibid., 182-84.

Perhaps Friedan's difficulty in reconciling the origins of domesticity and the departure from intellectual education stemmed from her own experiences. As Daniel Horowitz suggests in *Betty Friedan and the Making of the Feminine Mystique: The American Left, The Cold War, and Modern Feminism*, Friedan's extensive education and intellectual drive made her atypical of the American women she described who suffered so acutely from "the problem that has no name." In her time at Smith College in the late 1930s, according to Horowitz, Friedan (then Goldstein) was "an advocate of trade unions as the herald of a progressive social vision, a student exposed to feminist concerns, and a fierce questioner of the social privilege of her wealthy peers."²⁸ Horowitz does not base his argument solely on Friedan's extensive academic education, though. She admitted in 1973 that before she started writing the book in 1957, she "wasn't even conscious of the woman problem."²⁹ Thus, while *The Feminine Mystique* led readers to believe that Friedan had longstanding feelings of repression and dissatisfaction, even she admitted that she had been fairly content as a 1950s American woman. Horowitz contends, "Her claim that she came to political consciousness out of a disillusionment with her life as a suburban housewife was part of her reinvention of herself as she wrote and promoted *The Feminine Mystique*."³⁰ As Horowitz compellingly explains, Friedan's assertions became inherently less credible with the knowledge that she *created* her fictional persona as a "trapped" homemaker. According to Horowitz's argument, if Friedan had never been a housewife, she could not truthfully speak to the feelings of "the problem that has no name."

²⁸ Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, The Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 33.

²⁹ Cited in *ibid.*, 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

Not all historians challenge Friedan as adamantly as Horowitz does, and certainly his revelations about Friedan's early life are not tantamount to proof that her claims of American women's dissatisfaction in the early Cold War are false. Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak's *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* attempts to give a comprehensive history of the decade. In this well-known work, Miller and Nowak discuss gender roles and the "typical" American nuclear family, focusing on women's experiences. Their analysis of the postwar era typifies many of the assumptions held by Americans today about women's roles in the early Cold War. Most of those assumptions have been based upon Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, at least until more recent scholarship began to challenge them. "Many women found the wife-and-mother role not at all as fulfilling as the mystique had promised," Miller and Nowak explain. "They found themselves trivialized by spending all their time with children; they found themselves expanding housework into a major operation; they found the demands of their role not enjoyable but boring and humiliating."³¹ 1950s women were, according to Miller and Nowak, trapped in a comfortable prison of domesticity, where they had no choice but to conform to mainstream society's expectations that they would marry, raise children, and tend house: "A mock-Victorian vision of life became the great fifties American dream – Mom the homemaker, Dad the breadwinner, smiling determinedly in their traditional roles."³² If women dared to go against these alleged norms, they would be classified as fundamentally dysfunctional.

³¹ Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1977), 173. See also David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 591-597; J. Ronald Oakley, *God's Country: America in the Fifties* (New York: Dembner Books, 1990), 407-408.

³² *Ibid.*, 152.

Miller and Nowak also address the issue of women's education in the fifties. According to them, the reasoning behind women's decreased enrollment in colleges or completion of higher education was rooted in "functionalism"—educating students for their proper "functions," as determined by their gender, social status, race, and other factors—which began as early as elementary school. "Many school systems had misinterpreted the goals of progressive education to mean a student should be prepared for a future slot in life," they explain. "Educators would look at a child's social position, and then project the child's future from that. A kid's education became functional training for that preplanned future."³³ Thus, due to the assumption that men and women would inevitably fulfill prescribed gender roles, educators saw little reason to educate their students beyond those roles. The vast majority of women would presumably become homemakers, and thus their education would prepare them for domesticity and little more; those female students who aspired to break the mold would have difficulty doing so, because their "functional" educations would not allow such deviation. With few exceptions, suggest Miller and Nowak, American educators subscribed to the notion that women ought to be housewives, and consequently women had few opportunities to pursue more intellectual endeavors than home economics. After all, as Miller and Nowak explain, many Americans assumed that "[p]eople were only happy if they were functioning properly, if they obeyed their sexual roles," and the purpose of education was to prepare students for those proper functions.³⁴

³³ Ibid., 151.

³⁴ Ibid.

Women and Containment in the Home

According to historian Elaine Tyler May, those who failed to subscribe to their “proper” gender roles were not simply deemed dysfunctional and unhappy; they were also considered threats to national security. May suggests that many Americans believed that the “sexual independence” that women had demonstrated when they entered the workforce during the war “would weaken the nation during wartime and threaten the family later,” since the stable nuclear family served as the foundation for a secure country.³⁵ Not long after the end of World War II, when thousands of American men returned to the United States and reclaimed their jobs, the Cold War began. The Soviet Union exploded an atomic bomb, sending the United States into a frenzy and, as Friedan had suggested in *The Feminine Mystique*, compelling many Americans to seek solace in the “comfortable reality” of the nuclear family. “The modern family would, presumably, tame fears of atomic holocaust, and tame women as well,” explains May. “If women fulfilled their domestic roles, as adapted to the atomic age, they would rear children who would avoid juvenile delinquency (and homosexuality), stay in school, and become future scientists and experts to defeat the Russians in the cold war.”³⁶

Thus, May suggests that the emphasis placed on the importance of the nuclear family stemmed from Americans’ fears of Soviet domination and the spread of communism. She proposes that women felt pressured to conform to society’s alleged ideals because the prevailing belief among Americans was that the home was “the one institution that seemed to offer protection” from the threatening Soviets.³⁷ “Containment

³⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 78.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

at home,” as May dubs it, was the female homemaker’s responsibility. Historian Stephanie Coontz concurs, stating that the Cold War American family served as the “domestic version of George F. Kennan’s containment policy toward the Soviet Union: A ‘normal’ family and a vigilant mother became the ‘front line’ of defense against treason; anticommunists linked deviant family or sexual behavior to sedition.”³⁸

The nation’s leaders also made clear their value of the secure home in terms of national defense. The government’s measures to affirm gender roles corroborate May and Coontz’s link between the domestic family and the nation’s foreign policy. A prime example of this connection occurred in 1959, when Vice President Richard Nixon met with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Moscow, in what came to be known as the “kitchen debate.” As May explains, “The ‘kitchen debate’ was one of the major skirmishes in the cold war, which was at its core an ideological struggle fought on a cultural battleground.”³⁹ In it, Nixon claimed that American families, complete with working husbands and housewives who raised children and washed the family’s clothes in electric washing machines, were superior to Soviet families, for they embodied the spirit of American liberty and freedom of choice. “We don’t have one decision made at the top by one government official,” Nixon told Khrushchev. “We have many different manufacturers and many different kinds of washing machines so that the housewives have a choice. . . . Would it not be better to compete in the relative merits of washing machines than in the strength of rockets?”⁴⁰ According to May, Nixon emphasized the superiority of American household appliances, because “arguments over the strength of rockets would only point

³⁸ Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 33.

³⁹ May, 11.

⁴⁰ Cited in *ibid.*, 11.

out the vulnerability of the United States in the event of a nuclear war between the superpowers.”⁴¹ Thus, while the United States lacked the scientific capabilities that the Soviet Union had demonstrated, Nixon championed American superiority in the domestic sphere.

Conclusion

The unrealistic popular culture representations of 1950s American women as domestic goddesses—which likely spoke to many of the general public’s Cold War anxieties and insecurities—had support from the nation’s leaders. Many American women of the Cold War era, as depicted in magazine articles, television shows, and even *The Feminine Mystique*, did spend their lives as housewives, though not necessarily happily. The pressures that women faced to become homemakers are undeniable (and frequently documented). Not all women, however, conformed to the “norms” set forth by the popular media, and certainly not all who did conform did so as eagerly as fictional housewives like June Cleaver. World War II, still fresh in Americans’ minds, had demonstrated to women that life beyond the cul-de-sac did exist and that they were capable of directly contributing to national defense. Before the war even ended, though, the backlash against working women began. The prevailing sentiment among Americans was that women belonged in the home rather than the labor force, and that all women should *desire* lives of domesticity. This predominant ideology had educational implications as well. If women did pursue higher education, most often their curricula offered training for marriage and childrearing rather than academic pursuits. Homemaking, popular media insisted, was educational in its own, feminine respect.

⁴¹ Ibid., 12.

Of course, all women did not aspire to be housewives, but the media made many women feel that it was their own fault if they were unhappy as wives and mothers. Betty Friedan's depiction of the widespread discontent among American women in the postwar era highlighted many of their feelings of worthlessness and loneliness. Numerous historians have studied and attempted to interpret these American women's experiences, but the complexity of the era makes for diverse explanations. Daniel Horowitz focuses upon the hypocrisy of Friedan, insisting that her privileged life, in which she studied academic disciplines in college and became involved in political organizations, made her unable to speak for the majority of women—not unlike, ironically, Dorothy Thompson in “Occupation: Housewife,” who Friedan censured for claiming to represent housewives when she was actually a journalist. While Friedan may not have been representative of a typical housewife either, she touched on a number of sources of dissatisfaction among American homemakers. Miller and Nowak, among many other historians, accept Friedan's claims as fact. Elaine Tyler May and Stephanie Coontz do not deny that a substantial number of American housewives were dissatisfied, and they strive to explain the push for domesticity in terms of the nation's conflict with the Soviet Union. They argue that Cold War “containment” began at home, for the nuclear family represented the nation's best defense against communism.

“Containment” at home implied adherence to “traditional” gender roles, but not all Americans believed this strategy to be the nation's best defense against the Soviets. No nation as large and diverse as the United States could possibly generate a single message *and* have it be accepted in only one manner. While messages that women should be housewives and mothers and ought to be happy doing so pervaded postwar society, some

did suggest that women deserved better educational and professional opportunities. Many argued that stringent gender roles would protect the nuclear family, which served as the foundation of the nation as a whole. Others contended, however, that women would better serve national security if directly participating in efforts to compete with the Soviets in science and technology rather than maintaining comfort and safety behind the scenes. Thus, women were faced with a variety of seemingly opposing pressures, but at the root of each was the objective of preventing the United States from falling to the communist Soviet Union in the Cold War.

Chapter Two

Early 1950s Academic Voices Emerge: The Groundwork for Educational Reform

As 1940s and 50s popular media suggest, women in postwar America received conflicting messages as to their proper roles, and during that time the issue of education was garnering an increasing amount of attention. The nation as a whole was recovering from World War II and vying for hegemonic status with the Soviet Union. According to many pundits, for the United States to defeat the Soviets would require far-reaching changes in American society. In particular, a reassessment of education was essential, and not only women's magazine columnists but prominent intellectuals addressed the question of how women's education would play into the future of the United States. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the majority of works published in the popular media in the late 1940s and early 1950s stressed the importance of women as domestic beings, and the responsibility that women's education must play to support women's roles as homemakers. While magazines and other popular works maintained that women's domesticity was essential to the success of the nation, more academic voices were significantly more varied in their analyses of women's education. Indeed, many academics, although by no means all of them, called for women to extend their influence beyond the home and into the public sphere. How would American women best serve their country in its quest to establish its superiority over the Soviets? Some academics said in the kitchen and some said in the workforce, but all agreed that women's education needed to be modernized in order to best serve the nation during the early years of the Cold War.

Calls to Educate Women for Lives of Domesticity

In 1950, Lynn White, Jr. wrote *Educating Our Daughters: A Challenge to the Colleges*. White was the president of Mills College—the very same institution spotlighted by *Life* for offering a “marriage major.” He recognized that women’s education was in need of improvement. As he saw it, however, the problem facing women was not that mainstream society had dictated “proper” and restrictive gender roles, but rather that women had been taught to undervalue themselves as a sex. “America’s deepest spiritual malady,” he argued, “is lack of respect among its women both for themselves as persons and for themselves as a group. We have accepted the theory of equality between women and men, but we are far from achieving the substance of it.” Yet White did not argue that women ought to have equal opportunities to explore various career paths or lifestyles. Instead, he stated, “The task [of achieving equality] will not be complete until women respect women as much as they do men, until women by achieving respect for themselves win the full respect of men, and until women are as glad to be women as men are to be men.”

⁴² Women’s self-respect, according to White, would be determined by encouraging the general American public to value women more highly, not by allowing women to pursue professional careers and higher education. “The resentment of many women towards talk about differences between the sexes shows the degree to which our form of civilization has undermined their self-respect,” White declared. “It is comic as well as tragic that women in such numbers have come to accept the biologically fantastic notion that to be different from men is to be inferior to men.” According to White, all Americans, particularly women

⁴² White, Lynn, Jr. *Educating Our Daughters: A Challenge to the Colleges* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950), 27.

themselves, should respect and appreciate women for their many contributions to society within the home.

Not only should Americans applaud women's role as homemakers, White argued, but to challenge these roles would be demeaning and—even worse—“defeminizing” to the female sex. Coeducation, according to White, was insensitive to the inherent differences between men and women. “[Coeducational] colleges are run by men for men, and the women are there on men's terms,” he contented. Furthermore, “[s]o profoundly masculine is our whole tradition of higher education that at the present time a woman tends to be defeminized in proportion as she is educated.”⁴³ The true danger in coeducation was that women would receive the “wrong kind” of advice—“wrong” because it would be “a man's kind.” He explained the dangers of such misleading advice:

Since men are educated for careers, the implication of our collegiate atmosphere is that a girl who does not plan to start editing *Vogue* the day after graduation is in some way not rising to her responsibilities. . . . The more highly educated a woman is, the less importance a family of her own has in her thinking, because the family has no place or consideration in our present system of higher education.⁴⁴

The notion that a woman educated by man's standards would likely shun the idea of a family was horrifying to many Americans, for the security of the happy nuclear family represented stability in the volatile postwar era.

White emphasized the importance of American families and the magnitude of women's roles within them. He argued that because women's most critical role in maintaining security in the face of the Soviet threat was that of homemaker, women's education must emphasize the significance of this role. Just as he argued that women needed to learn to respect themselves as being different from men, White asserted that

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 54-57.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

women's education ought to highlight the immense value of the family. He recognized that this would not be accomplished easily, noting: "One of our great tasks is to make higher education family-minded, as it is now state-minded. We must give the family the prestige which it deserves. How can this be done?" His conclusion was that women deserved a uniquely feminine curriculum, one which highlighted the immense worth of women's domestic roles. "Why not study the theory and preparation of Basque paella, of a well-marinated shish kebab, lamb kidneys sautéed in sherry, and authoritative curry, the use of herbs, even such simple sophistications as serving cold artichokes with fresh milk?" he asked. Home economics courses would not only improve the quality of life of women and their families but also, he claimed, "It is rumored that the divorce rate of home economics majors is greatly below that of college women as a whole."⁴⁵ Thus, if the United States was to be stable and unified while defending its ideals of democracy and freedom, women needed to be educated on creating happy and successful families.

Two-time presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson also perceived that many women were expressing shame and dissatisfaction with their prescribed roles. In his address to the graduates of Smith College in 1955, he declared, "Women, especially educated women, have a unique opportunity to influence us, man and boy, and to play a direct part in the unfolding drama of our free society." This was a role in which these educated women ought to take pride, and one of which they were uniquely capable. Stevenson argued that due to the innate differences between the sexes, women would be more likely to succeed in instilling integrity in American society by taking on the responsibility of influencing their husbands and sons:

⁴⁵ Ibid., 78.

[I]t is important work worthy of you, whoever you are, or your education, whatever it is, because we will defeat totalitarian, authoritarian ideas only by better ideas; we will frustrate the evils of vocational specialization only by the virtues of intellectual generalization. . . . This twentieth-century collision, this "crisis" we are forever talking about, will be won at last not on the battlefield but in the head and heart.

Stevenson asserted that due to the indirect nature of the Cold War, womanly honor rather than intellect was the nation's best hope for securing a victory. Yet these Smith-educated women had not wasted the past four years. Stevenson assured to the graduates that "what you have learned and can learn will fit you for the primary task of making homes and whole human beings in whom the rational values of freedom, tolerance, charity and free inquiry can take root." These women's college education may not have prepared them for professional careers, according to Stevenson, but it had achieved the more significant task of creating discerning future wives and mothers who would help to instill righteous ideals throughout American society, beginning with their individual family units.⁴⁶ The role of women's education, then, was to ensure that when women married and became mothers, they would spread good, American ideals of freedom, democracy, and integrity to their children and their immediate communities.

White and Stevenson were not alone in their assertions that American women were underappreciated. George Stoddard, president of the University of Illinois, shared similar views, many of which he expressed in his 1950 book *On the Education of Women*. Stoddard and White, both college presidents, identified a sense of dissatisfaction among American women and stated that women ought to receive uniquely feminine educations. "As I see it," Stoddard explained, "the time has come to give as much attention to homemakers seeking a good education in college as to physicists, chemists, or engineers."

⁴⁶ Adlai Stevenson, "A Purpose for Modern Woman," excerpted from a Commencement Address, Smith College, 1955, in *Women's Home Companion* (September 1955): 30-31.

He reasoned that male-dominated education had been detrimental to American women and was responsible for their much-discussed discontent:

The women have not done well. They have been confused by the red herring of an education identical to education for men. . . . [T]hey have not really wanted this education, and I am glad for it! What they have secured is, for the most part, an education similar to that of the non-physicist, the non-chemist, the non-engineer, the non-physician—a fragmented culture, defective as engineering education is defective, but along different lines.⁴⁷

Women who had been educated at coeducational institutions, dominated by traditionally “male” fields of study, had not benefited from their experiences, Stoddard argued. These male-dominated curricula, moreover, acted to divide the university culture. Much like White’s claim that women educated in home economics were less likely to divorce than those who did not receive that training, Stoddard contended that coeducation acted to “fragment” the comfortable culture to which 1950s Americans clung. White argued that women who did not take courses in homemaking would be doomed, and Stoddard similarly elicited fears that allowing women to pursue traditionally male fields of study would bring about disunity and instability among Americans during a particularly chaotic time.

Discussions of Education in Terms of Gender Differences and National Defense

According to White, American women’s general unhappiness was exclusively a product of prevailing social misconceptions that undervalued women, and Stoddard also recognized that women were not receiving the opportunities that they deserved. He cited “women’s inferior vocational place in our society” as one of many sources of women’s

⁴⁷ George Stoddard, *On the Education of Women* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1950), 9-10.

feelings of dissatisfaction.⁴⁸ Stoddard contended that no one cause could be cited for women's feelings of failure, for a "woman is not exclusively a wife, a mother, a secretary, a social worker, an imitator of men; she is all these, on occasion, and much more." For that reason, he argued, "Whatever the jar to tradition or the grief among male committees, we should embark upon the indicated reforms."⁴⁹ According to Stoddard, then, changes in the educational system would be necessary for women to overcome these feelings of inadequacy. Unlike White, who suggested offering more courses in home economics and placing them in higher esteem, Stoddard's proposed curriculum combined "general education" with "home education," "women's career majors," "men-women career majors," and "preprofessional and professional curricula."⁵⁰ Because women rarely played one exclusive role, he contended, their education should prepare them for the many facets of their future lives.

Stoddard also discussed women's education in terms of national defense more directly than did White. For example, Stoddard cited Sarah Blanding, the president of Vassar College. In Blanding's December 1947 article "If I Were President of a Men's College," which appeared in *Woman's Home Companion*, she pointed to women as a resource that she believed the majority of Americans had overlooked. She argued,

In the women of America I think we have a vast and comparatively untapped store of resources. Up to now the number of women who have made great contributions to science, government, or the arts has been comparatively small, because few have had the opportunity to exercise their talents freely, despite all our hard-won "women's rights."⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 55-56.

⁵¹ Cited in *ibid.*, 49-50.

Blanding's assertion that the United States was not taking full advantage of the many talents and abilities of American women was ahead of her time, and certainly contrary to the beliefs of prominent educators such as White. Stoddard appeared to accept Blanding's line of reasoning, but he attempted to co-opt it for his own purposes. While he acknowledged the differences between men's and women's accomplishments, he used this discrepancy to support his argument that women's education ought to be different from men's: "This is the paradox: *Recorded* knowledge is largely the work of men, but living, everyday knowledge, with the wisdom that shines through, is at least equally given to women."⁵² As was implicit in Stoddard's argument, women's work was often less recognizable upon first glance than men's, but while women's achievements were more difficult to observe and received less public acclaim than men's, women had made equal contributions to American society.

While White would likely have agreed with Stoddard's assertion that the multi-faceted nature of women's contributions made them particularly worthy of appreciation, Stoddard took his conclusions one step further by stating that women's contributions had been so valuable that they ought to progress out of the private, domestic sphere. "Women are a conscience and a spur to lagging communities," he contended. "The next stage will be for women to get into policy and administration. There is evidence that the long-delayed promise in women's suffrage is about to bear fruit."⁵³ In other words, Stoddard believed, women's involvement in the public sphere would only benefit society. Stoddard even titled the final chapter of his book "Can Women's Education Save Us?" In that chapter, he discussed women's education as a potential tool in defending the United States

⁵² Stoddard, 51.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 68.

against the Soviet threat. While Stoddard did encourage women's involvement in public life, his primary emphasis was on the ways in which women's homemaking roles contributed to American security. After all, the home, the most basic structural component of American society, was woman's domain, and as Stoddard asserted, after a long day at the office, "[m]en in most societies *go* home, where the women already *are*. They go home to share a new danger, for all our homes are Nagasaki a few hours before the catastrophe."⁵⁴ With women constantly in their homes, educated to protect them and keep them secure, Stoddard reasoned, the chances of Soviet destruction of the United States would be considerably lower.

The more academic assessors of women's education, as opposed to columnists in popular magazines or directors of television shows, were not exclusively male. White and Stoddard were two prominent voices in the debate over the role of women's education in the postwar era, as was Kate Hevner Mueller, Professor of Education at Indiana University. In her 1954 book *Educating Women for a Changing World*, Mueller addressed what she called "the unwieldy and treacherous problems in women's education."⁵⁵ She, like Stoddard, recognized women's many roles and responsibilities. While Stoddard encouraged a curriculum for women that would educate them for their many roles, Mueller challenged her readers to reassess prevailing conceptions of women's "proper" position in society. "Aggressive and competent working women will more and more frequently be promoted over heads of less able male colleagues," she asserted. "Can we learn to accept all these things? Or at least not to resent them? Are the attitudes of the colleges still a

⁵⁴ Ibid., 98.

⁵⁵ Kate Hevner Mueller, *Educating Women for a Changing World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954), v.

little stuffy?”⁵⁶ Mainstream society’s refusal to accept notions of women in traditionally male positions was harmful to the nation as a whole, Mueller contended:

It is the housewife, unemployed except within the domestic domain, who is becoming the greatest handicap both to herself and to her society. Tradition, or male domination, or whatever it was that restricted her within the home is one of the unstable values in our world today. Her position is already an equivocal one, and with the successive stages toward the full equality of men and women it will become more and more preposterous and intolerable. Education of herself, of her sister in the working world, and eventually of her husband will play a large part in her salvation. It is obvious that the solution of her dilemmas and other concomitant [sic] ones will constitute an important and necessary step toward the better mental and social health of all persons in our culture.

Inflexible gender roles which prevented women from exploring life beyond their front steps and station wagons, according to Mueller, were creating an unstable and unhealthy nation.

But Mueller did not insist that all women become professionals. Rather, she hoped that given increased opportunities and options, American women would choose various paths, and she recognized that women inherently had more ties to home and family than men did. “Which is the more urgent, the responsibility of women to their own cause or to that of society?” she asked. “The answer is of no importance for the two are knit together more firmly than even the marriage rite itself, with not even the possibility of divorce.” Improved education, Mueller asserted, would allow women to gain self-fulfillment while simultaneously contributing to greater society. It would also permit them to make informed decisions about their futures and how they would choose to lead their lives. “Women’s growth has been stunted by our American traditions,” she declared. “Women are fettered by prejudice, by their own ignorance; only a liberal education, a truly liberating experience in their education, can set them free.” During a time in which the United States

⁵⁶ Ibid., 253.

prided itself on its dedication to security and stability, rhetoric which implied that women were not free citizens would shock many Americans. As Mueller affirmed, the alternative was clear: “Choosing a college and a curriculum within that college through which she can earn her freedom becomes the modern woman’s most important task.”⁵⁷

Debating How Women *Ought* to be Educated

While Mueller longed for a society in which American women could “earn their freedom,” she was aware of the narrow-minded nature of most Americans during the early Cold War. Thus, she took pains to stress that the American nuclear family would not become obsolete; on the contrary, she addressed its importance in the security of the nation. Mueller did, however, state that the nation ought to be accepting of women who chose professional careers over lives of domesticity, and to recognize that career women could also be family women. “We will rejoice for every young woman who has the interest and ability to pursue [specialized professions],” she proclaimed. “We need as many of those . . . ambitious young women as we can get who will by necessity or choice sacrifice or postpone or delimit romance and family life in order to promote their own professional or business careers. Their successes are an essential step in the transition to the future more equitable status for all women.” To those who still feared the downfall of the nuclear family, Mueller emphasized that educators must remember that professional women “*will be a small minority*. In the long run, the large majority of women students will fit best into the more general rather than the specialized patterns.”⁵⁸ In other words,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 254.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 281.

most educated women would likely not challenge the accepted gender roles, and those Americans concerned about losing the security of the status quo need not worry.

In 1955, the year after Mueller's book was published, the American Council on Education published its own work titled *How Fare American Women?* which addressed the role of women's education in the postwar United States. In it, author Althea K. Hottel, the Director of the Commission on the Education of Women, discussed the Commission's assessment of college-educated women's lives after graduation. She spoke of the global context of women's education, stating, "Through individual ingenuity and the pressures of world circumstances, the people of the United States have developed a culture and an economy of entirely new dimensions and with global relationships."⁵⁹ Women's education would hold significance reaching far beyond individual students. She noted that there was considerable disagreement about how to design curricula for women that would best serve the nation. "Educators counseling students on long-range educational programs are continually confronted with contradictions among the goals and in the life-patterns of women," she noted, alluding to the many mixed messages that women received from the popular media and prevailing conceptions among prominent Americans.⁶⁰ Hottel addressed the contradictions that American women faced, asking,

In a period when there are critical shortages in the medical profession, in engineering, and particularly in education, the question is raised more and more insistently: Why do so comparatively few women reach administrative, high-ranking instructional, or other commanding posts in the professions? Are they inadequately educated, too involved in dual responsibilities, viewed with prejudiced eyes, or just passed over?⁶¹

⁵⁹ Althea K. Hottel, *How Fare American Women?* (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 1955), 1.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

As Hottel pointed out, the incongruity between publicized national shortages and women's opportunities was highly ironic. The United States, entrenched in a bitter conflict with the Soviet Union, seemed to be bypassing manpower in favor of retaining comfortable gender roles.

Hottel aimed to draw conclusions about women's education based upon the experiences of women who had attended and graduated from college. She found that even those women who had pursued higher education most often did not view themselves as professionals. "While they do have vocational interests, since they fully expect they will work sometime before and during marriage—at least until children are born," she wrote, "the great majority see themselves not as future teachers or business women, successful writers or union representatives, foreladies or saleswomen, but rather as the wives of successful men."⁶² Hottel viewed this pattern as problematic, for even educated women did not have individual professional aspirations—they simply hoped that they could supplement their husbands' income if necessary. She also noted that the concentration of study among the majority of college-educated women was not pre-professional.⁶³ Hottel discussed the conflict, as perceived by the Commission on the Education of Women, between those who believed that education's function was "to produce the cultivated mind capable of self-direction toward useful purposes" and those who believed its primary purpose was to produce "good citizens." As Hottel explained,

This difference in opinion leads directly to the question: Should not women be educated more particularly to be good wives, fully prepared for household duties and child care, thus enhancing the prestige of the homemaker and increasing her sense of fulfillment in this role? Many would contend that this is not enough, that an education designed to equip all women primarily for a single area of responsibility would significantly limit the educational opportunities of women, so

⁶² Ibid., 11.

⁶³ Ibid., 15-16.

restricting and narrowing their spheres of life that society would be deprived of the potential contributions which their varied abilities, properly developed, could provide.

How to educate women as to increase their fulfillment and satisfaction, then, was a truly contentious issue. Hottel's stance on the topic shone through when she posed the question, "*Can we resolve the contradictions of a society that opens doors wide to women but translates their vocational success as damaging to the happiness of both men and women?*"⁶⁴

Hottel was not alone in her belief that women ought to have just as many opportunities to succeed professionally as men. Four years before her book was published, the American Council on Education sponsored a conference titled *Women in the Defense Decade*. The following year a report summarizing the events and conclusions of the conference was published, and, as the conference's title suggests, those who attended the conference looked toward American women as an invaluable tool of national defense. "At the present time in the United States we are trying to build up and maintain a level of production that will meet our needs for defense, for war if necessary, and for civilian needs," the report stated. "This vast production program will require maximum utilization of all our available man- and woman-power without regard to sex."⁶⁵ The report noted that increasing the number of women in the workforce would dramatically affect the framework of the American family, noting, "The changing structure of family life must be recognized by the individual and by the community. If there are to be two breadwinners in thousands of families, there must also be two homemakers—the father as well as the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁵ Raymond F. Howes, ed., *Women in the Defense Decade: Report of a National Conference of Persons Representing Schools, Colleges, Universities, Government Agencies, and Selected National Organizations*, New York City, September 27-28, 1951 (Washington, 1952), 31.

mother.”⁶⁶ It challenged entire communities, rather than individuals, to support these modern families. The reason that this transformation of the family unit was necessary, after all, was a nationwide problem, and adapting the structure of the family would benefit all Americans.

Prominent educators and politicians addressed the conference attendees, further driving home the point that the defense of the nation would be much more promising with woman-power. In her address “Wanted: Women to Defend Freedom,” Ohio Congresswoman Frances Bolton declared that “although it is not my purpose to take from you any of the kudos you have so triumphantly earned, . . . it must be emphasized that the defense of freedom rests upon the shoulders of all women—and more than half of America’s women are in America’s homes!”⁶⁷ These speakers, however, did not minimize the importance of the family. As Oliver Carmichael, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, argued in his address “Women’s Education: An Evaluation,” women’s education had been consistently neglected, and such neglect influenced many more than those allegedly educated women. “This has social implications,” he proclaimed, “particularly when one considers that in the education of a *woman*, you really educate a *family*, whereas in the case of a man it is primarily the individual that is affected.”⁶⁸ And as Althea Hottel, the same woman who wrote *How Fare American Women?* four years later, asserted in “Women’s Education: New Needs in Our Time,” “Out of the wars and depressions of this century women have emerged more as persons with lives of their own to live. Many of them have recognized that their spheres certainly include, but extend beyond, the home and their vocations into the community,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁷ Cited in *ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁸ Cited in *ibid.*, 65.

and that community is now the world.”⁶⁹ Adapting women’s education for the “defense decade” during which a “deadly struggle for power” was ensuing, then, would influence not only women, but also men and families; not only local communities, but also the international community.

The international implications of women’s education were also acknowledged by the Commission on Human Resources and Advanced Training in its 1954 report, *America’s Resources of Specialized Talent*. The goal of the commission in publishing the report was to increase sources of what it called “educated manpower,” so as to benefit the United States in that “deadly struggle for power.” The report noted that women who had graduated from college were “more likely to enter the labor force than . . . noncollege women.”⁷⁰ The commission acknowledged the changing nature of United States society in the postwar era, stating that the typical American woman’s “role is no longer purely that of a housewife whose household duties require all her time. . . . As can always be expected when a variety of paths are open, different individuals have reacted differently.”⁷¹ The report offered short-term solutions to the manpower shortage during this “time of emergency,” but stated that more sweeping changes would be necessary to effect changes in mainstream American gender ideology. It posed the question, “how can the current barriers be broken down so that women who wish careers in the specialized fields will have opportunities which depend wholly upon their abilities and which are not restricted by the fact that they are women?” There was no easy answer to this question, which called attention to a critical dilemma: “true equality of occupational opportunity cannot be achieved until there is true equality of occupational interest, and true equality of

⁶⁹ Cited in *ibid.*, 70-71.

⁷⁰ Dael Wolfle, *America’s Resources of Specialized Talent* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 226.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 232.

occupational interest cannot come about as long as the distinction in sex roles involves significant differences in attitudes toward the occupations of men and women.”⁷² While prevailing American conceptions of what constituted acceptable gender roles would have to be overhauled in order for women to receive truly equal opportunities, the urgency of the Cold War demanded that those short-term solutions be implemented. The United States had no choice but to utilize its female citizens in the labor force if it hoped to stand a chance in its conflict with the Soviets.

Conclusion

These represent the more intellectual voices of the “defense decade,” but, while better educated than most Americans, they were far from immune to prevailing gender ideologies and pressures from popular society to conform to those rigid roles which limited women to the domestic domain. While diverse in their messages, the significant difference between the academic and the popular voices from the early 1950s was in the manner in which they either challenged or adhered to the so-called “traditional” gender roles. Whereas the majority of sources from the popular media found maintaining the status quo to be the least threatening and most promising method of defending the nation and achieving lasting security, the academic figures of the early postwar era were more apt to suggest making changes throughout American society, particularly to the education system. As is evident from these many voices, discussion of women’s roles, and specifically women’s education, in terms of national defense began soon after the onset of the Cold War. There were no easy answers, though, for while revamping women’s education to improve the United States’ efficiency and power seemed like a promising

⁷² Ibid., 238.

option, this was an era during which tradition was held in high esteem. Whether American women would best serve their country in the private or the public sphere had not yet been determined, but the importance of women's education and careers in terms of national security was undeniable.

Chapter Three

1957 as a Turning Point:

Womanpower, Sputnik, and Heightened Awareness of Opportunities for Women

While societal pressures to conform to idealized gender roles may have existed in the postwar United States, so too did opportunities for women in academic and scientific fields. Much of American society, including the federal government, began to recognize that women had more to offer the nation than a well-kept home, and that women were an untapped resource in the technological battle against the Soviet Union. This change in attitude was triggered when the first Soviet satellite, Sputnik, was sent into space in October of 1957. The year 1957 proved to be a turning point for women in the workforce. In that year, the publication of the *Womanpower* report by the National Manpower Council and the launching of Sputnik drew attention to existing educational and scientific opportunities for women and created numerous new opportunities for them as well. Throughout American society, tension resulted from Americans' dawning recognition that they needed to "catch up" technologically to the Soviets (and the concomitant realization that, to do that, they would have to educate and employ more women in scientific and other "male" fields) combined with their resistance to notions of violating "traditional" gender roles.

Betty Friedan's famous 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* highlighted this opposition to challenging women's long held roles, but, as historian Joanne Meyerowitz explains, many misunderstandings exist about the postwar era's gender ideologies. Most of these false impressions are rooted in associations with popular culture representations of 1950s housewives and, arguably more than any other source, with Friedan's famous assertion that American women were "trapped." According to Meyerowitz, not only did the

The Feminine Mystique create misconceptions among its readers in postwar America, but it has also persuaded historians to accept Friedan's inaccurate assertions as fact:

Friedan's work has had a surprisingly strong influence on historiography. In fact, since Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, historians of American women have adopted wholesale her version of the postwar ideology. While many historians question Friedan's homogenized account of women's actual experience, virtually all accept her version of the dominant ideology, the conservative promotion of domesticity. According to this now-standard account, postwar authors urged women to return to the home, and only a handful of social scientists, trade unionists, and feminists protested.⁷³

Meyerowitz utilizes popular magazines of the Cold War, such as *Ladies' Home Journal*, to demonstrate that postwar women did not necessarily experience the discontent identified by Friedan. "In general," Meyerowitz notes, "popular magazines incorporated women's public participation as part of a positive image of the modern American woman in the postwar world."⁷⁴

Meyerowitz's critique of Friedan has considerable basis in fact. Widely read periodicals did indeed encourage women to be active in public issues, rather than simply to make peanut butter sandwiches for their children. For example, in "Trousered Mothers and Dishwashing Dads," a *New York Times* article which appeared in April of 1957, journalist Dorothy Barclay discussed the changing gender roles within the common nuclear family. "Little girls not too many years ago wore dresses consistently, played quiet games, and were repeatedly reminded to behave like little ladies," she wrote. "Today in some circles the tree-climbing, marble-playing, ball batting boy is just as likely to find a short-haired and betrousered girl beside him as he is another lad. His mother, too, like as not, wears trousers

⁷³ Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994), 230. For an example of the acceptance of Friedan's account as fact, see Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1977), 147-181.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

around the house and yard and is as handy with the screw driver and electric mower as dad is.”⁷⁵ Consistent with Meyerowitz’s argument, Barclay wrote of shifting gender roles not as a worrisome trend, but as something to be celebrated: modern American women were no longer restricted to the home; rather, they were increasingly involved in public life.

The Government Begins to Recognize Women’s Potential Role in National Defense

Even the government began to take notice of these noticeable shifts in gender roles. Instead of involving women in the fight against the communist threat solely in the domestic sphere—as Nixon had suggested in the “kitchen debate”—the federal government chose to utilize women to battle its Soviet adversaries outside of the home. Beginning in 1955, the National Manpower Council met to discuss the role of women in the workforce, issuing its final statement, entitled *Womanpower*, in 1957. On the very first page of the report, the Council declared, “Women constitute not only an essential but also a distinctive part of our manpower resources.”⁷⁶ The Council recognized that in light of the threatening and unstable environment brought about by the Cold War, taking full advantage of every facet of the nation’s “manpower” resources was imperative. “In recent years, Americans have developed a new understanding of the extent to which their nation’s strength and security depend upon its manpower resources—that is, upon the skills, capacities, and creativeness of its people,” the report explained. “The search for immediate solutions to pressing problems of manpower shortages has been accompanied by a growing awareness of the rich contribution which the more effective development and utilization of our manpower resources can make to the future progress of the nation and to the well-being of each

⁷⁵ Dorothy Barclay, “Trousered Mothers and Dishwashing Dads,” *New York Times*, 28 April 1957, SM25.

⁷⁶ National Manpower Council, *Womanpower* (New York: Columbia UP, 1957), 3.

individual.” The top priority of the Council, then, was to utilize “manpower” to ensure a high level of national security.

In *Womanpower*, the Council expressed its disgust at the United States’ failure to draw upon all of its potential contributors. “Today, we are troubled by the waste of human abilities,” the report proclaimed. As the Council saw it, women’s potential to play a role in national defense was continually ignored. The report emphasized the importance of women in making the United States a technologically competitive nation:

[Women] are essential because without their presence in the labor force we could neither produce and distribute the goods nor provide educational, health, and other social services which characterize American society. They constitute a distinctive manpower resource because the structure and the substance of the lives of most women are fundamentally determined by their functions as wives, mothers, and homemakers.⁷⁷

In other words, women were a “manpower resource” that the United States, for the most part, was disregarding. The Council insisted that instead of appreciating the variety of contributions that women could make to the country, the majority of Americans emphasized women’s domestic roles and overlooked the many ways in which they might help alleviate the so-called manpower shortage. By employing the services of men *and* women in all arenas, based upon qualifications rather than gender, the nation as a whole would benefit.

The Council acknowledged that while the employment of women would be to the advantage of the United States, for women’s entrance en masse into the labor force would be a somewhat difficult transition. Because the majority of Americans considered women mothers and homemakers above all else, gaining acceptance of women in traditionally “male” roles would likely prove challenging. But members of the Council asserted that attempting to change long held gender roles would not be impossible. According to the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 9.

Council, “The attitudes of society which affect the participation of women in paid employment are deeply rooted and resist change, but they are far from immutable. They have altered sufficiently to make it easier for married, as well as for single, women to work outside the home without feeling that they are violating social conventions.”⁷⁸ The progress that had been made in women’s rights and opportunities throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially during World War II, had laid the groundwork for additional progress. “It is difficult for one living in the middle of the twentieth century to realize that not so long ago women were second-class citizens, unable to vote or hold office,” the Council pointed out. “Only a few vestiges remain of a former system of law which made married women and their property subject to the direct and almost unlimited control of their husbands.”⁷⁹ The Council spoke of the Feminist Movement as successful and finished, as though American women were nearly equal to men and there was little need for further improvements in American women’s status. The report’s implication, then, was that expanding women’s roles in the labor force should be a relatively smooth transition, for, due to the foundation that had been laid decades earlier, American women were no longer second-class citizens.

Members of the Council observed that women were not typically prepared for the working world, and they perceived this failure to adequately educate and train *all* potential laborers, including women, as detrimental to the cause of national defense. “Our society’s needs for capable, highly trained persons are so great that we do ourselves a disservice by neglecting any reservoir of undeveloped talent and ability,” the Council insisted. “The chief, but not the only, means by which potential ability is developed is through formal

⁷⁸ Ibid., 15-16.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 52.

education.”⁸⁰ Among its list of objectives in *Womanpower*, the Council declared that the nation ought to “strengthen the contributions made by secondary education to the acquisition of skill,” to “strengthen the institutions through which scientific and professional manpower is educated and trained,” and to “expand the opportunities for capable young men and women to secure higher education.” The Council feared that because “so many girls do not intend to go to college, and because there is a tradition that they have neither the interest in nor the aptitude for work in mathematics and the physical sciences, they are less well prepared than boys in these subjects.”⁸¹ Therefore, the Council recommended that “[f]ederal and state governments, employers, labor unions, voluntary groups, and individuals expand their support of scholarship and fellowship programs, in order to enable more young women of high ability to continue their formal education in college or in professional or graduate schools.”⁸² If improving women’s education was a necessary step in capitalizing on females as a resource of national defense, the Council argued, the federal government would have to do all it could to make obtaining quality educations feasible for female students.

These recommendations did not come without reservations. As the Council admitted, traditional conceptions about women’s roles persisted, even though progress towards increased educational and professional opportunities for women had already begun.

Womanpower stated,

To inquire how women should be educated, or whether they should be educated in the same way as men, or differently, does not merely raise queries concerning the structure of educational institutions and methods of instruction. It also asks how young men and women are to be prepared to assume those adult responsibilities which society views as distinctive of each sex. Consequently, almost every utterance on the education of women is likely to express a judgment—at least by implication—

⁸⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁸¹ Ibid., 31-32.

⁸² Ibid., 3.

on the degree to which women resemble or differ from men in general intelligence, abilities, and aptitudes, in “nature” or “psychology,” or in functions.

Addressing issues of women’s education, then, brought up more general perceptions of women’s roles in society—a controversial topic, especially in light of the Cold War and the push for conformity and stability. Moreover, with that discussion, as the report noted, inevitably came judgments. The Council then noted that a debate existed as to whether women would best serve society as “homemakers, as workers, or as citizens”—as though those were mutually exclusive categories—and the function that higher education ought to serve in preparing them.⁸³ Members of the Council were uncertain about society’s willingness to accept increased roles for women outside of the home, for many Americans presumed women to be less intelligent than men and therefore less capable of effectively contributing to the nation’s effort to defend itself against the Soviet threat.

The Council made it clear that its primary objective in utilizing women in the workforce was to help the United States effectively compete with its communist opponent, the Soviets. *Womanpower* even directly compared the education and training of American women to that of the Soviet women:

[One] used yardstick [to compare the education systems of the United States and the Soviet Union] is the number of students who complete their education and training for scientific and professional occupations in the Soviet Union. Some who employ this measure visualize the United States as losing out in a race for highly trained manpower because about twice as many new engineers are currently being graduated in Russia as in the United States. A doubling in the number of engineers graduated each year by American schools has even been urged in order to keep pace with the gains made by the Soviet Union. It is worth noting in this context that there are annually some 13,000 women graduating as engineers in the Soviet Union, compared to well under 100 in the United States.⁸⁴

⁸³ Ibid., 191-192

⁸⁴ Ibid., 262.

As the historian Susan Hartmann notes, the Council specifically expressed concerns about the possibility of the Soviet Union surpassing the United States because of the Soviets' superior utilization of women in the workforce. Whichever nation was victorious in this womanpower race, the Council claimed, would inevitably use its technological innovations against its opponent.⁸⁵ Many Americans feared the prospect of Soviet innovations, especially in the realm of science and technology. The Soviet Union had already exploded its first atomic bomb in 1949, and the notion that the Soviets were continuing to make scientific advances was deeply threatening to many Americans. As the report stated, some already believed that the United States was losing the technological battle between the two nations. It seemed only logical that the cause of American security was suffering at least partially due to the thousands of female engineers in the Soviet Union compared to the very few in the United States; it did not appear as though the United States was making the most of its "manpower" resources.

Sputnik Adds Urgency to the Push for "Manpower"

On October 3, 1957, with the launching of the first Soviet satellite, Sputnik, the impetus for women to challenge their allegedly restrictive domestic roles increased even more. In the clash of the two superpowers, Sputnik tangibly represented the threat posed by the Soviet Union and confirmed the anxieties of countless Americans. Eventually the Soviets launched three Sputniks, but the first was especially critical in the grand scheme of the Cold War, for it called attention to the technological advantage that the Soviet Union did, in fact, have over the United States. As the historian Barbara Clowse notes, "An

⁸⁵ Susan M. Hartmann, "Women's Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994), 91.

atmosphere of crisis arose, generating in Americans a sense that the nation was losing the cold war. . . . By 1957, scientific and technological competition was stressed to a striking degree.”⁸⁶ The question of what would come next unnerved not only the public but those within the government as well. President Dwight D. Eisenhower proclaimed that the United States had to meet the challenge of the Soviets “on the Communists’ own terms—outmatching them in military power, general technological advance, and specialized education and research.”⁸⁷ Thus, emphasis on the importance of education increased greatly, for the implicitly and sometimes explicitly stated reason that American national security would depend on its educational system in order to defeat its communist enemies.

In the days immediately following the launching of Sputnik, newspapers were filled with articles about the possible consequences of Soviet technological superiority and its significance for American security. Seven days after the launch, an article titled “Politics of Sputnik” proclaimed, “It is becoming increasingly evident that the main purpose of the sputnik, the man-made moon launched by the Soviets, is political rather than scientific.” The author claimed that Sputnik was simply a part of the Soviets’ “rocket diplomacy” to “compel the United States to deal with the Soviets separately and directly over the heads of our allies as one way of breaking up our alliances.”⁸⁸ In an article published on October 13, the *New York Times* declared the “U.S. Advantage Erased”⁸⁹; that same day, America’s newspaper of record published an article titled “Science in Review: Soviet Success in Rocketry Draws Attention to Need for More Students in the Sciences,” in which author

⁸⁶ Barbara Clowse, *Brainpower for the Cold War: The Sputnik Crisis and National Defense Education Act of 1958* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 3.

⁸⁷ Cited in *ibid.*, 16.

⁸⁸ “Politics of the Sputnik,” *New York Times*, 10 October 1957, 32.

⁸⁹ Thomas J. Hamilton, “World Seen Reaching a Balance of Terror: Soviet Achievements in Sciences Expected to Have Wide Effect Among Neutralist Nations, U.S. Advantage Erased,” *New York Times*, 13 October 1957, 183.

William Laurence argued that American scientists and educators were especially concerned with this Cold War development:

To them, the vital problem facing the nation, and the free world as a whole, is the fact that Russia is training scientists and technological personnel at a pace four times that of our own and that, unless something is done about it as a large-scale, national effort, Russia will definitely surpass us in the near future, with consequences too tragic to contemplate.⁹⁰

Laurence and other journalists placed increasing emphasis on education in the wake of the Sputnik launching, and those concerned scientists and educators whom they wrote about had essentially the same goals as the National Manpower Council: to improve the quality of American education and, in turn, the technological strength of the nation in the face of the communist threat. The goals of concerned Americans after the launch of Sputnik echoed those that the Council had expressed earlier that same year: women had long been neglected as a possible resource, and the time had come for the United States to stop wasting talents simply because of “traditional” gender ideology.

While many Americans worried that women were a wasted source of talent, popular culture simultaneously reflected increasing opportunities for women. The heightened attention that popular newspapers and magazines gave to women in science following the launch of Sputnik is noteworthy. On April 27, 1958, a short article appeared in the *New York Times* titled “M.I.T.’s Bachelor Girls of Science.” Along with a brief summary, which explained the connection between the “post-Sputnik concern with technological education” and the enrollment of women in scientific programs, such as those offered at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the article pointed readers to photographs of “[s]ome M.I.T.

⁹⁰ William L. Laurence, “Science in Review: Soviet Success in Rocketry Draws Attention to Need for More Students in the Sciences,” *New York Times*, 13 October 1957, 191.

intelligent-girls-with-character.”⁹¹ The images that followed depicted well-groomed women surrounded by men in lecture halls and working with male students on scientific experiments. While the article was significant in that it drew attention to one of many new opportunities for women in post-Sputnik America, its tone was somewhat derisive. How could mainstream society take women pursuing careers in science seriously if they were labeled “bachelor girls of science” and portrayed enlisting the help of their male classmates in photographs? In another 1958 *New York Times* article, “Homemakers Take Jobs To Stave Off Boredom,” journalist Nan Robertson wrote about the Kelly Girl Service, “the nation’s biggest supplier of women white-collar workers for part-time office duty.” Robertson described the jobs held by “Kelly women,” which included not only clerical work but also more demanding tasks. She wrote of one Kelly woman who tracked Sputniks at the Smithsonian, one who studied the unconscious of Eskimos, and one who was sent to Haiti to take a public opinion poll following the country’s revolution in the fall of 1957. Robertson quoted John J. Brandt, the executive vice president of the company, who explained that the typical Kelly Girl “doesn’t want full-time work, but she’s bored with strictly keeping house. Or maybe she just wants to take a job until she pays for a davenport or a new fur coat.”⁹² According to the article, these women were unfulfilled in the domestic sphere, and by working outside of the home, were able to overcome the boredom and monotony inherent in the role of the “typical” American housewife.

While these articles, and many more, discussed the available opportunities for women in occupations other than homemaking, the tone with which nearly all of the authors

⁹¹ “M.I.T.’s Bachelor Girls of Science,” *New York Times*, 27 April 1958, SM84-85.

⁹² Nan Robertson, “Homemakers Take Jobs To Stave Off Boredom,” *New York Times*, 22 January 1958, 20.

wrote about women in the workforce was far from serious.⁹³ Ironically, these journalists were predominantly female—they were women who were not “trapped” in lives of domesticity, but they still recognized social pressures to conform to “traditional” gender roles. While opportunities existed for women and the government encouraged tapping the newfound resource of womanpower, the cultural appeal of female domesticity refused to disappear. As Gertrude Samuels’s November 1958 *New York Times* article “Why Russian Women Work Like Men” demonstrated, while the Russians were leading in the “space race,” many Americans viewed Russian women as ugly and unfeminine—antithetical to the traditional notion of a proper American woman. Samuels’ article epitomized this sentiment:

Her [the average Russian woman’s] role in life is reflected in her appearance. There are, of course, occasional beauties, and others, neatly dressed despite their cheap clothes, who manage to be attractive. . . . But, in general, the Soviet Union seemingly believes that looking prettily feminine is “bourgeois” and therefore to be avoided.⁹⁴

Perhaps Russian women, Samuels suggested, contributed to their country’s technological superiority over the United States; their lack of femininity and beauty, however, made the image of the Russian woman utterly unappealing to mainstream American society. Soviet customs seemed inherently backward to many Americans, even though the Soviet Union was defeating the United States technologically. The question of whether to follow the Soviet lead and encourage women to work in scientific fields, then, carried significant ramifications. On the one hand, if all Soviet customs were backward, then the prospect of encouraging women to work, much like Soviet women did, seemed illogical. On the other hand, however, the nation that advocated these alien customs was attaining technological

⁹³ See also “Society and Working Women,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 September 1958, B4 and “Fatigue Frightens Working Wife,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, 14 January 1958, B5.

⁹⁴ Gertrude Samuels, “Why Russian Women Work Like Men,” *New York Times*, 2 November 1958, 22-25. For other articles which portrayed Soviet women as unfeminine, see Carl Turk, “They Do a Man Sized Job: The Olgas and Tanyas Trade Femininity for Muscle Power on Farm, in Factory,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 10 August 1958, F30; Hugh A. Mulligan, “Got a Gunny Sack, Girls? You’re Right in Style,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 19 January 1958, E4.

superiority over the United States. Samuels patronizingly represented Russian women as pathetic and despondent, and her position in the debate was obvious: the life of the Russian woman was clearly not something to which a good, American woman would ever aspire.

Conclusion

The Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik brought attention to existing opportunities for women and helped to create more; however, Americans continued to cling to the security of women's traditional domestic roles. The Cold War paranoia that pervaded 1950s American society led many Americans to oppose anything associated with the Soviet Union, such as the notion of women performing traditionally "male" tasks. The combination of this aversion to Soviet gender roles and the quintessentially American alternative—women as domestic, feminine housewives—created a great deal of tension throughout American society. With the launching of Sputnik, the publication of *Womanpower*, and the publicity which followed, the general public became more aware of the opportunities available to many women, especially in scientific fields. The image of the Cold War suburban housewife, however, proved to be so deeply engrained in the minds of Americans that many did not take these newfound opportunities for women very seriously.

Chapter Four

Maximizing America's Untapped Resources: A Gendered Analysis of the National Defense Education Act

In the mid-1950s, the United States' failure to take advantage of women's intellectual capabilities attracted a great deal of public attention. Increasingly, government reports and the news media suggested that there was a particular need for man- (or woman) power in fields of science and technology, and the Soviets' October 1957 launching of the 184-pound satellite Sputnik transformed what had been simply interest in these undermanned fields into panic about the future of the nation. As historian Barbara Clowse observes, "All over the country, Americans picked up radio signals from the sputnik. The effect of its eerie ping-pong was chilling."⁹⁵ Many Americans had assumed their nation's technology was competitive with, if not superior to, that of the Soviet Union, and this Soviet satellite shocked Americans by providing a tangible example of the United States' technological inferiority to its communist enemy.

Throughout the early postwar era, the nation's leaders stressed the need to maximize manpower and take advantage of the capabilities and talents of all American citizens, including women. With the launch of Sputnik, the emphasis on the importance of manpower became especially strong, and the following year the National Defense Education Act was passed by the United States Congress. The Sputnik crisis, then, is useful in analyzing the link between women's roles in national security and the National Defense Education Act of 1958. Prior to the launch of Sputnik, many Americans were becoming increasingly convinced that in order to bolster national defense, women might have to assume roles traditionally considered fit only for men, such as those in scientific

⁹⁵ Barbara Clowse, *Brainpower for the Cold War: The Sputnik Crisis and National Defense Education Act of 1958* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 7.

and technological fields. The National Manpower Council's *Womanpower* report, issued in 1957, exemplified this trend, but it did little more than bring the topic of women's educational and professional opportunities to the forefront of media coverage and everyday conversation in American society. In October of that same year, Sputnik orbited the earth and brought about paranoia and frenzy throughout the United States, and the following year Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which allotted federal funding to students pursuing studies in the sciences, mathematics, and foreign languages. The "male" roles that women were increasingly encouraged to hold directly correlated with the fields that the National Defense Education Act aided. American women did benefit from the National Defense Education Act, finally receiving the economic backing that reports such as *Womanpower* could never provide, and while the act never explicitly addressed *women's* roles in the effort to improve national defense, direct correlations did exist between newly encouraged women's roles and the fields upon which federal aid to education focused.

Sputnik and the National Defense Education Act of 1958

In her study of the Sputnik crisis and the National Defense Education Act, Clowse emphasizes that the movement for federal aid to education began long before the first of the Soviets' three Sputniks was launched on October 4, 1957. She notes that in 1955 "it became widely known that America was graduating fewer scientists and engineers than the Soviet Union" and that "the intricacies of the manpower issue definitely perturbed educational critics long before the [Sputnik] crisis ballooned."⁹⁶ The primary significance of the launch of Sputnik, in Clowse's view, was not in the attention that it

⁹⁶ Ibid., 29.

drew to American deficiencies in the sciences and technology, for most Americans were already concerned with those inadequacies; rather, it was important because it acted to silence those who had previously opposed federal aid to education, for, as Clowse explains, it “disarmed opposition to federal aid per se and to the specific provisions of the two leading bills, enabling the NDEA eventually to pass.”⁹⁷ Moreover, once the panic surrounding Sputnik became associated with American education, it “coalesced with the long and hitherto inauspicious struggle for federal aid to education.”⁹⁸ Thus, the campaign for increasing federal aid to education gained support due to Sputnik, and the significance of the satellite became not only an issue of national security but also one of federal policy.

Although every component of the National Defense Education Act had been considered before Sputnik orbited the earth, it was not until shortly after the satellite’s launching, Clowse notes, that American proponents of federal aid to education “found a way to link education to national security.”⁹⁹ In the aftermath of the launching of the first Sputnik, the Preparedness Subcommittee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee began to address concerns that most Americans were alarmingly anti-intellectual. As the *New York Times* reported, Fred L. Whipple, director of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory, declared, “Until the time comes when the Phi Beta Kappa has the same social standing as the football player, we are going to fall behind in our technological race with the USSR.”¹⁰⁰ According to Dr. Edward Teller, the father of the hydrogen bomb, these attitudes translated to educational practices that were harmful to national

⁹⁷ Ibid., 12, 49.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰⁰ Cited in “Spying Ruled Out in Soviet’s Gains,” *New York Times*, 24 November 1957, 72.

security. In his attempt to expose the inadequacies of the American education system, Teller recalled the experiences of one Massachusetts Institute of Technology student who had just returned home to the United States from the Soviet Union. Upon his return, that student, supposedly among the best educated in the nation, declared, “I think our educational problem is as acute as our missile problem.”¹⁰¹

Following Sputnik I’s launching, Americans learned from nearly every news source that their nation was in a state of emergency that could not go ignored any longer. In January of 1958, just three months after Americans had learned of the first Soviet satellite, *Newsweek* printed a long feature article titled “A World at Stake.” The article began dramatically,

To every civilization, at some moment in its existence, the mortal challenge comes. Now Red Russia’s dictatorship has thrust such a challenge upon the West. The challenge is not simply military; it is total—intellectual, spiritual, and material. To survive, the free world, led by the United States, must respond in kind.¹⁰²

The article’s unnamed author identified Soviet science and technology, best exemplified by Sputnik, as one of the critical pieces of “Red Russia’s” challenge to the United States. Improving education, which had the purpose of training “human minds in the high and complex skills that a nation needs to exist and progress in the modern world,” was among the necessary responses that the nation must take if it was to successfully defend itself and the “free world.”¹⁰³ The article pointed out that the Soviet Union was technologically successful due to its education system, where all “secondary students study algebra and geometry, whereas only 67 per cent in the U.S. get even algebra.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Cited in Clowse, 60.

¹⁰² “A World at Stake,” *Newsweek*, 20 January 1958, 53.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

The nation that had successfully launched two satellites into space (while the United States' attempts had failed) emphasized mathematics and the sciences in its education system, and Americans were beginning to recognize that the link between education and technological success might help the United States more effectively compete with the Soviet Union in the Cold War.

The article discussed the proposed National Defense Education Act as a response to the scientific and technological success of the Soviet Union. "What is the U.S. doing to meet the challenge of Soviet education?" the author asked. "The instinctive American reaction to a threat like this," the article explained, "is to spend more money. . . . The White House last month proposed a \$1 billion Federal program for expanding science education in the next four years." The author argued that the proposed \$1 billion was not enough to combat the threat posed by the Soviet Union in its quest for domination, and pessimistically predicted that American mathematics and sciences would continue to be inadequate because of the shortage of qualified teachers. Rather than teach, the article explained, "thousands of teachers are going into private industry where they can earn higher salaries than they now get."¹⁰⁵ Thus, this author viewed improving education as the best manner in which to become a technologically competitive nation rather than improving and developing industrially, but he feared that the funding allotted by the federal government was inadequate. The National Defense Education Act would help to encourage studies in technologically relevant subjects, but the article's author had doubts as to the effectiveness of the act in a nation that did not yet appreciate the benefits of education as they pertained to national security.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Many Americans agreed that education needed not only to be made available to more students, but also needed to be improved, and the difference between quantity and quality was significant. A March 1958 *Newsweek* article stated that there was “no room for socialites” in higher education and featured a section that specifically addressed women as an important contingent of American students. In that section, the article quoted the President’s Committee on Education Beyond the High School as affirming that “the resources available to higher education can be greatly enlarged” and “meantime anything short of maximum efforts could place the long future of our democratic society in serious jeopardy. . . . If an unwelcome choice were required between preserving quality and expanding enrollments, then quality should be preferred.”¹⁰⁶ The implication was that there were doubts as to whether educating women might compromise the overall quality of American education. Americans reading this article were left to ponder whether female college students were likely to be “socialites” rather than intellectuals conscious of their potential to help defend the United States, and whether federal funds ought to be used to support women in academic pursuits beyond the high school level.

Even before the nation had been made aware of the proposed federal funding that could potentially promote women’s education, popular media drew connections between Sputnik, education, and national security. A November 1957 issue of *Time* magazine featured the article “Knowledge is Power,” which began,

In the uneasy autumn of 1957, the U.S. is reluctantly grasping the full, unwelcome meaning of Russian-made metal objects orbiting around the earth. Sputnik I and Sputnik II have painfully fractured the U.S.’s contented expectation that behind an impenetrable shield of technological superiority, the nation could go on with the pursuit of happiness and business as usual this year and the next and the next. Now the U.S. has to live with the uncomfortable realization that

¹⁰⁶ Cited in “The New Age of College-Age Americans: Who Should Go, Who Shouldn’t—And a Crisis,” *Newsweek*, 3 March 1958, 82, 84.

Russia is racing with clenched-teeth determination to surpass the West in science—and is rapidly narrowing the West’s shielding lead.¹⁰⁷

To judge by breathless articles as this, the significance of the Sputniks in the greater scheme of the early Cold War was immense, not only to government committees and commissions, but also to the general public. The article went on to emphasize the importance of knowledge and intellectual prowess in maintaining American power and dominance, which was now being threatened throughout the world. According to the pundits at *Time* and other mainstream American newspapers and magazines, American education would determine whether or not the United States could cling to its superpower status.

Thus, in the wake of Sputnik, the pressing question for millions of Americans was, as the *Newsweek* article “Building Brainpower” asked in November 1957, “Why had U.S. education been defective in turning out scientists? How could the country get more of them, fast?”¹⁰⁸ While the immediate reaction was to allot funding to education, which provided proponents of the National Defense Education Act with the support it needed to be enacted, not all Americans agreed that specifically targeting the scientific and mathematical fields would best serve the security of the United States. “To attract money into purely technical fields would limit funds already critically needed for social sciences and the humanities,” Boston University president Harold Case told *Newsweek*. “Civilization cannot live through education in technical affairs alone.”¹⁰⁹ The article also pointed out, however, that without an American appreciation for science education,

¹⁰⁷ “Knowledge is Power,” *Time*, 18 November 1957, 21.

¹⁰⁸ “Building Brainpower,” *Newsweek*, 4 November 1957, 96.

¹⁰⁹ Cited in *ibid.*

American society would be “doomed to rapid extinction.”¹¹⁰ The nation was facing a series of critical questions about the effect that the Soviet threat would have on life in the United States, and how American education might need to change to meet those dangers head on.

As Americans began to associate educational and technological deficiencies with one another, the general paranoia of postwar America swelled. David Halberstam recalls that after the American public became aware of Sputnik and, in turn, the apparent advantage that the Soviets had in the Cold War, “Suddenly, it seemed as if America were undergoing a national crisis of confidence.”¹¹¹ Prior to Sputnik, Halberstam suggests, the general consensus among Americans was that while the Soviets did pose a threat to national security, the United States would never actually *lose* the Cold War. With American education *and* technology under attack, however, many Americans began to consider the Soviets more menacing. Halberstam points out that a parenting book, *Why Johnny Can't Read—and What You Can Do About It*, appeared two years prior to the launching of Sputnik and sold relatively few copies when released; in late 1957 and early 1958, however, in the midst of the Sputnik crisis, sales soared and the book became a best-seller. Clowse also notes that reform of “education to win the cold war became a temporary obsession in the media, in Washington, and throughout the country.”¹¹² At all levels of American society, the education system was under intense scrutiny.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower had long been resistant to providing federal aid to education, but even he could not deny the nation’s obsession with its “educational problem” in the aftermath of the Sputnik crisis. As Clowse explains, Eisenhower could

¹¹⁰ Elmer Hutchinson cited in *ibid*.

¹¹¹ David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 626.

¹¹² Clowse, 29.

not understand the paranoia that so many Americans were experiencing. “He was annoyed by the state of near hysteria,” she writes, “but had been convinced by the scientists that he must act to keep America abreast of Russia. Yet he remained utterly opposed to an extensive crash program for education.”¹¹³ In a November 1957 *New York Times* article, author James Reston wrote that Eisenhower had been surprised to hear from a group of scientific advisors that “what they were worried about was not the sputnik but the state of scientific education in the schools and universities of the nation.”¹¹⁴ Thus, Eisenhower was essentially oblivious to the alleged crisis in American education, but he trusted his appointed experts. While Eisenhower was not enthusiastic about devoting federal funds to education in general, he was convinced by these pundits that the nation needed to take action, and he did support a more narrowly focused plan that would specifically support the sciences (rather than education in general). Another *New York Times* article from the same week stated that the President would soon propose “a broad program of greatly increased scientific education, especially in basic research.”¹¹⁵ With the guidance of experts, Eisenhower became convinced that promoting scientific education for the cause of national security needed to be a priority.

The following year, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 was passed by the United States Congress. The act appropriated loans to colleges and universities to support students pursuing higher education, requiring that those institutions give preference to students excelling in the sciences, mathematics, engineering, or foreign languages. The act also provided funding to improve the instruction of these subjects and the guidance services offered to “able” students. Students who received funding from the

¹¹³ Ibid., 55.

¹¹⁴ James Reston, “The U.S. and Science,” *New York Times*, 6 November 1957, 13.

¹¹⁵ “The New Defense Program,” *New York Times*, 9 November 1957, 21.

National Defense Education Act were required to take a loyalty oath, in which they swore not to support any group that might overthrow the United States Government and signed an oath of allegiance to the United States. Some funding did go to secondary schools as well as colleges and universities, and, as Loren Pope explained in the *New York Times*, the goal of the act was to “uncover abilities that should not be wasted.”¹¹⁶ More and more Americans, including members of the United States Congress, had come to believe that through government funding to education, the nation would be able to take advantage of all of its scientific and technological resources. By utilizing that funding, then, the nation could become more competitive with the Soviet Union.

Calls for Women’s Opportunities Parallel Calls for Federal Aid to Education

The connections between the fields for which the National Defense Education Act allocated funding and the fields that *Womanpower* and the various reports of the Commission on the Education of Women encouraged women to enter are obvious. Pre-Sputnik reports and articles that encouraged improvements in women’s educational and professional opportunities pointed out that in an era of insecurity regarding national defense in the United States, American women were a largely overlooked source of “manpower.” These reports emphasized that scientific and technological fields, more than others, were lacking female experts. They also recognized the significance of this absence of female brainpower and labor because these fields were critically important to the nation’s effort to defend itself against its primary enemy, the Soviet Union.

Similarly, the National Defense Education Act, which Clowse indicates was for the most

¹¹⁶ Loren B. Pope, “Education in Review: Varied Benefits of New Federal Aid Act Will Soon Be Felt in the Schools,” *New York Times*, 30 November 1958, E9.

part drafted months before the launching of Sputnik, recognized a deficiency in fields of science and technology, in addition to mathematics and foreign languages. Thus, the mid-1950s represented an era in which numerous Americans became aware of the nation's shortcomings, especially in education, and while not all who recognized these deficiencies identified women as a potential source of "manpower," the majority did agree that mathematical and scientific fields were the ones in the greatest need of improvements if the nation was going to be successful in defending itself against its communist adversaries.

While early drafts of the National Defense Education Act suggested that education in the subjects of mathematics, science, and foreign languages were insufficient and in dire need of improvement, the National Manpower Council and other similar groups were simultaneously making claims such as, "Today, we are troubled by the waste of human abilities."¹¹⁷ These councils and commissions devoted to addressing women's roles in postwar America called attention to the issue and made suggestions as to how to go about improving women's educational and professional opportunities, but most often they were limited in their potential to effect change because they lacked financial backing to help make those suggestions a reality. While the National Defense Education Act never directly addressed women as having the potential to contribute to improving the fields in American education that it identified as weak, in retrospect the link is extremely clear: women were an underutilized and underappreciated source of "manpower" and could contribute to shortages in fields that were not up to American standards, namely science and technology. Even the *New York Times* had described the goal of the National Defense Education Act as preventing abilities from being

¹¹⁷ National Manpower Council, *Womanpower* (New York: Columbia UP, 1957), 7.

“wasted”—the same objective that the National Manpower Council named in *Womanpower*.

These linkages were not only parallels or convenient coincidences, though; some more concrete connections between mid-1950s attention to women’s education and employment and federal aid to education did exist. For example, included in the archives of the American Council on Education’s Commission on the Education of Women are numerous papers and brochures regarding non-gender-specific federal aid to education. One brochure issued by the Council for Financial Aid to Education stated, “The realization of our national aspirations has always depended on public education. Now the security of our national life depends on it.”¹¹⁸ Like the National Defense Education Act, this brochure never spoke directly to the possibility of women’s education contributing to the improvement of the Americans’ “national life,” but it was apparently among the topics discussed by the Commission on the Education of Women nonetheless. Also included in the Commission’s papers is an article which appeared in *Think* magazine in January 1955. The article was written by James Killian, Jr., who became President Eisenhower’s scientific adviser during the Sputnik crisis, and it was titled “Role of Research in a Dynamic Economy.” In the article, Killian asserted,

As a result of the cold war, we have enforced upon us a burden of secrecy which, coupled with the necessity of combating Communist infiltration and espionage, has forced upon us procedures and apprehensions we have never experienced before and which are abrasive to our spirit. Much of this secrecy is necessary, but it is also necessary not to let a preoccupation with secrecy become so rampant that it impedes our scientific process.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Wilson Compton, “Why Go to College?” Council for Financial Aid to Education (brochure), Archives of the Commission on the Education of Women (hereafter CEW), Box 5, Folder 53, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

¹¹⁹ James R. Killian, Jr., “Role of Research in a Dynamic Economy,” *Think* (Jan 1955), 3-5, 33, CEW Box 7, Folder 100, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

Thus, members of the Commission on the Education of Women were concerned not only with improving and increasing the number of opportunities for women in their educational and professional pursuits; they were also mindful of the pressures created by the international conflict of the Cold War. The National Manpower Council's *Womanpower* report, too, was directly connected to the National Defense Education Act of 1958 in at least one aspect: both *Womanpower* and the National Defense Education Act were primarily funded by the Ford Foundation.¹²⁰

While the National Defense Education Act of 1958 did not specifically target female students, women *did* benefit from it. Among the recipients of funding provided by the National Defense Education Act was Radcliffe College, a prestigious all-female institution. In the academic year 1959-1960, the National Defense Education Act allocated \$37,397 in federal contributions to Radcliffe, allowing the administration to issue more aid to its female student body in the subjects of mathematics, sciences, and foreign languages.¹²¹ Radcliffe was only one of many women's colleges that was able to increase the amount of financial aid that it offered to its female students because of the National Defense Education Act, and therefore even though the Act did not explicitly direct funding at female students, women who might otherwise not have been able to afford pursuing their interests in mathematics or science now had assistance that would make studying in those typically "male" fields possible. A 1959 *New York Times* article discussed the student loan aspect of the National Defense Education Act and declared that "girls borrow, too." The article quoted G. Derthick, United States Commissioner of

¹²⁰ *Womanpower*, vii, and Hans Rosenhaupt, "Identifying College Students of Great Promise," *The Journal of Higher Education* 30, no. 7 (October 1959), 395.

¹²¹ Mary Bunting to L.G. Derthick, 23 September 1959, CEW, Box 3, Folder 43, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

Education, who explained that women had been “notoriously reluctant” to go into debt because they feared it might scare away future husbands; the article went on to say, however, that women “seem to be applying for repayable assistance in ever-increasing numbers.”¹²² Thus, while it was not considered a common occurrence for women to go out of their way to ascertain financial assistance for education, through the National Defense Education Act many women had done just that.

Why Would the National Defense Education Act *Not* Target Women?

Both those who encouraged increased educational opportunities for women and those who supported federal aid to education, such as the National Defense Education Act of 1958, sought to minimize the chances of “wasting” valuable intellect. With such clearly related goals, then, it might seem peculiar that the National Defense Education Act never explicitly mentioned women as having the potential to help the nation eliminate such wastes of talent in the fields of mathematics, sciences, and modern foreign languages. While events such as the Soviets’ launching of Sputnik increased the paranoia and panic throughout postwar America, though, nothing could completely change mainstream society’s prevailing conceptions of women’s roles. Had Congress directly addressed women’s education in the act, controversy would likely have ensued and possibly prevented the act from passing.

While challenging comfortable gender roles remained risky, over the course of less than a decade, higher education for women had gained a great deal of acceptance. Whereas higher education of any sort for women—namely, higher education that did not

¹²² “Education News: Varied Activity on the Campus And in the Classrooms,” *New York Times*, 27 September 1959, E11.

aim to educate women exclusively for homemaking—seemed pointless to the majority of Americans in the late 1940s and early 1950s, by the end of the decade women had made considerable progress in educational and professional fields. Articles such as “West Needs to Pool Brains to Survive,” which appeared in the *Washington Post*, called for women to contribute to “scientific brain power,” and throughout the 1950s public acceptance of women extending their sphere into “male” domain gradually increased.¹²³

Conclusion

As historians Joanne Meyerowitz, Stephanie Coontz, and Susan Hartmann, among others, have demonstrated, women’s opportunities did increase throughout the postwar era. More enrolled in universities, held jobs, and became politically active. Even so, the gender ideology which so many Americans associate with the early Cold War in the United States persisted. Women struggled to digest conflicting messages—various sources instructed women on how to best fulfill their roles as ladylike wives and mothers while effectively contributing to maintaining security in a nation that was in a state of perpetual panic regarding its conflict with the Soviet Union. These instructions often contradicted one another, leaving women to interpret them for themselves and, ultimately, decide how they would lead their lives. External pressures, of course, from parents, husbands, the media, and the government, all influenced these women. While many chose to adhere to “traditional” gender roles—raising children and tending house—a significant number made an effort to become educated in allegedly “male” fields, in an effort to play a direct part in defending the United States against the Soviet threat. By providing funding that allowed students, male and female, to pursue studies in

¹²³ Malvina Lindsay, “West Needs to Pool Brains to Survive,” *Washington Post*, 11 April 1957, A26.

mathematics, sciences, and foreign languages, the National Defense Education Act of 1958 aided women in expanding the scope of their potential career paths and breaking free from Betty Friedan's construct of a "comfortable prison."

Epilogue

“Women comprised one subset of [National Defense Education Act] beneficiaries,” declares journalist Paul Dickson in his 2001 book *Sputnik: Shock of the Century*. “Although feminism still had no name in 1957, its roots were in place. It was bolstered by Western revelation that the Russians were using the female half of the population to effect scientific and technical advances. . . . The other catalytic force was the NDEA, which put out a welcome mat for women to enter scientific and technical fields.”¹²⁴ While Dickson cannot establish a tangible link between feminism and the National Defense Education Act of 1958, he acknowledges the evident connection that did indeed exist between the act and the increase in women’s educational and professional opportunities in putatively “male” disciplines. Yet Dickson’s analysis is too neat; he correctly notes that the technological advances of the Soviets acted to improve women’s opportunities, but he fails to acknowledge that the pressure on American women to adhere to more “traditional” gender roles refused to disappear. A great deal of cultural tension surrounded this issue, for women simultaneously felt pressured to enter the “male,” public sphere *and* to be domestic and ladylike—all in the name of promoting the security of the United States.

As Dickson suggests, the foundation for expanded women’s roles was laid well before the Soviets launched Sputnik in October 1957. But constructing this foundation proved difficult. The encouragement of shifting gender roles was a long and gradual process, and one that did not go uncontested. Beginning in the late 1940s, as the paranoia of the early Cold War began to sweep the United States, a significant number of prominent academics raised the topic of women’s education and its role in the nation’s

¹²⁴ Paul Dickson, *Sputnik: Shock of the Century* (New York: Walker & Company, 2001), 228.

efforts to defend itself against the Soviet threat. At the same time, however, the popular media stressed the importance of women's role as domestic beings and encouraged women's educators to instruct female students on how to best serve their husbands and children as homemakers, rather than how they might contribute to scientific and technological fields.

Such contradictory messages regarding women's proper place in postwar America—as well as the role education should play in preparing women to assume that place—ought to underscore for historians the dangers of oversimplifying American gender ideology in the Eisenhower era. Joanne Meyerowitz has effectively debunked Betty Friedan's famous depiction of 1950s American women as confined in a prison of housework, childcare, and hostessing, yet Meyerowitz's own portrayal of women's career opportunities at mid-century is, in its own way, just as misleading. The fact is that American women were often pulled in two directions at once: toward the university and the laboratory by many—if not all—academics, and toward the familiar comforts of home and hearth by the organs of American popular culture. Like women in any other period of American history, these women were neither completely imprisoned within nor completely liberated from the prevailing gender norms of the time. If scholars wish to accurately recreate the experience of American women in the early years of the Cold War, they would do well to recognize the complexity of those experiences and not attempt to reduce them to either a “feminine mystique” dirge or an ahistorical celebration of empowerment.

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