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Ambassador without portfolio' Alistair Cooke's America on the British airwaves

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'AMBASSADOR WITHOUT PORTFOLIO'

ALISTAIR COOKE'S AMERICA ON THE BRITISH AIRWAVES

BY

TESSA CATHERINE CROKER

American Studies and History (BA), University of Sussex, 2007

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

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In

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This thesis has been examined and approved.

Thesis Director, Lucy Salyer, Associate Professor of History

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Nicoletta Gullace, Associate Professor of History

10 May 2010
Date
DEDICATION

To Anne Beggs

Although you never knew it, this whole project came from you. When you gave me Cooke’s *America* for Christmas, you told me it would be useful for research. How right you were! Thank you Grandma, I wish you were here to read this.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly my thanks go to the Howard Gotlieb Centre at Boston University for allowing me to investigate the Alistair Cooke Collection. I am particularly grateful to archivist Alex Rankin for all his assistance. In addition my thanks go to the staff and Trustees of the Mass Observation Archive at Sussex University for allowing me to access the collection. My sincerest thanks go to my supervisor, Professor Lucy Salyer for her constant encouragement and willingness to discuss my ideas. I am so grateful for all the additions and suggestions you have given. Thank you also to my committee members Professor Kurk Dorsey and Professor Nicoletta Gullace for giving me the benefit of their expertise in international relations and modern Britain.

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Raised in Britain, journalist Alistair Cooke received American citizenship in 1941. From his adopted home in New York, Cooke dedicated his career to protecting the Anglo-American alliance. Through his BBC radio broadcast, *Letter from America*, Cooke tried to combat British anti-Americanism with honest discussion of America. Utilizing his knowledge of Britain, Cooke tailored the tone and content of his discussions to a British audience. In the Cold War period he transferred discussion of Anglo-American relations from Washington and London to the sitting room, in an effort to encourage real friendship between the two nations. Unaffiliated with the American government, Cooke was free to discuss any aspect of American life and he focused on the American people. His lack of affiliation, and unique position as a British-born American citizen, made Cooke a successful, albeit unofficial, ambassador for Anglo-American relations.
INTRODUCTION

Good Evening, One of the nicest letters I have ever had dropped through my mail-box the other morning. It was from England and it said very little more than this: "As one of those ill-conditioned souls who intensely dislike Americans, America, and almost everything that comes out of it. I only wish to say that if anybody could convert me, it would be you."

The “you” to whom this “nice letter” was addressed, was BBC radiobroadcaster Alistair Cooke. Beginning in 1946, from his studio in New York City, Cooke broadcast his weekly Letter from America to the people of Britain for 58 years. Every broadcast, like the example above, began with the address “Good Evening” before transitioning into a rich and informative discussion of American life. More than simply offering description, Cooke used the radio to educate. As the example above demonstrates, British feeling toward America and Americans after World War II was, at times, intensely negative. Cooke attempted to create a more positive American image by adopting a “self-appointed role as the protector of transatlantic relations.” In post-war and Cold War Britain, Cooke became America’s “Ambassador without Portfolio.”

Though unaffiliated with the American government, Cooke was part of a

1 Alistair Cooke, Letter from America, Number 183, recorded 22 June 1950, broadcast 30 June 1950, File 3, Box 4, The Alistair Cooke Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archive, Boston University. (Hereafter all subsequent Letter references cited as Cooke, Letter from America. All Files and Boxes are located at the Howard Gotlieb Archive).


general effort during the Cold War to use radio to spread knowledge about America, its policies and way of life abroad. The State Department, through the newly created United States Information Agency (USIA), frequently utilized radio broadcasts to promote America overseas. While Cooke broadcast to the United Kingdom, the USIA targeted countries under the sway of “Communist forces of darkness.” The value of the radio to the USIA, historian David F. Krugler has argued, was its ability to “reach behind the iron curtain.” Congress, particularly the appropriations committee, believed that fighting communism was the USIA’s most important role. As one USIA operator interviewed in 1953 revealed “Congress considers that all money spent on Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom is wasted.” As the USIA received its funding from Congress, it could not afford to ignore such congressional opinion. The agency therefore targeted those countries that were vulnerable to Communist persuasion, rather than wasting funds on nations already in the democratic capitalist fold.

Alistair Cooke, however, realized that the USIA was grossly mistaken in assuming that the United Kingdom identified with the United States. As the “nice letter” he received in 1950 demonstrated, some Britons in fact “intensely disliked” America. Thus while the USIA broadcast its Voice of America network throughout Communist Russia and its sphere of influence, Cooke realized the importance of extending American cultural diplomacy to the British airwaves. During the fraught

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6 Leo Bogart, Cool Words, 27, 65.
years of the Cold War, Cooke provided Britain with a tailor-made form of cultural diplomacy: *Letters from America*.

Given its popularity in Britain, Cooke's decision to use radio in his cultural diplomacy efforts was a prudent choice. In 1942, for example, a survey of public opinion in Britain undertaken by the Mass Observation Organization concluded that the majority of the British population would like to learn more about America. Of those who expressed an interest in learning more, the majority (39%) suggested that radio would be the best way to foster understanding of the American way of life.\(^7\) Cooke seems to have been equally enthralled by the power of radio. In 1939, for example, he told his listeners, "it is the duty of radio...to keep on checking and denying and explaining, and turning corners quickly on an untruth, and smashing it down."\(^8\)

The British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) had a strong reputation in the field of international broadcasting, and thus it is perhaps not surprising that the British appreciated the medium of radio. In the early twentieth century, the BBC ruled the international airwaves. Indeed, in much the same way as the United States was to use the *Voice of America* in the post-war period, Britain used similar

\(^7\) The Mass Observation Organization was formed in Britain by reporter and amateur anthropologist Charles Madge together with Tom Harrisson and Humphrey Jennings in 1937. Their aim was to record an "anthropology of ourselves" and to study the everyday lives of ordinary people in Britain. As part of their work they organized a national panel of hundreds of self-selected volunteers who replied to questionnaires on a range of topics. The volunteers were disproportionately middle class and female. In addition a team of paid investigators recorded people's behavior and discussions in a wide range of public situations. The project was disbanded in 1949 but resumed operations in 1981 when a new national panel of volunteer writers were recruited. Today the Mass Observation Project focuses on voluntary participation which makes it different from other social investigations. http://www.massobs.org.uk/a_brief_history.htm (accessed 26 April 2010). M-O A, Special Report 1095, "Opinion on America", February 1942, 7-9.

techniques in America during the early war years. As historian David F. Krugler has explained, Britain used the airwaves to garner pro-British sentiment and foster anti-German feeling in the United States. By cutting the German telegraph cables, Britain gained control of the flow of information across the Atlantic.9

The BBC had been producing an overseas shortwave transmission, the Empire Service, since 1932. Through this and their frontline war-time broadcasts, the BBC gained a reputation for honest and reliable reporting around the world. Former reporter, Desmond Hawkins recalled, “for years after the war, if you were traveling in Europe, you only had to mention that you were from the BBC, to be clasped by the hand and welcomed as an honoured friend.”10 Perhaps because of its reputation, much of the scholarship of the VOA and the USIA includes discussion of the BBC. Leo Bogart, for example, referred to the “Olympian BBC” as the model for the Voice of America. In addition he praised the BBC’s “reputation for integrity, its flat objective tone at times of both adversity and triumph”11

Yet while American cultural diplomacy agencies such as the USIA respected the BBC’s “reputation for integrity,” their focus on “winning” the Cold War prevented them from retaining a similar reputation. In the USIA’s cultural diplomacy the ends justified the means. Accurate reporting was not required in

11 Bogart, *Cool Words*, xxxviii, xii.
their quest to discredit the Soviet Union. In contrast, Cooke was concerned with Anglo-American relations rather than Soviet-American ones, and he believed honest discussion was crucial to improving transatlantic relationships. In 1951 he contended, “I don’t believe the Anglo-American alliance will be wrecked by plotters, by the Communists, or by people deliberately against it. It will be wrecked by people on both sides of the ocean who live by the bitterness of their pride.”

Cooke was uniquely placed to offer specialized radio broadcasts to combat this bitter pride in England. As he explained in a proposal to the BBC in 1941, “I fall into a curious, and dare I say useful category. Namely one who knows something of English psychology, an Englishman and an American citizen.” Cooke received his green card in 1941 and considered himself an American citizen as demonstrated by his frequent use of terms such as “we” and “us” when describing and addressing the American people. In a 1951 article for the ‘Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review,’ Cooke made reference to “our Constitution” and spoke of the British as “they.” However, in the same article, Cooke also spoke of how “we” felt when describing the British WWI experience. In addition his article gave advice to the people of the United States, using the term “you” rather than “we.” The inconsistent way in which Cooke uses pronouns within one article demonstrates, what writer Leonard Miall calls Cooke’s personal

12 Ibid, 130.
13 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 240, broadcast 26 October 1951, File 2, Box 5.
14 Nick Clarke, Alistair Cooke, (1999), 163.
"mid-Atlantic rootlessness."\textsuperscript{16}

To Cooke, this rootlessness was an asset. Though he considered himself an American, he could still relate to the British and he considered their reactions when writing and planning his broadcasts. In a revealing \textit{Letter} from 1957, Cooke explained his methodology in writing \textit{Letters}. He told his listeners that he kept files of press cuttings from both England and America on a range of topics that interested him. On those occasions when his listeners wrote letters of sharp rebuke to him, Cooke turned to his press cutting collection and found that generally his most frivolous amusing talks had "a habit of being done on the day when there is some abominable accident in Britain." As a result, before beginning the talk of Spring he had planned, he checked the British papers and on seeing that an industrial strike had begun, Cooke changed the content of his planned essay and turned his attention to less frivolous discussion.\textsuperscript{17}

To retain connection with his British audience, Cooke made frequent return trips to England. Yet Cooke was equally concerned with his subject as he was with his listeners and took time to travel and explore his adopted home. In 1939 he explained his belief that "the time, I think, is long overdue for a new kind of foreign correspondent – one who does not take it for granted that we will all live and think alike."\textsuperscript{18} Cooke aimed to be this foreign correspondent. For example,


\textsuperscript{17} Cooke, \textit{Letter from America, Number 484} recorded 22 March 1957, broadcast 24 March 1957, File 2, Box 11.

\textsuperscript{18} Clarke, \textit{Alistair Cooke}, 149.
soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor while journalists flocked to the nation’s capital, Cooke bought a Lincoln Zephyr and took to the road to find out what the rest of the United States thought about the war.\footnote{19 William Grimes, “Alistair Cooke’s America, Explored in Wartime,” \textit{New York Times}, 24 May 2006.} Cooke remained committed to ‘on the road’ reporting and investigation throughout his journalistic career. He went to Washington twice a month and toured the United States once a year. For the rest of the time he worked from his Fifth Avenue apartment or his Long Island summer home.\footnote{20 A Cooke’s Look at America, \textit{Life}, August 25, 120.}

Cooke’s \textit{Letters} demonstrate that he understood British history and popular opinion as well as Britain’s political and economic position in the post-war world. His realization that not all people were alike was crucial to Cooke’s attempts to improve Anglo-American relations. Lack of understanding and generalized, stereotyped views had stymied transatlantic relations. The British, for example, assumed that America was culturally inferior and irresponsible. Having been raised in Britain during World War I, Cooke experienced British dislike of America and its people firsthand. Chapter 1 explores Cooke’s experiences of living in both Britain and America. Both countries had negative assumptions about the other, and as a result Cooke chose to develop \textit{Letters from America}. The show was a response to what Cooke saw as a need to foster closer connections between the two nations, especially in the Cold War context.

Within this context, in the years 1950-1960 two dominant themes are present in Cooke’s work and in the USIA’s cultural diplomacy. But while Cooke
and the USIA dealt with the same topics, they did so in different ways. Chapter 2 addresses Cooke’s discussions of American consumer culture in which he downplayed the importance of consumption in the United States. His talks suggested that cultural events, such as baseball, were more important to the American way of life than American products like Coca Cola and chewing gum were. By focusing on cultural events and the people that participated in them, Cooke found discussion topics in which the British could participate, in spite of Britain’s weak post-war economy. By transferring focus from products to people, Cooke hoped to find ways in which the British and Americans could relate. In his discussion of Cold War politics, Cooke employed similar techniques. Chapter 3 discusses Cooke’s treatment of America’s emerging role as a superpower. While American informational sources such as the *Voice of America* program depicted a bipolar world in which America and the Soviet Union were the dominant forces, Cooke stressed Britain’s continued importance in world affairs. His talks were designed to appeal to a nation whose pride had been considerably wounded by its loss of imperial dominance, and the post-war realignment of world power.²¹

For fifty-eight years Alistair Cooke explored American life in its widest and

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²¹ In the years 1950-1960 Cooke broadcast approximately 520 *Letters from America*. As he was given freedom to discuss any topic that interested him, the scope of his radio essay topics is vast. This thesis considers Anglo-American relations and therefore has addressed subjects best suited to this topic. Most crucially, this thesis largely ignores Cooke’s racial discussions during the Cold War. Although Mary Dudziak’s scholarship stresses the centrality of domestic civil rights reform efforts to American Cold War foreign policy, the issue of civil rights is not of central importance to Anglo-American relations and therefore race is generally beyond the scope of this particular project. However because of Dudziak’s stress on the importance of foreign perception’s of America to America’s ability to “maintain its leadership role,” a study of British perception of racial issues using Cooke’s *Letters* merits further consideration. During World War II many Mass Observation respondents expressed their dislike of American treatment of racial minorities in America, and their treatment of American G.I.s in Britain, certainly this could be considered further in future research. Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6.
most varied forms over the British airwaves. Even in the turbulent years of the Cold War, Cooke remembered that in times of war people still had to live. And Cooke was never afraid to live and describe this life to his British audience. Cooke moved the focus of the Cold War from Washington to the fireside and encouraged real friendships amongst people rather than just national alliances. His work, in his own words, stressed “the springs of American life, whose bubbles are the headlines, rather than the bright headlines themselves.”

Behind the headlines, and on the road, Cooke found the real America, and it was this image of America that he transmitted over the British airwaves. It was this image of America with which Cooke helped to “convert” those “ill-conditioned souls.”

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CHAPTER ONE

'AMERICANS ARE HUMAN BEINGS, JUST LIKE YOU':

ALISTAIR COOKE AND POST-WAR ANGLO-AMERICAN RELATIONS

On the deck of the Arbella in 1630, John Winthrop spoke to his congregation. His opening words remain amongst the most well known in American history, and they provided the Puritan settlers with a mission and an identity for their new nation. "We must consider" Winthrop preached "that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." Thus, as historian Richard Pells has argued, historians who locate the origins of America's international mission in the Cold War period are mistaken. Instead, as Pells argued, for nearly four centuries Americans assumed that all other peoples either wanted to move to America, or replicate the "new Eden" in their own countries.¹ Although not new ideas, it was assumptions such as these that informed American cultural diplomacy during the Cold War. To understand these diplomacy efforts, one must consider the assumptions under which both America and the countries they targeted operated.

According to historian Chris Tudda, American rhetorical diplomacy was "consciously designed to educate Western citizens for globalism."² Yet as Pells

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astutely observed, American policy frequently failed to acknowledge individuals in its global vision, and neglected the need for programs that were tailored to the particular desires of an individual nation. Blinded by their sense of mission, American Cold War policy makers “functioned as evangelists on behalf of the American Way” and assumed that Europeans would welcome their ideas and way of life. It was this determination to preach the American way that blighted American cultural diplomacy efforts throughout Europe.

Yet the Americans cannot be seen as the only guilty party for the limits of cultural diplomacy. European nationals also had pre-conceived notions about America and the American way of life. Hollywood began ‘selling America’ long before Washington ever attempted to do so. Thus, prior to Washington’s cultural diplomacy, Europeans had formed judgments about America, its culture and people, and in many cases actively sought to reject the American way of life. According to Pells “the ‘Americanization’ of Europe is a myth.”³ Pells argued that far from being welcoming, Europeans have rejected and modified American material goods, incorporating American wares into their existing cultures, rather than replacing their own cultures with American practices. Both American cultural diplomats and historians alike have often failed to appreciate the subtle rejections of American culture exhibited abroad. Without understanding the underlying anti-American aspects of European opinion, American cultural diplomacy could never be fully successful.

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³ Pells, Not Like Us, xiii.

and John Foster Dulles (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2006), 2.
Historiography of American cultural diplomacy during the Cold War period has tended to focus on West Germany and France. Although Richard Pells contends that “British intellectuals and scholars tended to be more knowledgeable and more dispassionate about the United States than did their colleagues on the Continent,” Britain is largely absent from his consideration of European culture. Indeed Britain is generally only included in scholarly discussions of the American Studies movement and the Fulbright Program. In large part this is because American cultural diplomacy efforts in Britain were almost non-existent. Relying on their shared heritage and language, American governmental policymakers failed to understand the complexities of Anglo-American cultural relations. The USIA and its cultural diplomacy efforts focused almost solely on its “enemy” nations and those who appeared vulnerable to communist influence. In doing so the USIA drastically over-simplified understandings of friend and foe. It was individual Britons who realized that shared language alone was an insufficient basis on which to form bonds of allegiance. It was journalist Alistair Cooke who realized that Britons needed instruction, and Cooke that took on the role of instructor, correcting and challenging hostility toward America over the airwaves. As he explained to his listeners, it had become necessary to point out that “Americans are human beings, just like you.”

In many ways, of course, the two countries were very similar, if only because

4 Ibid, 442.
5 Alistair Cooke, Letter from America, Number 209, recorded 28 February 1951, broadcast 16 March 1951, File 3, Box 4, The Alistair Cooke Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archive, Boston University. (Hereafter all subsequent Letter references cited as Cooke, Letter from America. All Files and Boxes are located at the Howard Gotlieb Archive).
of their shared history. As David Reynolds suggested, throughout most of American history, Britain has been important in defining American values. On gaining independence, America found its identity in being “non English,” and chose to represent all that they believed England stifled: republicanism, democracy and liberty. Thus, to be American was defined in opposition to being British. Textbooks portrayed England as the exploiter and by the 1930s British history had virtually disappeared from the classroom as a separate subject. Instead Britain featured as an actor in America’s story.⁶

It is the complex shared history of the two nations that made Anglo-American relations such a unique case. The familial language utilized by each nation to describe the other suggests that deep-rooted bonds were shared across the Atlantic, even if they were not always favorable. As a 1943 Mass Observation publication noted, the British have never looked at Americans as “full-blooded foreigners,” but rather as cousins and thus tended to judge Americans by English standards. Britons were therefore often more critical of Americans than of other foreigners.⁷ Their shared heritage also informed American opinion of Britain, and British anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer contended in 1948 that Americans also understood Britons as a form of family. However, rather than seeing the British as cousins, Americans viewed Britain as the overbearing parent, “an authoritarian father - wicked, past its prime,

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old-fashioned, passed and left behind."8 Their shared historical record informed the ways in which Britons and Americans understood each other and themselves.

Born on 20 November 1908, Albert Cooke grew up surrounded by negative depictions of America, however, for Cooke, England, too, had limited appeal. He was raised in Salford, Manchester, an area of the United Kingdom he would later describe as “an appalling place.” Cooke’s biographer, Nick Clarke, described Cooke’s first home in somewhat kindlier terms; it was not “the bottom of the heap,” however neither was it a place “for the nurturing of great ambitions.” Cooke’s father Samuel was an iron fitter and money was tight. However as a strict Methodist, Samuel Cooke encouraged his family to live respectably. There was no alcohol or swearing in the Cooke household.9 Cooke’s dissatisfaction with life began at a young age, and he quickly abandoned the name Albert for the more cultured Alistair. His British education ignored the United States. American history ended at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. His curriculum followed the principle “that if they didn’t need us, we didn’t need them.”10

Yet in his adolescent years it became clear to Cooke that England did “need” America. During World War I, Cooke had direct contact with American G.I.s stationed in Blackpool. In total, 1,027,000 G.I. soldiers and 7000 Army nurses came to Britain. Though these “doughboys” only stayed in the United Kingdom for a short period of time, their time “over here” left an important legacy. On a national

10 Ibid, 12.
scale the doughboys entered British popular memory, and this memory affected British reception of the G.I.s in World War Two. The G.I.s would also have a lasting influence on Cooke, indeed he later described the arrival of these troops as the “decisive moment” in his life. Without knowledge of the American Revolutionary War, Cooke did not necessarily understand the negative connotations of “the Yanks are coming,” a phrase used regularly in local press, but he saw firsthand the differences and hostility between the two nationalities. Cooke became fascinated with the tall pale soldiers. Their complexions, his father told him, were whitened from living in the shadows of skyscrapers. Cooke’s early years exposed him to observable tensions between British and American citizens and fueled a desire to know more.

Cooke, his biographer Nick Clarke claims, was “his own invention.” With a passion for adventure and a desire to escape the small Northern British towns he found so dreary, Cooke received a Commonwealth Fund Scholarship (also known as the Harkness Fellowships) in 1932. In September of that year he boarded the SS Laconia and set sail for Manhattan. Just as Winthrop’s Puritan settlers defined their mission aboard the Arbella, Cooke too found his while crossing the Atlantic, mingling amongst his fellow passengers, ordinary American people who would become the mainstay of his future journalistic career. The Commonwealth Fund was established in 1925 to promote study and research in US colleges and the

11 Reynolds, Rich Relations, 3-4.
12 Clarke, Alistair Cooke, 1, 9, 11.
program was a precursor of the USIA's Fulbright Commission. Cooke, then, serves as a poster child for cultural diplomacy: his experience in America as a Commonwealth scholar fostered in him a great love for America, a country he would defend, promote and explain throughout his entire career. It was during these early travels that Cooke would collect the minutiae that would become the essence of his broadcasts.

Having come to America to study drama, Cooke transferred from Yale to Harvard and switched his focus to the history of the English Language. On returning from America he pitched two radio shows to the BBC, one to examine language and the other “American life.” The BBC adopted his language idea and in 1935 produced a show entitled, English Both Sides of the Atlantic. Crucially this show was heard at NBC and as a result Cooke formed a relationship with NBC producer Fred Bates who arranged for his broadcasts to be transmitted in America. As a result when NBC looked for someone to cover the Edward VIII and Mrs. Simpson abdication crisis, Cooke was the journalist they employed, and he became their chief correspondent on the subject.

The decision to report for NBC had consequences that Cooke himself had not foreseen, and marks perhaps a turning point in his relationship with Britain. On 1st December 1936, Cooke had gathered in Mayfair, London, with fellow members of The English Speaking Union to discuss how to improve Anglo-American relations. Due to a blanket newspaper silence, most Britons did not know about

13 Ibid, 55.
14 Founded at the end of the First World War, The English Speaking Union was founded by Sir Evelyn Wrench and Sir Winston Churchill was one of the union’s first Chairmen. The Union
the abdication crisis, Cooke's American companions, however, did. During the meeting, Cooke received an urgent phone call from Fred Bates. The story had broken in New York and as a result Bates demanded that the BBC must issue a statement. Because of the blanket silence, no one in England knew of the crisis and thus it was impossible for Cooke to provide a 'reactions' report. Under pressure from Bates, Cooke decided that he himself would voice a report, which he recorded at the BBC studios. As the red 'on air' light clicked off, the radio announcer screamed at Cooke. "I have never," he said, "heard anything like it. It is absolutely monstrous that an Englishman should use a BBC circuit to denigrate His Majesty the King before a foreign audience. You may be quite sure that I shall report this to my superiors." In part because of his abdication talks the BBC made plans to sack Cooke but he signed with NBC before they had opportunity to do so. However this would not be the last time Cooke would be subjected to the BBC's official cold-shoulder.

Given both more money and more respect at NBC than the BBC had ever given him, Cooke accepted a contract with the network and moved to New York in 1937. He, by this point, had an American wife, and expected his children to be American citizens. Moreover he strongly believed that America would be a popular subject on the airwaves. Cooke never lost his attachment to the BBC though and during the interwar years fought consistently for a role in the BBC aimed to encourage and promote close relationships between English-speaking peoples. The English Speaking Union website, www.esu.org/page.asp?p=1739, (accessed 1 May 2010).

16 Clarke, Alistair Cooke, 128, 177
schedule. He wanted to be the BBC's "man in America," and the outbreak of war gave him the opportunity to do this. Based in America, Cooke looked for a way to fulfill his wartime obligations as a British citizen without leaving his new home. Broadcasting enabled him to do this and he remained in the United States.\(^{17}\)

Throughout the Second World War, Cooke continued to promote his idea for a program examining everyday America to the BBC. However as a letter sent to him in January 1940 demonstrates, the BBC were less than enthused by Cooke's suggestions. Frustrated perhaps by America's continued non-involvement in the War, in January 1940 Deputy Director Sir Cecil Graves rejected Cooke's idea for "A Letter From America," arguing that while America needed to learn more about the British, there was no need for Britain to learn more about America.\(^{18}\) However as Cooke had observed during his childhood days in Blackpool, British animosity was precisely why the BBC should consider such a program.

Indeed Cooke himself fell victim to this animosity. Having completed the required two-year residence qualification in the Spring of 1939, Cooke applied for American citizenship. Unfortunately for Cooke, his application for citizenship was delayed by the 12,000 European Jews seeking American visas to escape Hitler.\(^{19}\) Thus he did not receive American citizenship until 1 December 1941, six days before the Pearl Harbor attacks, when Britain's economy and morale was at its weakest. As a result many Britons saw his renunciation of English citizenship as a

\(^{17}\) Clarke, Alistair Cooke, 115, 127

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 160.

rejection and personal attack on their nation. It seemed Cooke was deserting his country when it needed him most, and this was an image that never totally faded. In a report in the *Sunday Pictorial*, August 1948, Cooke was named on a list of seven famous men who turned their backs on Britain. The article claimed he could not have become successful without the patronage of the British public but abandoned them for America. In personal correspondence between Cooke and Alfred Wadsworth, his editor at the *Manchester Guardian*, Cooke described the write up as “quite a piece!” but Wadsworth dismissed the article as “nothing to bother about.” While both the men attempted to dismiss the article, it made enough of an impact that Cooke addressed it on his radio show, where he brushed it off as “the sort of piece thought up over a news-less weekend.”

Cooke had a very different experience of the war from his former countrymen. Safely ensconced in the relative comfort of Manhattan, it is perhaps understandable that British citizens believed Cooke abandoned them. In the decade following World War One, relations between America and Britain became ‘seriously strained.’ According to historian David Reynolds, the Wall Street Crash and America’s subsequent decision to remove their support from Europe further soured Anglo-American relations. However, as Britain found herself being dragged deeper and deeper into war with Nazi Germany, she could ill afford to advertise her ill-feeling towards America. Following the Pearl Harbor attacks, 69%

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21 Letter from Alfred Wadsworth to Alistair Cooke, 19 September 1948; Letter from Alistair Cooke to Alfred Wadsworth, 10 September 1948, Folder 12, Box 43.

of males and 56% of females canvassed by Mass Observation said they were
glad the U.S. was now in the War. Yet while pleased that America had finally
entered the War, the British remained unconvinced as to the strength of its
commitment. In 1942, of those sampled by Mass Observation in London, 25% in
January and 40% in February expressed dissatisfaction about the American war
effort. As one twenty-five-year-old male told a Mass Observation researcher “it's
only half-hearted. They could multiply their present effort ten times.”
Such comments were perhaps partially justified as until June 1944, the air force was the
only American presence in Britain engaged in any real fighting. However while
there may have been some factual basis to these sentiments, they were also
informed by hearsay and misguided assumptions about the American character.

Both Britons and Americans held stereotypical views of each other, many of
which reflected their shared history. In 1942 Mass Observation's Report on
Opinion on America, found that 24% of those surveyed felt negatively towards the
US, having increased from 15% in 1941. Of those who disliked America, 48%
expressed distaste at American boastfulness. In his anthropological study of the
Americans, Geoffrey Gorer also noted this boastful trait, and attempted to explain
it. Gorer contested that the young American child was always in a contest with
their stronger parents and, as a result learned early in life to speak
over-emphatically. As their parents grew used to this style, they failed to correct
their child's exaggerations and, as a result, Gorer claimed, Americans continued

24 Reynolds, Rich Relations, xxix
this style as adults. While Americans generally interpreted this style with ease, non-Americans failed to do so, considering it as "excessive boasting and self-glorification."\textsuperscript{25} British dislike of American boastfulness was perhaps not surprising; the English were, after all, known for their stoic reservation and their seeming passion for queuing. The British were an ordered, self-controlled society and American boastfulness and desire for instant gratification went against all that British social etiquette promoted. Thus to understand how the British understood Americans, one needs to see how the British saw themselves.

Britain projected her own fears about her dwindling international power onto her understandings of America. British opinions tended to focus on America's relative youth when compared with England's long cultural history. English culture had an undeniable influence and thus perhaps the British could be forgiven for believing in their own superiority. Historian H.C Allen, for example, noted that English culture dominated internationally, long after Britain had lost her commercial and political dominance.\textsuperscript{26} However, Britain generally failed to see merit in American culture which was demonstrated by one female Mass Observation respondent, who commented "I dislike the culture they're so proud of which really doesn't exist."\textsuperscript{27} While American commentators celebrated their youth as a sign of vitality, the British equated youth with immaturity.\textsuperscript{28} Americans had yet to learn social graces and their youth left them vulnerable to exploitations,

\textsuperscript{25} Gorer, \textit{The American People}, 88.
\textsuperscript{27} M-O A: Special Report 1095, 11.
\textsuperscript{28} Gorer, \textit{The American People}, 47.
as M-O respondents saw it: “they’re a nation of suckers” and “they talk too much.” In addition, Britons criticized “their thick-skinned commercialism,” “their shoddy materialism” and “their dollar worship.”

Americans, too, held their fair share of assumptions about the British, ranging from the belief that “they eat too many fish and chips,” as one G.I. from Philadelphia commented in 1943, to more damning critiques. While Britons tended to connect American youthfulness to naivety, Americans interpreted British reserve as old fashioned. In the 1930s films were the dominate source of information about Britain in America, and these focused on themes of class and monarchy in Britain. Educated in the history of the early Republic, Americans still assumed that the King and the House of Lords retained a dictatorial hold over the British people. Having escaped the grip of tyranny, Americans assumed other nations should do the same. Americans, Gorer posited, though they were not even consciously aware of it, believed that the world could be judged on a scale of more or less complete Americanism. All nations and peoples could thus be positioned on a scale with one hundred percent Americanism at the positive end and one hundred percent anti-Americanism at the negative axis. Thus as long as the British retained their monarchy and hereditary titles, they could only ever be considered “incompletely democratic.”

On January 26, 1942, the first American servicemen landed in the British

30 M-O A: TC American soldiers’ attitudes to Britain, June 1943, 3/F.
31 Reynolds, Rich Relations, 32-33.
Isles. They were, Pells argued, the 'personification' of American foreign policy and culture. In towns all over England, Britons and Americans were forced to confront each other directly for the first time, rather than through the lens of a cinema screen, or the pages of a school textbook. David Reynolds posits that it is difficult to speak of the G.I.'s collective experience in Britain as they were stationed all over the country and factors such as their race shaped their British experience. However, their preconceived assumptions about each other meant that both the Americans and the British continued to make generalized critiques of each other. Certainly the memoirs of both the G.I.'s and the British who encountered them contain sweeping judgments about each other.

In some cases personal contact reinforced existing assumptions. For example, the British seemed to be correct in their assumptions that Americans had more material goods. The prevalence of anecdotes, including the phrase "Hey chum, give us some gum" in Mass Observation memoirs demonstrates how deeply American consumption penetrated British popular memory during the War. To those starving in the Blitz, American luxury consumption was hard to comprehend. In January 1940 rationing was imposed for the first time in Britain. In contrast, rationing in the United States began notably later. Meat, for example, was rationed from March 1940 in Britain but in the United States it was readily available until 1943. When they arrived in Britain then the G.I.s were better fed.

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33 Pells, Not Like Us, 40.

34 For examples of these generalizations see Mass Observation, "American soldiers’ attitudes to Britain," June 1943 and "WW2 People’s War." WW2 People's War is an online archive of wartime memories contributed by members of the public and gathered by the BBC. The archive can be found at bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar.
and better dressed than the British troops were. While points systems were enforced in both countries, the scale of enforcement was different. In America, only canned and processed foods were restricted, whilst in Britain all foods and clothing were allocated on a points scheme. In America rationing produced food shortages, whereas in Britain many goods were completely unattainable.35

Both nationalities were aware of the material gulf that existed between them. As one British lady later commented of her memories as an eleven year old encountering the G.I.s, “we thought they were different - they had more money than the local lads - they were smarter, more confident and gentlemanly - they knew how to treat you well - and they definitely danced better! Some of the girls could get nylons, perfume, chocolate and chewing gum.” Americans were very aware that their lives back home offered more material comfort, and to some G.I.s discussing what they would eat on their return home was a form of entertainment.37 A few however began to appreciate the difficulties faced by the British. As one G.I. commented in 1943, “the U.S.A. doesn’t allow enough for England’s difficulties in having to import everything - timber and raw materials and everything.” Living in Britain had been an educational experience for this young G.I from New York City and he was now beginning to understand that “its not so easy to get things done when you’re not a big country with great natural

35 Reynolds, Rich Relations, 51.
Without great natural resources, England was increasingly reliant on her allies. The War had cost Britain £1,500 million in onshore property, and its gold and dollar reserve dropped from £864 million in 1938 to £453 million in 1945. One third of the merchant fleet had sank at a cost of £700 million. In 1945 it was estimated that the war cost Britain a quarter of its national wealth.\textsuperscript{39} The English, Denis W. Brogan observed, “had only their pride to keep them warm,” and “it did not keep them very warm.”\textsuperscript{40} Thus, while Mass Observation memoirs often draw on the description of American G.I.s as “overpaid, oversexed, and over here,” the G.I. retort that the British were “undersexed, underpaid, underfed, and under Eisenhower,” is less commonly known. Though it may have pained them to admit, Britain had to rely on America for survival. While British manufacturing, the British economy and imperial legacy lay in tatters, the American GNP had increased 50% in real terms during the War.\textsuperscript{41}

In an age of dependency, Britain could ill afford to remain un-educated about America. In 1946 Cooke was called back to London for meetings, and he suggested to Lindsay Wellington, director of the BBC Home Service, that discussion of Americans and their way of life might more “honestly entice” Britons

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\textsuperscript{38} M-O A: TC 25 Political Attitudes and Behavior 1938-56, 3F American soldier’s attitudes to Britain, June 1943. Finding reference SxMOA1/2/25/3/F.


\textsuperscript{41} Reynolds, Rich Relations, xxiii, 53.
\end{flushleft}
to an interest in America.\textsuperscript{42} Inspired, Wellington offered Cooke an assignment to discuss "anything and everything" in America that interested him. Rather than more tales of War and suffering, the BBC hoped to tempt austerity Britain with human interest pieces.\textsuperscript{43} Cooke had now once again found favor with Broadcasting House and his \textit{American Letters} first aired in March 1946.\textsuperscript{44} Although initially commissioned for 13 weeks, \textit{Letters}, described by Cooke biographer Nick Clarke as "a broadcasting monument," aired every Friday evening from 1946 to 2004.\textsuperscript{45}

Cooke's \textit{Letters} were often anthropological in style. To use Clifford Geertz's rhetoric, \textit{Letters} are a "thick description" of America. No topic was seemingly out of bounds for Cooke. In 1950, among other themes, Cooke's broadcasts considered New York City sales tax, baseball, President Truman's vacation to Key West, the American federal income tax system, the F.B.I and milk consumption. Cooke was interested in the marginal characters in American life, and as an avid explorer was keen to educate his listeners about the diversity within America. In a 1951 \textit{Letter} dedicated to discussion of Nevada, for example, Cooke considered a farmer in rural Nevada, rather than the Nevada of "gambling and prostitution and divorce," more commonly described in Europe.\textsuperscript{46}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{42} Alistair Cooke, \textit{One Man's America} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 6.\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{43} Alistair Cooke, Alistair Cooke at the BBC, BBC Radio Collection, 2003.\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{44} Broadcasting House is the corporate headquarters of the BBC, located in central London. \textit{American Letters} adopted the more familiar title \textit{Letter from America} in 1950. The first \textit{Letter from America} was broadcast on 24 February 1950 and the name remained the same until the final letter in 2004.\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{45} Clarke, \textit{Alistair Cooke}, 328.\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{46} Cooke, \textit{Letter from America}, Number 207, recorded 20 February 1951, broadcast 2 March 1951, File 3, Box 4.\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{}}}
explain America effectively to Britain, one had to have knowledge of Britain as well as of America and here, as a British-born citizen, Alistair Cooke had a supreme advantage. In format, style and content, Cooke's cultural diplomacy was tailor-made for a British audience.

Perhaps because of his appreciation of diversity, Cooke realized that anti-Americanism was strongest amongst intellectuals, who tended to see America as a scapegoat for British problems. Until 1957 American immigration policies did not allow ordinary tourists to bring money into the United States. As a result access to America was restricted to official businessmen, journalists and some intellectuals. The ordinary Englishman had no direct contact. Much to the horror of anti-American British intellectuals, the lower classes of Britain were receptive to American ideas and products; they envied American gadgets and admired the potential for social mobility in America. The popularity of American life can be seen in the large numbers of British women who married American G.I.s Generally the brides were of lower social standing as most were munitions workers, secretaries, servicewomen and members of the Women's Lands Army. By 1947, 70,000 women had left England to join their husbands and fiancés in America.

Cooke saw potential in his lower class listener. Indeed his first Letter from America discussed the "couple of thousand" of G.I. brides he met onboard the

47 Brogan, From England, 16-17.
Queen Mary in 1946.\textsuperscript{49} His target audience was as diverse as his broadcast topics, and he aimed to be equally accessible to "shrewd bishops and honest carpenters." Indeed the BBC first broadcast \textit{Letters} on a Sunday night but quickly shifted to a Friday evening timeslot to encourage a wider audience. Yet though talking to large numbers of people, Cooke believed it was important to be himself on air, and addressed his comments to "two friends in a room, no more."\textsuperscript{50}

In the format of his broadcasts, Cooke devised a style that suited the English listener. He described \textit{Letters}, a fifteen minute broadcast, as "exercises in the radio essay." This format, he observed, was tailored to a British audience, who he claimed have greater toleration of essays than Americans.\textsuperscript{51} In 1952, on receiving the George Foster Peabody Radio and Television Award, Cooke used his acceptance speech to explain the difference between American and English radio audiences. The English, he contended, leaned forward while listening, the Americans in contrast leaned back. In fact so relaxed was the American radio listener, that radio became "audible wallpaper".\textsuperscript{52} In harnessing the power of talk radio, Cooke found a vehicle with which he could meet the British public. From his radio pulpit he could then deliver sermons, the content of which were tailored to suit the listener just as was the format of the broadcast.

Aware that the British were proud of their imperial and cultural history, Cooke was at pains to suggest that Americans also respected British history. He

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\item \textsuperscript{49} Alistair Cooke, "Coming Home" American Letter Number 1 in \textit{Reporting America}, Alistair Cooke (New York: The Overlook Press, 2008), 29.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Clarke, \textit{Alistair Cooke}, 106, 192, 215.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Cooke, \textit{One Man's America}, 6-7, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Clarke, \textit{Alistair Cooke}, 266.
\end{itemize}
challenged assumptions that Americans rejected all but republicanism, and stressed, instead, American admiration for the monarchy and parliament. In Letter 237, September 1951 Alistair Cooke addressed the illness of King George VI. The King had undergone surgery to remove a tumor in his lung. Cooke spoke of American sympathy for the King, demonstrated through the large volume of media coverage dedicated to the King's health. Rather than a sideline event, Cooke depicted the King's surgery as an important international event. He suggested that the London dispatch was a staple of the American front page, and as if to reassure Britain of its importance in the international world, he remarked "if the Soviet Union had set off a revolution or a hydrogen bomb, that London dispatch would have been there."53

Cooke argued that Americans were interested in the present monarchy because they were a family, (parents George V1 and Queen Elizabeth and children Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret). Due to American interest in youth, they were generally interested in anyone with children.54 Geoffrey Gorer made a similar argument, but suggested that Americans stressed the familial relationships of those in authority so that they could reduce their authority and understand their strengths at a human level. In the case of Stalin, whom the Americans reduced to "Uncle Joe," his unsuccessful relationships with his children became a source of criticism.55 But while Gorer stressed American desire to reduce the power of

53 Cooke Letter from America, Number 237, recorded 27 September 1951, broadcast 5 October 1951, File 1, Box 5.
54 Ibid.
those in authority, Cooke argued that ordinary Americans were just genuinely interested in the British royals. For example, he noted that in preparation for the Queen’s Coronation, the American press already had dummy coronation magazine specials prepared.56

According to Cooke, Americans also respected British political leaders, none more so than Winston Churchill. The Prime Minister’s popularity sprung not from the fact that he was half American, but rather, as David Reynolds' scholarship argued, that Churchill’s rhetoric won him respect in America, restoring heroism to the British.57 In a 1954 Letter, Cooke, however made a more complex argument. Rather than simply a hero, he described Churchill as a “successful prophet,” arguing that there is nothing more that an American would like to be. Cooke spoke of Dunkirk’s importance to America and argued that the American image of Dunkirk was very different from that of the British. Dunkirk, he claimed “was a challenge to the boasted power of America and to very many Americans it was the guiltiest moment of the war.” He credits Churchill’s action at Dunkirk with bringing the Americans into the war. “The bloom on the American adoration of Churchill,” Cooke observed, “is the deep knowledge that at the worst time he was the sword in the conscience, that his bravery haunted their guilt, and that when they responded later and won by his side, he never brought it up.”58 Thus it was a British rather than an American leader who turned the tide of the war, and in this

56 Cooke Letter from America, Number 307, recorded 6 February 1953 broadcast 13 February 1953, File 1, Box 7.
57 Reynolds, Rich Relations, 33.
example British reserve is a characteristic to be admired.

Though he was proud of his American citizenry, in an article celebrating Cooke’s sixtieth year on the BBC, journalist Alexandra Frean described Cooke as being “as quintessentially English as the Queen and the late Benny Hill.”\textsuperscript{59} It is this characteristic that made his broadcasts appealing and it is his heritage that made him a successful cultural diplomat. While Britain relied on American support to survive the troubles of post-war austerity, this did not mean that they would automatically support American policy. Moreover as the Cold War heated up, American policy sought international support. The relationship between Britain and America was not then as one-sided as it had once seemed. Having grown up surrounded by observable Anglo-American tensions, Cooke’s work was undoubtedly influenced by these experiences. As described in the following chapters Cooke spoke about many of the same subjects as the VOA and USIA publications did, but he tailored them to a British audience. His discussions about the British monarchy and heritage, however, are unique. Knowing that historical memory informed many of Britain’s negative stereotypes about America, he re-examined the past to assuage British hostility.

Cooke, however, did not place all blame with the British, he understood that to interpret Anglo-American hostility he had to look at how both sides perceived themselves and each other. Whilst programs of the USIA expected Europe to adapt to the American way, Cooke saw that an alliance required compromises on both sides. In an enlightening article in the 1952 Michigan Alumnus Quarterly

Review entitled ‘How to Wean An American’ Cooke addressed the American public. He criticized the central tenet of American foreign policy: the desire to make other nations “like us.” Instead he argued “we have to learn to respect other peoples’ cultures, and to discover, what history has so often demonstrated, that real friendship springs from the awareness of differences and the respect for them.” Though American history and memory tended to see Europe as a continent lost, modern America would “have to learn to make new ties with that continent and to live again with Europeans as equals.” Unlike official American cultural diplomacy, Cooke realized that the shared heritage of Britain and America had to be addressed if they could move forward as allies.60

Cooke was a realist. Unlike the USIA he saw that an ally could still be hostile and he challenged the notion that only enemies behind the Iron Curtain did not understand the Western world. As he mocked in a 1953 Letter, “Surely no such misunderstandings exist between the French and British and Americans? On the contrary, I believe that it takes an extraordinarily released man, an emotionally happy and generous man - - or it takes any small child - - to meet a foreigner on uncritical terms, to take him for what he is, and to wait a long time to find out what he is.”61

The USIA did make some attempts to promote their image within Britain: the “Report from America” radio broadcast was particularly popular with the British

61 Cooke Letter from America, Number 315, recorded 1 April 1953 broadcast 10 April 1953, File 1, Box 7.
audience, and the USIA paid for 644 subscriptions to the *New York Times* and *New York Herald Times*, one for each of the members of the British Parliament. However on April 12 1957 John J. Rooney (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House Subcommittee on State Department and USAI appropriations cut the USIA's budget by 26%, arguing that their spending in Britain demonstrated the USIA's "fiscal irresponsibility." Instead of spending in Britain, Rooney argued, the USIA should redirect its money to more important countries.\(^6\) Whilst the USIA sought instant results, Cooke saw the value in long term education and his *Letters from America* series is the world's longest running radio speech program, broadcast for 58 years. As Congress cut funding for British cultural diplomacy, Cooke stepped into the breach understanding that successful diplomacy had to address both sides, and understand each nation on its own terms. Proof of Cooke's success can be found in a letter written to him by a listener on 28 August 1967. It reads "you have helped to clear away many of our misconceptions of American Life; and we have enjoyed the many penetrating digs at our own natural self complacency, and abysmal ignorance of the ways of foreigners."\(^7\) Whilst the USIA tried to Americanize, Cooke sought a true Anglo-American alliance, one that included compromise and self-evaluation on both sides. Cooke's work paved the way for a long term Anglo-American partnership rather than merely an American dominated alliance.


\(^7\) Letter to Alistair Cooke, author unknown, 28 August 1967, File 17, Box 48, The Alistair Cooke Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University.
CHAPTER 2

REMOVING AMERICA'S PINK RIBBONS: 1

CULTURE AND CONSUMPTION IN COOKE'S AMERICA

Good Evening. I had a letter a couple of days ago from an earnest young man - - I know he is earnest and I hope he is young - - who said "Here were are in England depressed by the atom bomb, threatened with the hydrogen bomb, laboring under a crushing economy, watching the Cold War freeze into hopelessness - - and what, Mr. Cooke, do you talk about? About the women's fashions that have sprung from a New York musical comedy hit; about children and the spring coming in; and now, so help us, about a kidnapped baby. Good heavens, Mr. Cooke," he says, - - "don't you have a serious thought in your head; don't you take any interest in politics; how do you live?" 2

In his letter, this "earnest young man," answered his own rhetorical question, "how do you live?" without even realizing it. For, of course, like most Americans, Cooke's daily life continued through the Cold War freeze and the fear of nuclear attack. In this extract, taken from the opening of a 1950 Letter from America, Cooke demonstrates an important point, one that is often overlooked by historians of the Cold War. Hidden beneath the culture of fear so frequently discussed by scholars, politicians and journalists, were ordinary Americans buying spring

1 The title is taken from a 1951 Letter in which Cooke said, "I have never had the desire to tie America up in pink ribbons." Alistair Cooke, Letters from America, Number 209, recorded 28 February 1951, broadcast 16 February 1951, File 3, Box 4, The Alistair Cooke Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archive, Boston University. (Hereafter all subsequent Letter references cited as Cooke, Letter from America. All Files and Boxes are located at the Howard Gotlieb Archive).
2 Cooke, Letters from America, Number 179, recorded 24 May 1950, broadcast 2 June 1950, File 1, Box 4.
fashions and attending Broadway shows. Historian Peter Filene shows awareness of this in his recent consideration of Cold War culture. In his essay, Filene argues that the idea of a Cold War culture is “irresistibly convenient” to the historian. The term is a neat package which requires very little explanation. Cold War culture, it is widely assumed, was crucial to all areas of American life, both in terms of foreign and domestic policy, during this time period. However, Filene’s work questions the uniqueness of ‘Cold War Culture,’ arguing that widespread paranoia was much less of a feature of society than is commonly assumed. Filene points to the continuities in culture between the post war and Cold War era, challenging the notion that a unique culture developed in the Cold War.  

Filene argues that the Cold War was fought on an elite level, and Cooke seemed to share a similar opinion. Cooke realized that regardless of the threat of missiles, regardless of the menace of communism, there were still average Americans whose everyday lives continued despite the ongoing war. It was these people that Cooke wanted to tell Britain about. Their lives were certainly impacted by the Cold War, but the Cold War did not dictate their experience. 

The ideas of culture and fear are very much interconnected, as these next two chapters will demonstrate. In a war of ideology, culture itself became an important weapon. Cooke could ill afford to ignore American culture in his essays. In the immediate post war period, American material abundance stood in contrast to British austerity. Even as Britain’s economy improved, American abundance

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continued to be an important topic of discussion as American diplomacy programs increasingly began to utilize their material wealth and household gadgetry as cultural weapons with which to fight Communism.

In the early 1950s Senator Homer H. Capehart proclaimed that the USIA’s job was “to sell the United States to the world, just as a sales manager’s job is to sell a Buick or a Cadillac.” Indeed in 1945 the United States government recruited a salesman – William Benton – to oversee the United States Information Service, the USIA’s predecessor. Benton had no governmental background but was cofounder of the advertising agency, Benton and Bowles. Benton was Head of Public Relations for the University of Chicago and chairman of Encyclopedia Britannica. In his new role as Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, Benton converted the United States Information Service for peacetime use. From its inception, then, the USIA favored sales techniques in its cultural diplomacy efforts.

Cooke’s mission, however, was not to sell but rather to explain. Avoiding the empty rhetoric of the salesman, Cooke instead favored the full disclosure of the anthropologist. Rather than a “show window,” his Letters were intended to be a mirror, a true reflection of American life, exposing its faults as well as its strengths. “I have never,” Cooke told his audience, “had the desire to tie America

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7 The terms mirror and show window were used by Leo Bogart in his consideration of the USIA.
up in pink ribbons." British sensibilities would not appreciate such frivolous ornamentations, and austerity Britain was no place to advertise American material superiority. Instead, Cooke examined all aspects of American culture, and attempted to show his audience that America had more to offer than Coca-Cola and chewing gum.

As already discussed in Chapter One, many of the Mass Observation responses focused on negative aspects of American culture and character. For example, in 1943 one female respondent from Salisbury commented on, "their boasting and their superficiality - they're quite incapable of understanding what our civilization stands for." In addition, many of those surveyed commented on their perceptions of American luxury. In 1984, one elderly respondent recalled her early memories of America which, to her, seemed "the top dream world! Glamour, comfort, hygiene, it appeared like the perfect place." Both Alistair Cooke and the USIA were aware of the skewed views that foreigners held about America. For example, Benton, in his position as Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, commented in 1945 that other nations "knew more about the American gangsters of the 1920s than they knew about the American educational system of the 1940s. They thought we were all very wealthy, and that we got divorces every year or

Bogart, Cool Words, p.94.
8 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 209, recorded 28 February 1951, broadcast 16 February 1951, File 3, Box 4.
9 M-O A, Respondent F50B, TC 'British Attitudes to America 1941-43' Finding Reference SxMOA1/2/25/3/D.
two.” In 1980, reflecting on his inspiration for the Letters series, Cooke commented of England in the 1940s, “the only thing people were reading from America was drivel about gangsters and movie stars.”

Amongst this “drivel,” of course, there were vestiges of truth. Compared to austerity Britain, America was a dream world. Having been unable to purchase consumer goods during the war years, in the aftermath Americans were actively encouraged to spend. Fueled by images in the cinema and women’s magazines, British women, like their American counterparts, also desired fashionable clothes and beauty products. But post-war Britain offered none of the consumption choices of post-war America. In Britain, civilian consumption of clothing, for example, continued to be rationed until 1949. Even when clothes were de-rationed, high prices and limited funds ensured that most Britons still could not access the goods they desired. Between 1945 and 1959, 19 million new homes were built in the USA and, by 1955, 4000 families a day were leaving the cities for the suburbs. These new suburban homes contained seven times more equipment than in the 1920s. England, in contrast, suffered a severe housing shortage. In 1944 Churchill promised a program of half a million new prefabricated homes, but only 156,623 such homes were constructed between 1945-1949. Such inequality in circumstance was not lost on the British. As one Mass Observation

11 Belmonte, Selling the American Way, 56.
12 Clarke, Alistair Cooke, 127.
correspondent commented, “up against it - I always felt we were the poor relations.”

To these “poor relations,” the American way of life held some appeal. Historian Lizabeth Cohen termed the years 1952 to the mid 1970s “A Consumers’ Republic.” This republic, by nature, lacked the exclusivity of the British peerage system and welcomed anyone, regardless of lineage or class. The only entry requirement was a willingness to spend. Many lower-class Britons saw the appeal of social fluidity in America. In 1942, one Mass Observation respondent noted that “they haven’t the old Royalty distinction. There isn’t the same class distinction.”

By the mid-1950s, nearly 60% of all Americans were middle class by monetary standards, compared with 31% in the height of 1920s prosperity. The percentage of families earning under $3000 fell from 46% in 1947 to 20% in 1959 and the percentage of families earning between $7,000 and $10,000 rose from 5% to 20% in the same years. To understand his early Letters, Cooke told the audience in his 2,458th Letter in 1996, one had to understand “the dark, bleak background of Britain...Otherwise you'll wonder at the obsession in this talk with food and clothing and the desperate ways of procuring them.”

In his discussions of American consumer culture, Cooke would have to address those who envied,

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admired, and despised American culture. He had to understand all these varied emotions in order to create rhetoric that would entertain and inform his listener.

To his jealous British listener, Cooke suggested that America was not as rosy as the glossy magazines suggested. Many of Cooke’s Letters exposed negative aspects of material life in America, for example the high cost of sales tax in New York and the inefficiency of the elevators in his building. Lizabeth Cohen argued that Americans, “saw their nation as the model for the world of a society committed to mass consumption and what were assumed to be its far-reaching benefits.” 21 Cooke recognized this trait in the Americans he encountered, however to Cooke this faith was a “reckless assumption.” In a Letter considering unemployment in 1933, Cooke suggested that even in times of poverty, Americans still rather naively believed that “America was their oyster - - - not their hometown, or State, but America.” In 1950 when Cooke broadcast this Letter, the Great Depression was not a current news story and thus not an obvious topic of discussion. By recalling past American experience, Cooke reminded his audience that, contrary to popular opinion, success in America was not guaranteed, even though the majority of American people believed it was possible. Even in the 1950s, those who became millionaires were “fitful exceptions,” more typical were the unemployed masses of the 1930s who had seen money come and go. 22 By invoking America’s past experience of poverty, Cooke’s Letters bridged the gap between affluent America and austerity Britain.

21 Cohen, A Consumers’ Republic, 7.
22 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 164, recorded 1 February 1950, broadcast 10 February 1950, File 1, Box 4.
Yet while he could bridge the gap to a degree, Cooke could not deny the material gulf between America and Britain in the 1950s. Cooke challenged the idea that Americans were greedy, dollar worshippers and instead sought explanations that excused American excess. While he acknowledged that Americans must seem “fussy” to the British, he contested that Americans had simply grown used to affluence and thus what most British would consider a luxury, the majority of Americans would consider a necessity. “Nothing I can think of, nothing at all in America is in short supply,” argued Cooke, and thus, in America, a person’s wants increased. Speaking of the English contempt for refrigeration and ice cold beverages, he argued that if they lived in America, even the British would develop a taste for things in their “coldest, freshest form.”

Rather than representing a deep difference in character between the two countries, American consumption was merely a product of the American environment. The British, if in America, would have been equally susceptible to these environmental factors.

As so few Britons had visited America, Cooke had to explain economic factors to them so that they could understand Americans. For example in 1950, Cooke told his audience, “the scale of what is cheap and what is dear is quite different from the British scale.” Therefore Americans were not greedy, as the British perceived, rather their dollar stretched further than the pound. Neither were they “a nation of suckers,” as one Mass Observation observer contended.

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23 Cooke, *Letter from America*, Number 165, recorded 10 February 1950 for broadcast as a standby, File 1, Box 4.
24 Ibid.
Instead, the Americans Cooke encountered were educated shoppers, trained since birth to develop a "protective outer hide," to shield them from the lure of the salesman. The preponderance of salesmen in the United States meant that, in actuality Americans were less susceptible to advertisements and sales pitches than other nationalities might be.  

Self-trained in the art of sales and shopping, Americans, including Cooke himself, were skilled at knowing where to shop to get the most for their money. As Cooke revealed in 1954, whenever he wanted to purchase an expensive item, his "thrifty wife" would direct him away from the specialist or department store towards the discount house. In these superstores everything from electrical goods to books was available at a reduced rate. Though they had access to many consumer goods, Americans retained a commitment to saving. American consumers believed in the theory of private enterprise and saw that an item was only worth what it would fetch on the open market. Coupled with this knowledge, Americans had a "touchy, traditional dislike of price fixing." Far from being "shoddy materialists," Americans were educated consumer citizens. Cooke's examination of American consumption discredited some of the stereotypes that the British held about Americans.

Though Cooke could translate and explain many aspects of consumer culture, some characteristics of America's consumer world defied translation. As he described in a Letter of 1956, "There are some things in any country you must be born there to like. And I don't believe that another hundred healthy years would

25 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 403, recorded 1 April 1955, broadcast 28 April 1955. File 1, Box 10.
ever reconcile this expatriate to drum majorettes or peanut butter." While Americans believed all other nations would want to adopt their model of "new Eden," Cooke had no such expectations of his audience. While the USIA avoided discussion of events that reflected unfavorably on the United States, Cooke did address such events and customs. After all, in a war of ideology the very fact that one could voice criticism was one of the greatest selling-points of democracy.

His tone of criticism varies considerably. At times it seems Cooke was almost smiling at the naivety of America. For example, in a 1955 Letter, having heard nutritionists extolling the virtues of freshly squeezed orange juice rather than concentrated canned juice, Cooke saw the irony that, in a nation famed for their modern canning and processing techniques, "it takes a real genius to realize that all along there was nothing like simple, fresh orange juice." This idea becomes something of a metaphor for the whole of Letter 405, in which Cooke addressed America's penchant for reinventing the wheel. Cooke was fascinated by the supposed virtues of the suburbs, which, through mass migration and building of department stores, replicated many aspects of urban life and became little cities themselves. In a further example, Cooke spoke of a drive-in movie theater in Muskegon, Michigan which had recently opened. In this particular theatre, people could park their cars and watch the film from inside an enclosed glass gallery. Cooke found mirth in the circular trends in American consumer culture, as this glass structure clearly resembled traditional movie theatres and offered very little that was new or revolutionary. The movie world, it seemed, had

26 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 438, recorded 2 March 1956, broadcast 8 March 1956, Box 10
realized that there was nothing like, the cinematic equivalent of “simple, fresh orange juice.”

While he was amused by American obsession with the latest “fads,” Cooke also saw some potential danger in this system. He was most vocal in his criticism of American material culture when it threatens the health and safety of the American people. When discussing the meaning of civilization in the Twentieth Century, Cooke spoke of a society whose “characteristic ailment is going to be what you might call television arthritis.” This condition, Cooke suggested, might be specific to America, where, already the proliferation of televisions had created a generation of teenagers whose muscle tone was considerably less than their European counterparts. Given that American teenagers were shielded from the infant malnutrition of war-torn Europe, and today were the “best-fed youngsters alive,” with the most resources for play and exercise, Cooke found this development alarming.

This self-induced weakness becomes particularly interesting when compared to a 1950 Letter, in which Cooke revealed to his British audience that Americans were “great hypochondriacs.” He claimed that they were “particularly alert to the latest treatment for what ails them.” While penicillin was the latest drug a few years ago, in 1950 aureomycin was in vogue. Cooke described how patients would shop around, until they found a doctor willing to supply them with their drug of choice. This urge to have the latest drug for even the mildest

27 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 405, recorded 7 April 1955, broadcast 12 April 1955, File 1, Box 10.
28 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 473, recorded 4 January 1957, broadcast 6 January 1957, File 1, Box 11.
complaint, Cooke believed, was a “particular America absurdity.” There is a certain irony in the image of Americans outwardly investigating and investing in their health, while still continuing their slothful habits at home. Neither penicillin or aureomycin would be able to treat the effects of “television arthritis.”

Anxieties regarding medical treatment represented the worst of American fascination with “fads.” Yet in the same Letter, Cooke also found much to admire about this fascination. Fads, he claimed, represented the American “urge to move on under the gallant belief that to move on at all is to move forward.” British manufacturers, he believed, could benefit from this idea. For example in the automobile industry, “trade ins” provided frequent income for the salesman. While this desire to move forward produced absurdities such as glass drive-ins, it also produced “everything that is best in American adaptability, inventiveness, and the strong conviction that the best of life lies ahead.” Americans, Cooke believed, were not fatalistic. He contested that life was a process of constant change and posited that the frequency of American political elections is proof of America’s faith in change and improvement. There was always the promise of new leadership and the chance to begin again.

This mindset explains the faith of the unemployed workers that Cooke witnessed during the Great Depression, and it is precisely because of this mindset that Cooke could discuss kidnapped babies, Broadway shows and spring fashions during times of War. Even under the lingering shadow of communism,

30 Ibid.
everyday life still continued. “Part of the strength, and part of the confusion of Americans,” Cooke claimed in 1952, “is their belief that even happiness, if you analyze it long enough...is a manageable thing.”

This belief, Cooke posited in 1953 was “funny, rousing, and often naive,” but it should not be ignored. Material goods intrigued Cooke, as they did his English listener. But while people in Britain were in awe of the goods themselves, Cooke’s interest lay in the creativity and inventiveness that produced these goods. To Cooke, America’s pioneer spirit was reincarnated in the inventors of America’s multiple gadgets.

Cooke was interested then, not so much with America’s consumer goods but rather with the culture and people that these goods represented. In a 1952 review of Cooke’s published works, Elwood R. Maunder argued that “Mr. Cooke sees beneath America’s superficial face. He is not inclined to emphasize the neon-lighted marquee, the garish spate of advertisements, the din of singing commercials, the sensational moral climate of Hollywood.” Cooke saw the benefits of consumer culture, but as Maunder astutely observed, he tried to steer British focus from the superficiality of America to the diverse culture in the nation.

Diversity, Cooke saw, was the hallmark of American society. In the Cold War, diversity, like the opportunity to voice criticism, was an important selling point of democracy. In a 1951 Letter, Cooke combined these ideas of open

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expression and diversity and demonstrated how they could be used in cultural diplomacy. The Letter recalled that, during the Nazi regime, Goebbels had contacted Cooke to ask if he could reprint an article in which he had criticized treatment of gangster crime in New York. The article had suggested that New York supported the criminals and ignored honest union members. In response to Goebbels, Cooke told him that he would be welcome to use the article, as long as he also reprinted everything Cooke had ever written about America in the previous two years. Then, Cooke explained, his one negative commentary would be seen as merely “a blot,” on a country “who ran with pride many, many cities where Germans, Italians, Swedes, Poles, New Englanders, Jews, Catholics and Lutherans lived amiably together.”  

It was the diversity of characters and experiences in America that Cooke valued, and a standardized vision of Americans as consumers did not accurately capture his vision of America.

Moreover, to Cooke, the traditional symbols of American material culture, such as gum and cola were not true reflections of American culture. Rather than reflecting anyone’s basic tastes, they were a compromise. In 1950 he argued that “the standardized American symbols --- a drug store, a main street, a cola drink, a hamburger, a movie house --- are not anybody’s absolutely fundamental preference.”  

Americans, all over the States would much prefer their local cuisine to hamburgers, he posited. However the hamburger, the cola drink and a drug store served a purpose in American life, they did “the enormous job of


keeping vastly different American communities and types pulling together as one nation.\textsuperscript{36} Thus while these standardized products were important, examination of them would never reveal a true slice of American life. To learn about America, you had to engage with its people and their culture. In his Letters therefore Cooke introduced his readers to lesser known American cultural traditions, to holiday celebrations, to lazy Summer days, to sports, to religion, to Broadway plays, to Saturday nights and Sunday Afternoons.

In one of Cooke’s most celebrated Letters, “Beizbol,” which was broadcast in 1953, Cooke examined the origins of America’s national game. After significant research the Soviets had claimed that Beizbol originated in the Ukraine and thus the quintessentially American baseball, was in fact a Soviet invention. The fervor with which American officials counteracted these statements was impressive. After careful investigation, American officials revealed that Abner Doubleday was the true inventor of America’s national game. However, a subsequent investigation discovered that the true origin of baseball was in early eighteenth century England, where the earliest recording of the sport baseball can be found in the 1744 diary of a Lady Harvey. Yet Cooke contended the modern game of baseball would be alien to English followers of cricket, and thus he concluded, “if the Atlantic alliance is to hold on the playing fields, we shall have to act on the suggestion of the late Robert Benchley, who bravely suggested it would be better to abolish both cricket and baseball and start again with a game both countries

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
can play…. preferably baseball.\textsuperscript{37}

In transferring the site of the Atlantic alliance from London and Washington to the local baseball pitch, Cooke makes the Atlantic alliance, an alliance between people rather than governments. Just as American cultural standards tied the country together, common cultural activity could link the people of the United States and the United Kingdom. Cooke was interested in friendship based on honest and frank discussion, rather than a short term political alliance, and he believed that full consideration of American culture would aid this.

Yet while Cooke strove to depict a wide range of American culture, propaganda battles between the USSR and the United States became more narrowly focused on issues of consumption. In 1951, America sociologist David Riesman wrote a fictitious account in which he envisioned a military campaign, where the United States bombed the USSR with household goods rather than explosives. Riesman’s fictitious America officials called the attack ‘Operation Abundance,’ but the USSR named it ‘The Nylon War,’ on account of women’s stockings which rained down on Russia soil. The attack was designed to reach behind the Iron Curtain and supply Russian housewives with American household products.\textsuperscript{38} Less than a decade later, in the summer of 1959, real life emulated fiction, as the American National Exhibition in Moscow introduced Soviet housewives to American consumer goods for the first time. Llewelyn Thompson, the US ambassador to the USSR, told the Exhibition organizers that their displays

\textsuperscript{37} Cooke, \textit{Letters from America}, Number 332, recorded 24 September 1953, broadcast 1 October 1953, Box 7.

should “endeavor to make the Soviet people dissatisfied with the share of the Russian pie which they now receive.”³⁹

The exhibition forced the Russian people to examine their own opportunities and question the view of America provided by the Russia government. In Russian propaganda, among the most frequent charges levied against capitalism was the suggestion that affluence was only available for a minority. In his Letters, Cooke argued that the Kremlin, keen to depict Americans as “grasping, money-mad gorillas,” failed to examine other characters in American life.⁴⁰ Furthermore, he suggested that their images of American capitalism were outdated. In a 1953 Letter Cooke analyzed a report on American economics that had recently appeared in The Pravda. The article focused on images of grasping American businessman abusing the poor, but rather than examining the realities of modern America, the article emphasized the worst features of the American capitalists of the Golden Age.⁴¹ The Moscow fair brought modern America to the Soviets, and the USIA used the fair as a store window from which to promote American life.

The Soviet masses were not the only ones forced to confront America during the Moscow Fair. Standing next to the lemon-yellow General Electric kitchen, Premier Khrushchev had to face his American opponent, Vice President Nixon. Unexpectedly the two men abandoned the etiquette usually employed in

⁴⁰ Cooke, Letter from America, Number 177, recorded 11 May 1950, broadcast 19 May 1950, File 1, Box 4.
⁴¹ Cooke, Letter from America, Number 343, recorded 11 December 1953, broadcast 17 December 1953, File 3, Box 7.
diplomatic negotiation, and argued directly with each other. Visibly perturbed by
the journalists watching his every move, the Russian Premier faced his opponent
in the kitchen, and claimed that Russian technology offered comparable levels of
gadgetry to its citizens. In a rash tirade Khrushchev declared, ‘in another seven
years we will be on the same level as America. When we catch up with you, while
passing by we will wave to you.”**42** The Press had a field day, and in popular
rhetoric and imagination, consumption and material culture became a crucial
component of the Cold War.

Yet Moscow was not the first of these ‘America’ fairs. The first was held on
Chicago’s Naval Pier in the Summer of 1950. **43** In the field of international fairs,
the USSR had a head start and participated in over a hundred international fairs
between 1950-1954. Indeed it was Soviet participation in these fairs that
convinced Eisenhower to expand American cultural diplomacy efforts. **44** In
addition to Chicago and Moscow, the United States hosted fairs in Berlin, Turkey,
Greece, Yugoslavia and Brussels. A letter from Abbott Washburn, acting head of
the USIA to Alistair Cooke in 1957, reveals that Cooke worked with the USIA in
planning the 1958 Brussels exhibit. **45** In addition Cooke featured on a 1953
Advertising Council panel on American Culture. The Advertising Council hoped to
use advertising to promote the American way of life. Cooke’s involvement in these

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42 Castillo, ‘Domesticating the Cold War,’ 262.
43 Robert H. Haddow, *Pavilions of Plenty: Exhibiting American Culture Abroad in the 1950s*
(Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 27.
44 Ibid, 39.
45 Letter from Abbott Washburn, Acting Director of the USIA to Alistair Cooke, 4th February
initiatives indicate his determination to promote American culture abroad, and also suggests the level of respect his work commanded at the USIA.

While the fairs became show windows, Cooke’s *Letters* remained a mirror, granting his British audience access to American life. During his encounter with Khrushchev, Nixon claimed that democratic freedom was “the liberty to select from among a variety of consumer products.” In contrast, Cooke’s America was not a land of movie stars or main streets or drug stores. Cooke’s view of democratic freedom was not just limited to the freedom to purchase but a democratic vision that valued the freedom to speak the truth and to go to a ball game. While model homes and free samples of Pepsi Cola might have had an instant appeal to American Exhibition visitors, discussion of these things alone would not have kept Cooke on the air for 56 years. Instead of selling American material goods, Cooke sought to promote the culture and people that these goods represented. Through careful and candid explanation, Cooke removed stereotyped, standardized views of American culture to reveal a commodity he believed to be far more precious than Cola or Gum: the American people.

46 Ibid, 217.
Good Evening. I had a sweet letter the other day from a lady in England and I am still suffering from the acid indigestion induced by its first sentence. “I wonder” it began, “if it would be possible for you to talk occasionally about something other than gloom and doom.” The simple answer is “well, yes, Madame, it would, and once we seal off Berlin on our side of the curtain, or pasteurize it, or find a tranquillizer for Mr. Khrushchev then I see no reason why some Sunday evening soon, we shouldn’t have a rollicking time.”

Opening this 1962 Letter with an aggressive tirade, Cooke reverted to a kindlier message in his final lines, telling the letter’s author, “I have not forgotten you, dear lady. I am still looking for a cheerful item.” However, Cooke concluded, “the gloom will keep breaking in.” Written in 1962, this Letter demonstrates the extent to which the Cold War concerned Cooke during the late 1950s. In the opening extract of Chapter Two, written in 1950, Cooke was criticized for ignoring politics. By 1962, it seems, politics was impossible to ignore. As Cooke himself once commented, “The only way to keep politics out of your daily life is forcibly, by putting up a plaque up on the front door, or a sign at the garden gate saying: No

1 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 685, recorded 27 August 1962, broadcast 28 August 1962. File 1, Box 12, The Alistair Cooke Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archive, Boston University. (Hereafter all subsequent Letter references cited as Cooke, Letter from America. All Files and Boxes are located at the Howard Gotlieb Archive).

2 Ibid.

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dogs, beggars, or politics beyond this point."

The Cold War, as historian Brian Harrison has argued, shaped more than foreign policy. In Britain, as in America, it shaped many aspects of society. Harrison has observed that from 1945 onwards, the mixture of ideological conflict and unprecedented access to destructive weapons created a unique combination of fear and fascination in Britain. As the Third World War never happened, Harrison cautions his readers, it is easy to forget how close it seemed for many decades. Living through the Cold War, Cooke was fully aware of how close war seemed, indeed at times in his life he experienced fear too. However Cooke’s Letters demonstrate that fear was just a part of people’s experience rather than their whole experience.

In 1953, sociologist Leo Bogart, who had been commissioned by the USIA to write a study of its operations, described the USIA’s role in foreign policy as being in the “business to fight communism. Its prime and only objective is a strong, dynamic anti-Communism program.” Congress shared this belief, but for himself and his broadcasts, Alistair Cooke envisioned a rather different role. While the VOA, had to be, as its name suggested, the voice of America, Cooke had no government affiliations and thus no duty to provide the “official version.” In matters of politics then, Letters from America was the Voice of Cooke.

Cooke’s voice lacked the missionary zeal of American broadcasts. Unlike

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3 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 384, recorded 10 December 1954, broadcast 16 December 1954, File 1, Box 9
5 Leo Bogart, Cool Words, Cold War, 18.
the USIA he was not fighting a war against Communism, yet he was on the side of democracy. Thus to understand Cooke's Cold War broadcasts, it is crucial to understand his view of international relations. These relations were healthiest, Cooke believed, when individuals in either country shared common interests and hobbies with those abroad. To foster true international relationships, individuals had to be free to interact "without feeling any compulsion to - as the missionary sentence goes - draw the two countries even closer together." Cooke was always more concerned with the people behind the story than the story itself. In his treatment of major Cold War news stories such as the launch of Sputnik and the Bay of Pigs Incident, Cooke tended to focus on peoples' reactions to these stories rather than factual detail of the events.

Perhaps in part because of their lack of factual content, Cooke's political Letters have generally attracted the most criticism. In a review in The Irish Press in 1968 for example, Knute Skinner contended that politics was best left to the politicians, and accused Cooke of wearing spectacles that were "too rosy". Similarly a review in the Oxford Mail suggested that his best essays were his non-political subjects, though the author did have to acknowledge that his political observations were often equally good. Cooke himself was aware of the difficulties of political commentary. In a 1957 Letter he observed that those topics most suitable for broadcasting -- public events -- produced generally

6 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 411, recorded 28 June 1955, broadcast 7 July 1955, File 4, Box 9.
unsatisfactory broadcasts, whereas all that was intensely private such as family life, "death of friends" and the "exasperating charm of children" translated more effectively on air.⁹ Perhaps in part because of this Cooke generally avoided political analysis, and looked instead to form real friendships rather than national alliances.

Cooke aimed, he said, to maintain a "civil tongue" in a "warlike time."¹⁰ To do this, Cooke utilized a range of different approaches. Though he claimed his Letters would "forget politics" and focus on the aspects of life beyond Washington that interested him, Cooke dedicated considerable time to events in the Cold War.¹¹ Politically, Nick Clarke contests, Cooke never "drifted far." Raised with a strong sense of social order Cooke found the excesses of the 1960s unattractive. Cooke was liberal in an intellectual sense but Clarke claims "he was no automatic Democrat." Cooke rarely spoke about his own voting record, however his wife Jane revealed to Nick Clarke that she "didn’t think" her husband had ever voted Republican.¹² From Cooke’s broadcasts it is possible to gain a sense of his opinion of American political leaders. For example, he admired the character of Eisenhower, a leader with "the decisiveness of Churchill, the charm of Bing Crosby, the directness of Will Rogers, and the political adroitness of Roosevelt."¹³

⁹ Cooke, Letter from America, Number 476, recorded live 25 January 1957, Box 11.
¹¹ In Cooke’s Five- Hundredth Letter, he reflected on the inspiration for the program, claiming that BBC producer Lindsay Wellington told him "Let's forget politics. How about the America I learned to enjoy when I left the office and the memoranda?" Alistair Cooke, Letter from America, Number 500, broadcast live 8 September 1957, Box 11.
¹² Clarke, Alistair Cooke, 493.
¹³ Alistair Cooke, Talk on Eisenhower, recorded 2 January 1952.
He treated Lyndon Johnston with "excessive romantic indulgence" and yet he was scornful of President Kennedy. He was prepared to criticize American policy but, equally importantly, he was prepared to chastise his British audience in an attempt to improve Anglo-American relations. He utilized his knowledge of British culture and political climate and applied this knowledge to his broadcasts.

Cooke realized that true friendship required understanding on both sides. Unlike the VOA programs which were primarily concerned with promoting America, Cooke was concerned with how his broadcasts would be received. If Cooke's talks on politics were to appeal to his audience, he had to understand the position of Britain in the post war period. Just as his discussion of consumption showed awareness of austerity Britain, his political broadcasts were tailored towards a falling world power. Having grown up in Britain, Cooke understood the importance of imperial prestige to the British identity. Therefore he understood the implications of the Labour government's August 1946 declaration that British Imperialism was dead. Cooke did not force his audience to admit this reality; instead he continued to give Britain a role in international affairs. Though the government may have realized that the imperial dream was over, not all Britons agreed.

During the early war years British ministers, including Churchill, had been forced to think in terms of survival. Indeed in 1942 Clement Attlee, who was Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, commented that in the postwar world problems could not be "solved by looking backwards and imagining that we can

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recreate the conditions of a past age." However Britain was reluctant to admit defeat, and as the tide of the war changed in 1943, Britain seemingly ignored Attlee's advice and began to think again in terms of her own prestige. This search for prestige caused tension across the Atlantic. The British, for example, resented America's commitment to Japan, and the Americans believed that British devotion to the Mediterranean strategy was motivated by a desire to foster British imperial interest. Britain hoped that the Italians would become a parliamentary state loyal to Britain, and the liberation of Greece would produce a regime that was friendly to Britain. Furthermore, in preparing for the postwar world, British policymakers recognized the strategic importance of her existing assets, namely the Suez Canal. The War had closed the Mediterranean to ships, temporarily decreasing the value of the Suez; however Britain believed that a postwar boom would increase the importance of the Suez. In addition, with the developments in air travel Britain looked to Egypt as a potential hub for air transportation.

These territories could potentially provide much needed revenue to the United Kingdom. Indeed both John Darwin and Ronald Hyam agree on the centrality of economic recovery and Russian expansion to postwar colonial policy. Facing economic disaster at home, the new Labour government needed to address both foreign and domestic policy, believing that foreign labor and territory would fund domestic change. In a secret memorandum, celebrated

British economist John Maynard Keynes warned the Prime Minister that Britain faced a "financial Dunkirk," as the disregard for financing during the war years had left Britain "virtually bankrupt." Through negotiation with the Americans, Keynes secured a loan of $3,750 million for Britain. The loan was less than he hoped for and came with significant conditions.\(^{18}\) It was in this context that Britain began to look to Africa as a way to free Britain from dependence on American handouts.\(^{19}\)

John Darwin observed that, though in severe economic trouble, Britain emerged from the war with its territory intact. Thus the speed with which England's empire ended was "remarkably rapid."\(^{20}\) Indeed Hyam contends that it was still plausible to envision some type of imperial future for Britain. However the War had nicked the bonds of empire. Many Indians and Burmese had defected to the Japanese; Indian appeals for self-government had, Attlee believed, also awakened a similar desire for status in Africa. Africa thus may not provided the riches the British hoped to extract there.

The experience in India demonstrated to Attlee the importance of allowing an outlet for nationalism, yet he was initially almost alone in seeing this.\(^{21}\) In the Summer of 1947, in order to avoid civil war in the region, Britain agreed to the partition of India and o recognize Pakistan as a country.\(^{22}\) Although India was to remain in the Commonwealth, Britain had lost its brightest jewel. Though Hyam

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18 Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire*, 130.
21 Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire*, 105.
considered Attlee’s decision to transfer power in India “a geopolitically prudent action,” it is clear that Attlee and his government did not intend to set precedent for colonial independence. Thus while they treated Burmese independence in much the same way as India, in Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka), the Labour government was reluctant to grant independence to this loyal and economically useful nation.\textsuperscript{23}

On 4 February 1948 when independence was granted, the government stressed that the situation in Ceylon, the most advanced colony in the British Empire, did not constitute precedent. However, in the same year Burma and the Irish Republic left the Commonwealth and the British withdrew from Palestine. The events of 1947 and 1948 irreversibly damaged British reputation amongst its subordinate allies, such as Jordan and Egypt. The appearance of strength, Darwin argued, had been the invisible string tying the British “ramshackle system” of empire together.\textsuperscript{24} With this illusion destroyed, Britain had little choice but to turn to America and its plentiful dollar, regardless of the conditions attached to such loans.

Yet despite their dwindling territory and increasing reliance on America, Darwin argued that the end of the empire proved to be “surprisingly undisruptive” to British politics.\textsuperscript{25} In part this was due to widespread faith in British heritage and legacy, a view expressed by Anthony Eden in 1942, when he contended “our history and geography demand that we should remain a world power with world

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 105.

\textsuperscript{24} Darwin, \textit{The Empire Project}, 537-538.

\textsuperscript{25} Darwin, \textit{The End of the British Empire}, 1.
wide interest.” In 1943, Field Marshall Jan Smuts delivered a speech to parliament entitled “Thoughts on a New World.” In his speech Smuts set forward his vision of a commonwealth that would be “the best missionary enterprise that has been launched for a thousand years.” It would be a mission “of good will, good government and human co-operation.” But perhaps most important to Smuts’ vision was the centrality with which he regarded Britain’s role.26 Writing in 1964, in his history of India and Britain, Maurice Zinkin claimed that Britain saw the Commonwealth as “the old Empire writ at large,” claiming that though the foundation of British power had altered considerably, the British were largely oblivious to these changes.27

Speaking to Sir Oliver Franks, British Ambassador to America in the late 1940s, Winston Churchill extolled his vision for a new world leadership based on an image of three interlocking circles: the United States, the British Commonwealth and Europe. England would be the link that joined these three circles together.28 Jan Smuts envisioned a remarkably similar view; he regarded the postwar world as a trinity in which America, the USSR and Britain would form an international triumvirate.29 However, the problem with such models was obvious, according to historian Peter Hennessy; the rest of world did not share this image of tripartite unity. Britain in 1948 was “no superpower,” however the

27 Maurice and Taya Zinkin, Britain and India: Requiem for Empire (Johns Hopkins Press, 1964), 98.
29 Darwin, The Empire Project, 520
British largely ignored this detail.\textsuperscript{30} Thus while Smuts acknowledged the increasing power of America in the world, he refused to recognize an accompanying diminishment in British power. Historian Brian Harrison suggested that, even if they were aware of their economic inferiority, the British believed that their long parliamentary record and varied diplomatic experience made them an essential part of world politics. If they could not dominate, they at very least expected to be Greece to America's Rome.\textsuperscript{31}

The postwar world was to be America's Rome, yet rather than take its lead from the British Grecian model, John Darwin argued that during the war both the United States and the Soviet Union were fighting for the "demise of the old colonial order."\textsuperscript{32} President Roosevelt, Darwin suggested, made no secret of his dislike of European colonial dominance, and only directed his acerbic remarks on the subject solely towards the French because he personally respected Winston Churchill. Darwin posited that despite their fondness for Churchill, most Americans believed that the British were "irredeemably decadent" as a world power.\textsuperscript{33} As Chapter One contended, America created its identity in opposition to England. Colonial rule, especially rule under a monarchy, went against all that America valued. It is therefore not surprising that America did not promote imperial efforts during the War.

However, while America could single handedly champion anti-colonialism, 

\textsuperscript{30} Hennessy, \textit{Never Again}, 343.
\textsuperscript{31} Harrison, \textit{Seeking a Role}, 11.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid}, 431.
she could not stand alone against communism. In the wake of the war’s end, Soviet expansionism appeared a greater threat in the eyes of the American president and his advisors than imperialism. Moreover, to fight this expansionism, America would need its allies, allies such as Britain who would not abandon their dreams of imperial grandeur. Truman, having taken office following the death of President Roosevelt in April 1945, realized it be would foolish to force his European allies to abandon their imperial assets. Therefore when Britain sought help to provide military aid to Turkey and Greece, Washington launched the Truman Doctrine. Truman recognized the importance of keeping Britain strong and as a result, “all feasible political, economic, and if necessary military support,” was to be given to the United Kingdom and its Commonwealth. The cost of defending Britain’s overseas empire was approximately a billion dollars a year, a cost underwritten by the United States.\(^{34}\) The ideological sacrifice of supporting an imperial system was perhaps even greater.

Given their wartime alliance, further cooperation between Britain and America was perhaps to be expected. In the postwar world, new organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the United Nations encouraged international co-operation. However, the scale of American financial support was unprecedented. In addition to monetary loans, Britain benefited from direct investment from America. By the 1950s, Britain was second only to Canada in its share of total American foreign investment. American factories, generally in the industries of engineering, ship construction and automobile production, were

\(^{34}\) Darwin, \textit{After Tamerlane}, 436-437.
particularly prevalent in London and the South-East. By the mid 1950s these factories accounted for one eighth of British manufacturing exports.\footnote{Harrison, \textit{Seeking a Role}, 72-73.} While investment in Britain’s domestic economy perhaps could have been predicted, the idea that, through the Truman plan, the United States had become the “patron and protector of the European empires,” marked a novel new phase in Anglo-American international relations.\footnote{Ibid, 437.}

In his style of cultural diplomacy, Alistair Cooke resembled Truman rather than Roosevelt. Like Truman, he understood the need to form alliances based on mutual understanding and compromise. He did not ask his British audience to abandon their dreams of superiority, and acknowledged Britain’s considerable experience in diplomatic negotiation. In his promotion of the UN, Cooke advocated international relations rather than simply bi-national relations. However, if America was to compromise its beliefs through the Truman Doctrine, Cooke expected Britain to make similar compromise. He called on Britons to offer support and understanding to America as a rising nation. While Britain was to play a role in international politics in the immediate postwar period, by 1956 Cooke’s broadcasts chart the decline of British world power, and the increased role of America on the world stage. The post-war world was discernibly bipolar and in this world, Britain would never be a superpower. Events of the Cold War forced Britons to face this reality. Britain’s “Greece” thus served as an example of a by-gone era from which lessons could be learned, but it would be America’s
"Roman Republic," that would lead the way forward.

In the postwar period, in which the prewar roles of the two countries had been switched, Cooke saw that Anglo-American relations had become a "difficult friendship." To improve this difficult relationship, Cooke encouraged his listeners to abandon stereotyped views and form friendships with individual Americans. He challenged his audience to learn about Americans and assess the nation on its own terms, accepting its foibles as well as its rich culture.

While consideration of the climate of fear is plentiful in historiography of the Cold War, historians have tended to assume that the enemy to be feared was the Soviet Union. This assumption fails to acknowledge that Britons were almost as fearful of Americans and their nuclear capability as they were of the communist menace. BBC broadcasts, including Letters from America, acknowledged British fear of its most loyal ally. In a 1954 Letter, Cooke contended "I have never known a time when America - as a civilization and a power - was so distrusted." In a further example, in a 1950 broadcast, American political analyst Stewart Alsop described how an English friend, visiting America, had been surprised by the limited media coverage following the Russian shooting of an American plane. The Englishman contended that in England many people were distressed to hear of the shooting "because of the probable reaction of the Americans. The Americans were after all, a volatile and emotional people, and who knew what they might not

37 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 194, recorded 17 November 1950, broadcast 24 November 1950, Box 4, File 2.

38 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 370, recorded 27 August 1954, broadcast 2 September 1954, File 3, Box 8.
In the climate of McCarthy and the Red Scare, it was perhaps not surprising that the Americans appeared a volatile and paranoid people. Indeed, in April 1950, Cooke told his listeners that "as you may have heard or guessed lately, these days are days of suspicion in America." Cooke did not deny the impact of McCarthy on America, however he attempted to mediate press reports and present a more balanced view of the Scare. At times he openly challenged the image of Americans in the English press. For example, a 1951 Letter dismissed the image of Americans "creeping about," unable to speak out, as "rubbish." Cooke argued that while it was a time of suspicion, prejudice and cowardice, it was also a time of resistance. As evidence, he cited both organized group resistance and a plethora of direct resistance in America's smaller communities.

Cooke's efforts to challenge British assumptions were not always so direct. For example, in educating his listener about the American legal and policing systems, Cooke attempted to indirectly dispel the image of America as a nation where the state supported interrogation. American law, he told his listeners in 1950, prohibited search without a warrant, valued protection from slander and presumed that a subject was innocent until he was found guilty. Even the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), Cooke was keen to stress, had to operate within the permits of the American legal system during their

39 Stewart Alsop, American Commentary, April 19 1950, File 1, Box 4.
40 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 171, recorded 29 March 1950, broadcast 7 April 1950, File 1, Box 4.
41 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 209, recorded 28 February 1951, broadcast 16 March 1951, File 3, Box 4.
anti-communist investigations. In suspicious times, America was still governed by written statute and thus maintained at least some semblance of order.

In discussing the American legal system, Cooke made comparisons to the British parliamentary system. Congress and Parliament for example both shared immunity from libel. Cooke frequently utilized comparative investigation to help his audience relate to America. He recognized the importance of speaking in terms that his audience could understand. If Britons could relate to events in America they could, he hoped, form the types of individual relationships crucial to a modern international alliance. Therefore in 1954 when he discussed the impact of the Alger Hiss trial, on the occasion of Hiss’s release from federal prison in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, Cooke looked for a comparison in English history. The example he used was a hypothetical one, arguing that “England could not have been more shocked if, for instance, the young Horatio Nelson had been found guilty of selling an invasion plan to the French.”

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On other occasions he used his comparative technique to give a deliberate sense of the gulf between the two countries. For example in discussing the Civil Rights Movement in 1956, Cooke reminded his audience that while all Christians believed in equality for all men, access to resources and economic opportunity affected the ability to apply these ideas. “It is easy,” Cooke observed, “to be a Christian intellectual in Streatham, [a wealthy London suburb] but a little tougher


in New Orleans."\(^{44}\) By making direct comparisons with America, Cooke fostered international understanding, encouraging his British audience to see the similarities between Britain and America, but equally importantly to understand the differences and assess America on its own merit.

In some senses, *Letters* was thus an educational rather than an overtly political production. However, in his earliest postwar broadcasts Cooke’s rhetoric was most obviously political. Rather than simply commenting on American life, he took on the role of an advisor as well as a commentator. In the immediate postwar period, when friendships between the United States and the United Kingdom were the most strained, Cooke was most direct, offering suggestions to improve this relationship. In some of his most direct pleas, Cooke made several comments regarding international hospitality. In 1950, for example, he pleaded with Britons to accept a range of American tourists in the coming Summer. He challenged his listener to accept Americans for their differences and claimed that respecting difference was “what makes the wheels of friendship go round.”\(^{45}\)

When Britons failed to heed his call, Cooke attacked his former countrymen. For example, in 1954 Cooke reported on a friend who had recently visited England and found herself cast as “the keeper of the Negroes...a hopeless materialist untouched by the finer things of life, and the personal agent of Senator McCarthy.” Relating this tale to his audience, Cooke termed this British behavior

\(^{44}\) Cooke, *Letter from America*, Number 471, recorded 21 December 1956, broadcast 23 December 1956, File 4, Box 11.

“childlike” and posited that they should be “ashamed” of their actions.\(^{46}\)

Cooke was personally saddened by the discovery that Europeans no longer welcomed Americans, but instead resented and suspected them. He claimed there was “nothing cynical” in America’s attempt to provide support and aid to Europe between 1946 and 1950 and he believed that Europeans were ungrateful for American assistance.\(^{47}\) In February 1952, Cooke used the occasion of George Washington’s birthday to discuss this ingratitude in greater detail. Commenting on America’s historic commitment to the contradictory ideas of isolationism and neighborliness, Cooke stressed that Europeans living in the 1950s should be grateful that American concern with neighborliness won out, and moreover that American definitions of neighborliness extended across the Atlantic. Cooke recalled a conversation with an English friend who told him, that if he were an American, “I simply can’t conceive that I would have cared a rap for the Marshall plan, and I’d have voted against any American troops going off to defend Europe.” Thus, as Cooke observed, “the really staggering fact is not what America has not done since 1939 but what, against the pull of its oldest instinct, it has done.”\(^{48}\) His British audience had much to be grateful for, and Cooke fostered British appreciation of America, encouraging his audience to see the merits in its Atlantic ally.

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\(^{46}\) Cooke, *Letter from America*, Number 346, recorded 31 December 1953, broadcast 7 January 1954, File 1, Box 8.


Having highlighted the benefits of American foreign policy, Cooke encouraged his British audience to offer support to America. Utilizing the familial rhetoric, that both the British and Americans used to describe each other, Cooke appealed to Britain as the older, wiser parent. He asked Britain to be patient, in much the same way that a parent would treat an adolescent child adjusting to adult life. “The United States of twelve years ago,” Cooke told his listeners in 1957, “is a country a hundred years younger and more irresponsible than it can be today. Bear with it in the long days of its painful discovery.”

Britain’s role in the postwar world then was an advisory one. Here Cooke cleverly combined Sir Anthony Eden’s belief that British history afforded Britain a place as a world power, with the reality of American economic dominance. In Cooke’s model, Britain could advise as the wiser, older statesman. To bolster British pride Cooke frequently drew on the memory of British military successes. For example, with its entry into Korea, Cooke claimed, America could now relate to the British at Dunkirk. Depicting America and Britain as world leaders with a mutual respect for each others’ successes, Cooke envisioned a leadership system in which Britain could retain a significant but secondary role while the United States remained the dominant western leader.

In the post-war period, it was envisioned that the United Nations would play a significant role in world politics, and inclusion in the United Nations would thus afford Britain a part in international affairs. South African and British

49 Cooke, *Letter from America*, Number 240, recorded 18 October 1951, broadcast 26 October 1951, Folder 2, Box 5.

Commonwealth Field Marshall Jan Smuts wrote the preamble to the United Nation charter and, in the UN, Britain seemed keen to assume the role of a wise statesman. Smuts’ 1943 speech had outlined a tripartite leadership model for the UN comprising Britain, America and the Soviet Union. Officially, however, the United Nations was dominated by the Big Five: America, Russia, Britain, France and Japan. Like Smuts, Cooke saw the potential of the United Nations and in a December 1953 Letter he declared, “I am myself an ardent United Nations man.”51

In addition to the humanitarian aspects of the UN, Cooke appreciated the day-to-day events of the UN. For Cooke, it was a site of mediation where those with conflicting ideologies could discuss and disagree. Cooke dedicated several Letters to discussion of the Russians in the UN. However, generally his discussions were not concerned with Russian politics or argument, but rather with the interactions between Russian and Western delegations. In 1953, for example, he discussed with some mirth the image of a visitor to the UN listening to a Russian delegate in English translation. As the visitor plugged in her headphones she was bombarded with a “hissing flood of adjectives,” including “capitalist hyenas, fascist beasts” and “swollen-bellied, blood soaked imperialists.”52 In a later 1953 Letter, Cooke again focused on Russian language, recalling how Soviet Foreign Minister Andrew Vyshinsky’s cries of “Nyet” caused more tension

51 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 345, recorded 23 December 1953, broadcast 31 December 1953, File 3, Box.

52 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 315, recorded 1 April 1953, broadcast 10 April 1953, File 1, Box 7.
than direct threats would have done." In the UN, as in other arenas of politics, Cooke retained a civil tongue and redirected his listeners' focus from policy to the individuals behind such policy.

The United Nations features most prominently in Cooke’s earliest Cold War broadcasts when the UN’s influence was greatest. Of supreme importance, the United Nations sanctioned the defense of South Korean in Korea in 1950, the first armed conflict of the Cold War. As America’s ally and a United Nation’s Security Council Member, Britain also committed itself to the war, in spite of Churchill’s complaints that until he was 74 he had “never heard of the bloody place.” Britain thus acted not out of concern for Korea, but rather to bolster Britain’s reputation as a world power and a committed UN member, and to strengthen the Anglo-American alliance. Britain’s contribution to the war was second only to that of the United States. In total 1,078 British servicemen were killed and 2,674, were wounded. Cooke’s Letters helped to cement British prestige, and pandered to the British desire for recognition. Broadcasting live on 8th December 1950, Cooke dedicated the entire Letter from America 196 to the issue of Korea. Cooke wrote two transcripts for this broadcast, and the version that was actually transmitted, Letter 196A, had been altered to include heightened emphasis on the British and their past record of combat.

In the opening to Letter 196A, Cooke described how America could not “really believe what the world has said about them-- that they are the most

53 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 247, recorded 6 December 1953, broadcast 14 December 1953, File 2, Box 5.
54 Harrison, Seeking a Role, 87.
powerful, the richest, and must now be the most responsible of all the nations.  
Cooke claimed Britain would have felt the same if Dunkirk had happened in 1850. 
Americans were, they felt, being asked to become a world power before they were fully matured. Though discussing an event of immense political significance, Cooke was able to bypass the political elements of the conflict, and instead described the American position in terms of raw human emotion. Casting the American viewpoint in simplistic human terms made their position easier to understand and relate to. Rather than a world power, Americans were merely people, flexing their muscles but “quaking” at their reflection in the mirror.  

Moreover, America was young, looking to Britain, as the ‘older statesman,’ for support and advice. While the original draft spoke at length about American dissatisfaction with allied support, the final version claimed that Britain was the sole exception. Mr. Attlee, Cooke attested, had given America the pledge it most urgently needed: Britain would stay in Korea as long as the United States did. In doing so, Britain had proved to be America’s “most reliable ally in bad times.” In a sense, Cooke gave Britain the superior role here, suggesting their pledge of support was crucial to revive “dispirited Americans.” In reality, however, though Britain’s contribution to the war was second only to that of the United States, there was a big difference between first and second place. Britain only contributed 9 percent of the troops, 4 percent of the wounded and 3 percent of those killed.

56 Ibid.  
57 Ibid.
While praised as a reliable ally, Britain was not a superpower.

John Darwin contends that Korea sealed Britain's geopolitical fate, and marked the "final arrival of the bipolar world." While this may have been true, Britain did not appear to have realized this. Aided by Cooke's supportive rhetoric, Britain still seemed to believe it had an important world role and a chance of imperial power. The Suez Crisis of 1956, rather than the Korean War, appeared to have destroyed Britain's imperial dream. Reflecting on the events of the Crisis shortly afterwards, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden claimed that the Crisis had "not so much changed our fortunes as revealed realities." Among the realties revealed, Britain realized the weakness of their imperial power and the limitations of America as an ally.

Suez was crucial to Britain's imperial vision as a gateway to the Middle East. Britain had expected America to support her efforts to control the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Nasser had supported the People's Republic of China and had angered the Americans by purchasing arms from the USSR. However M.A. Fitzsimons has argued that American foreign policy was only effective if it directly confronted a serious Soviet threat. Suez, to the Americans, was an attempt for Britain to regain imperial power, not a serious Soviet threat. On 26 July 1956, when Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal,

58 Darwin, The Empire Project, 565.
59 Harrison, Seeking a Role, 106.
Britain responded by founding a new power triumvirate with France and Israel. This arrangement was kept secret from the United States, which perhaps suggests the limitations of the Anglo-American alliance. In accordance with the agreement, French and British troops occupied the canal and Israel captured the Sinai Peninsula. In response to British action the UN called its first emergency session. Rather than supporting the actions of her “most reliable” ally, America together with the Soviet Union and 64 other nations, stood in condemnation of Britain.

"Being played for a sucker," Cooke claimed, was the dread of every American boy.\(^6^2\) In excluding America from their plan, Eisenhower believed, Britain and her allies had undermined his presidential authority. The events of the Suez crisis showed Britain the limitations of its alliance with America, and the UN condemnation highlighted the limits of Britain as a world power. Given these realities, a friend of Cooke's commented to him in 1956, "My, it must be a very tricky assignment, doing that American Letter these days."\(^6^3\) Yet Cooke treated the Suez crisis as he did all political events: he concentrated on individual views and found the human element within a political event.

The Suez Crisis was the sole subject of three consecutive Letters in 1956. Not even the Korean War had received so much continual attention from Cooke. Cooke's primary aim appears to have been to reassure his audience. For example, in recalling the events of the UN emergency session, Cooke revealed


\(^{63}\) Cooke, *Letter from America*, Number 468, recorded 30 November 1956, broadcast 2 December 1956, File 1, Box 11.
that though he recalled the day's events, what he remembered most was an Englishman at a "small party I went to, to escape from the grinding solemnity of the Assembly debate." By moving the focus from the General Assembly to an individual, Cooke reduced the solemnity of the ruling. In addition, he offered his listeners the consolation that Americans were Anglophiles at heart. While the United States had to vote publicly against Britain in the UN assembly, in private the United States sympathized.64

In all his discussions of Suez, Cooked stressed that there was no such thing as the American opinion, but rather "for every type of Englishman, say, there is an equivalent type of American."65 While some were offended and many were shocked, some were "stirred" by the image of the "old lion rousing herself at last." There were Americans who shared British pride in the event and understood the centrality of the Suez to British economy. There were also Americans who condemned British action as a resort to force they would have expected of the Communists.66 By focusing on the beliefs of individual Americans, Cooke suggested that Anglo-American friendship was still possible even when official relations between the two countries had soured.

However, even Cooke could not ignore the fact that "64 nations of the world, very few of them the lackeys of the U.S. stood together in moral condemnation of

64 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 464, recorded 2 November 1956, broadcast 3 November 1956. File 1, Box 11.
65 Ibid.
66 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 468, recorded 30 November 1956, broadcast 2 December 1956. File 1, Box 11.
Britain and France. Indeed it is because of this that Cooke was compelled to write three *Letters* on the subject. The Suez Crisis seems to mark a turning point in Anglo-American relations, as England was finally forced to acknowledge that, contrary to Eden's earlier beliefs, history and geography did not guarantee it a position on the world stage. Cooke, though he sympathized, acknowledged this reality in his *Letters*. For example, in Letter 471 of December 1956, Cooke commented:

> Even though it's only eleven years ago since the United Nations was built on the assumption that there are five great powers - The Soviet Union, The United States, The United Kingdom, France and who now amounts to the government of Formosa - everybody knows, however much they may rile under the knowledge, that there are two great powers and two only. And though it must be very galling to a proud Indian, or a proud Parisian, or a proud Yorkshireman - so help us - the fact is that the two vast monoliths of Russia and America glare at each other from in front and behind and across two oceans, and that what they each do decided more than anything else the fate of the friends of one and the satellites of the other.  

Cooke made these rather gloomy observations in his Christmas broadcast, 1956.

As one year ended and the next began, so too began a new phase in Anglo-American relations. Cooke's broadcasts, until this point, had addressed Britain as an active participant on the world stage. Now that America had come of age, standing against her ally in the UN, Britain's role as a wise advisor had diminished. In the years 1956-64, a period historian Gary Rawnsley considers the most crucial years of the Cold War, Cooke would continue to explain the impact of world events to his listeners. However, he would do so under the understanding

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that it was the Americans that decided the fate of their British friends.\textsuperscript{69}

Paralleling the demise of Britain as a world power, the UN also lost influence in the late 1950s. Cooke however remained an “ardent supporter,” having recognized as early as 1953 that the UN was ill-equipped to do half of what it pretended to do.\textsuperscript{70} Much criticism directed at the UN, Cooke claimed, was misguided. “It assumes”, he argued, “a Hollywood view of diplomacy - the notion that corrupt regimes will fall and wrongs will be righted all around the world by swift and gaudy means to the accompaniment of trumpets.”\textsuperscript{71} Rather than judge by such aloof standards, Cooke chose to report on the successes of the UN, such as its crusade against the skin disease yaws, which by 1958 had healed seventy percent of cases of the disease in Haiti. The failing of the UN was not in its altruistic aims but rather in its power structure, which relied on the strength of good feeling between the Big Five to make a decision.\textsuperscript{72} In the late 1950s, good feeling between these powers was in considerably short supply.

Reflecting on the world in his five hundredth Letter in 1957, Cooke highlighted some of the reasons for such loss of good feeling. Since 1946, he commented “old names have taken on brave grisly meanings: Israel, Hungary, Suez, Malaya, Indonesia, Algeria. New and menacing words have come into our vocabulary: automation, thermonuclear, integration, the inter-continental ballistic

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\textsuperscript{70} Cooke, \textit{Letter from America}, Number 345, recorded 23 December 1953, broadcast 31 December 1953, File 3, Box 7.

\textsuperscript{71} Cooke, \textit{Letter from America}, Number 520, recorded 24 January 1958, broadcast 26 January 1958, Box 12.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
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missile and rock 'n roll.” Indeed in his talks, Cooke relies on such specialized vocabulary to give a sense of the climate of the late Cold War. Terminology did not require explanation; England also knew the Cold War jargon. More important to Cooke was the human story beneath the terminology. Only with knowledge and understanding of the American people and their reactions to these “new and menacing words” and events could good feeling ever be reestablished.

It is in descriptions of the most grave events that Cooke relied most heavily on the individual. In the UN Suez conference, as already referenced, Cooke’s broadcast focused on the sideshow rather than the main attraction. In reporting on Sputnik he employed a similar technique, and recalled the reaction of his taxi driver in New York. The driver, Cooke reported, “thinks the whole Sputnik thing is a lot of propaganda.” The cabbie dismissed “all this yak-yak about a satellite.” Until someone actually saw it, he refused to believe it was real. Other Americans, though they did not understand the potential implications of the satellite itself, understood the significance of the event and the Soviet Union “thumbing its nose at Uncle Sam.”

Turning again from the main theatre to the side stage, Cooke concluded his talk, with what he considered to be the other great event of the week, which, in the excitement of Sputnik, most Americans knew very little about. The event was the State Department’s decision to stop “the humiliation” of mandatory finger-printing for all visitors to the United States. Cooke celebrated this decision as a “great and

73 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 500, live 8 September 1957. File 1, Box 11.
74 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 505, recorded 11 November 1957, broadcast 13 November 1957. File 1, Box 11.
civilized step forward.” Though a long time coming, the ruling “at last” fulfilled the promise of the Magna Carta to provide free and unobstructed passage to foreign lands. “All things considered,” Cooke concluded “I think the finger-print ruling has more to do with our good future as free men than the unholy miracle of Sputnik.”75

This event was effectively utilized by Cooke, as he managed to restore prestige to America by connecting them with the future of “free men” and divert attention from the fear and mystery surrounding Sputnik. However, perhaps most importantly, he offered his British audience a story personally relevant to them.

Although Britain had lost its place as an imperial power, Cooke did not wish to highlight this fact to his British audience. For example in commenting on the UN, Cooke used carefully chosen language when he stated that “at least two of the Big Five” had lost their power. In the phrasing “at least,” Cooke recognized the decrease in British prestige but he did not force his audience to dwell on it.76

Where possible, Cooke continued to relate his content to the British experience. For example in the Bay of Pigs fiasco, which he claimed got “more appalling” as investigation continued, Cooke compared the event with the Suez crisis. The experience in Cuba, Cooke suggested, had done some good, as for the first time it enabled Americans to “see as you saw, at Suez, and to feel as you felt.” Americans, he claimed, now saw how it was to be “cheated, humiliated, put upon, made to be a scapegoat.”77

75 Ibid.
76 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 520, recorded 24 January 1958, broadcast 26 January 1958, Box 12.
77 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 678, recorded 14 May 1961, broadcast 15 May 1951.
Without actually clearly articulating it, Cooke’s Letter almost seemed to apologize to the British, suggesting perhaps that Americans had been too rash in their judgments in the aftermath of Suez. Some sense of the old order is restored in Cooke’s words. America was once again the hasty child and Britain the patient parent, who took the higher road and decided not to “light into” America in the UN following the Bay of Pigs. Although British power was considerably diminished, it had not been completely destroyed.

In the later Cold War period, as Cooke expressed to the dear old lady in his letter, “the gloom will keep creeping in.” However beneath these cataclysmic episodes, the tide of American life continued at a steady pace. Even amidst the terror of events such as sputnik, there was still baseball. Every year, the eyes of the nation were focused on Spring Training, and every Fall, as a New Yorker, Cooke’s life was dominated by the Yankees and the World Series. In his Sputnik Letter, the baseball season penetrates his entire discussion. Indeed Cooke notes that “for simple souls, Lew Burdette was a flashing name in the sky far more marvelous that the Russians’ Sputnik”. To most Americans then, seemingly trivial matters such as baseball and the weather were the concerns of their everyday life. Indeed Cooke himself acknowledged that the weather influenced his mood. In a 1955 Letter, for example, he commented that the surprising

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sunshine in December had obliterated all “the bad and heaving news of the past two months.”80

Cooke used discussion of sports and the weather to alleviate his listeners’ fears, as exampled in 1961 when he commented, “while Berlin has been hotting up, the abominable Summer suddenly cooled off here.”81 By linking such an important event with such a mundane detail, Cooke implied that like the weather, the Berlin crisis would pass. Similarly in 1957 he commented on the “very soothing sort of reassurance” of seeing President Eisenhower playing a game of golf, “a homely reminder that, Russia and the Hydrogen Bomb to the contrary, the world cannot be falling apart just yet.”82

Cooke’s view of Cold War politics are captured in these examples. Normal life, he realized, had to continue or, “we shall sooner or later have to resign ourselves to living an abnormal life or redefine the word.”83 Cooke’s critics, such as Knute Skinner, suggested that politics was best left to the politicians, but they failed to realize that, in many ways, Cooke shared this view. Cooke was interested in people’s reactions to political stories rather than the stories themselves. In the opening to his 1968 collected works Talk About America, Cooke articulated his view of politics, saying it would plague people until death, yet “it would be a crime

82 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 479, recorded 15 February 1957, broadcast 17 February 1961, File 4, Box 10.
83 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 197, recorded 8 December 1950, broadcast 15 December 1950, Box 5.
against nature for any generation to take the world crisis so solemnly that it put off enjoying those things for which we were presumably designed in the first place."\textsuperscript{84}

Cooke’s politics did not take the form of negotiation among nations but rather as discussion between friends. While he discussed most major events of the Cold War, he spoke for himself, rather than for the American government. Indeed rather than the American government’s response to political events, Cooke was interested in the response of the American people. While he lived through the Cold War and was at times fearful and affected by political conflict, he did not “put off” enjoying life. While a proud American citizen, he was also of British birth and respected the audience to whom he addressed his \textit{Letters}. In addressing an audience sensitive to etiquette, Cooke saw that even in warlike times, nothing was more important than a “civil tongue.”

\textsuperscript{84} Cooke, \textit{Talk About America}, 6.
CONCLUSION

In her introduction to a 2008 *Letters* collection, Susan Cooke Kittredge described her father as a “reporter.” She claimed that this was how he described himself and recalled the vehemence with which Cooke would respond to being called a television personality. In addition, Cooke Kittredge revealed that “the more refined title of ‘journalist’ never sat as well with him as the simple, descriptive term of ‘reporter’.”¹ Such a term is befitting for a man who found more interest in the average American than in the events of Washington.

Writing during the Cold War, Alistair Cooke seems to have had a sense of the potential impact of radio diplomacy and thus understood the need for responsible journalism in warlike times. In one of his broadcasts about the Suez Crisis, for example, he contended that “on these powerful, even tragic, occasions it seems to me a good practice, in fact a necessary one for anybody who is going to write about these tremendous events, to get away from them if possible in the very moment of their impact.”² He cautioned against the journalist’s “peculiar form of megalomania” which led them to believe that because they were present at the great events they had helped to shape them.³ Cooke avoided this megalomania by reporting from New York, which journalist Simon Jenkins claims, was “crucial


² Alistair Cooke, *Letter from America, Number 464*, recorded 2 November 1956, broadcast 3 November 1956, File 1, Box 11, The Alistair Cooke Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archive, Boston University. (Hereafter all subsequent *Letter* references cited as Cooke, *Letter from America*. All Files and Boxes are located at the Howard Gotlieb Archive.

to the content and style" of Letters. Indeed Jenkins suggests that this decision gave Cooke a reputation among journalists as being difficult, as he was rarely at the scene of events when political stories broke in Washington.4

Cooke's decision to remain in New York was not an attempt to be difficult but rather a strategic decision to ensure he could report with the necessary distance from his subject. To see behind the headline, Cooke needed to be distanced from the headline. As he explained in a 1953 Letter,

When you are reporting American life from Washington you are so busy trying to cope with the mass of stuff coming out of Congress and the White House, you are so active, hopping around one government department after another finding about this policy and that man, that American life is always outside the window, so near and yet so far. You promise yourself that one of these days you'll get around to it but you never do.5

In many ways this Letter captures the reasons for Cooke’s success and it also explains the reasons for the USIA’s limitations. As the official voice of America, the USIA could not leave Washington in the way that Cooke was able to. Under intense congressional scrutiny, the USIA had to report on the official American view or risk budgetary cuts. Thus while the USIA joined the plethora of journalists attempting to report on America, Cooke’s broadcasts were unique in providing reports on the American people. Alistair Cooke’s success is captured in the letter of a female listener, who wrote to Cooke in 1967 from Birmingham, England. The lady asked, “Please let us have plenty of these “regular” (in the American sense pieces.) Great set pieces, for example, on the Kennedy assassination are, in my

5 Alistair Cooke, Letter from America, Number 309, recorded 20 February 1953, broadcast 27 December 1953. File 1, Box 7.
opinion, less important. Other commentators can do these, too.⁶

Cooke offered something that other journalists could not, and perhaps this is how he should be understood. He did not take a defined political position, but rather he reported on politics as seen through the eyes of ordinary Americans. His political ideas thus were as contradictory and wide-ranging as those of the American public.⁷ His experience of growing up in England highlighted the animosity between England and America and alerted him to the potential of cultural diplomacy between allied nations. His position as a British-born American citizen allowed him to be both a participant and an observer in American life, and his knowledge of Britain allowed him to tailor his broadcasts’ style, tone and content to his British audience.

Though they had initially eschewed foreign broadcasters, the USIA too came to see the merit in Cooke’s broadcasts. In 1958, in a letter to Alistair Cooke, Thomas L. Cannon of the USIA’s News and Features Branch thanked Cooke for granting permission to use “The Baltimore Story” in the United States Information Program.⁸ Of all Cooke’s Letters, the Baltimore Story was one of the most obviously pro-American. However, the techniques used in the Letter were uniquely Cooke’s. The Letter, broadcast in December 1957, addressed the attempts to integrate high schools in Little Rock. Rather than focus on the horrific scenes of the Little Rock High School, Cooke chose to report on Baltimore which

⁶ Letter from unknown female, Birmingham to Alistair Cooke, 27 August 1967, File 16, Box 48, Alistair Cooke Collection, Howard Gotlieb Archive, Boston University.
⁷ Jenkins, Introduction, xiii.
⁸ Letter from Thomas L. Cannon, Chief, News and Features Branch, USIA to Alistair Cooke, June 18, 1958, File 12, Box 48, Howard Gotlieb Archive, Boston University.
he claimed was "the most spectacular example of the success of integration." Cooke spoke of Baltimore as an example of what has happened outside of Little Rock. Yet while Baltimore had bravely taken a decision to accept integration without riots, no headlines in "Moscow or Sheffield" focused on Baltimore. Cooke did not attempt to deny the horrific events of Little Rock, or indeed to try and explain them. Instead, as he did when discussing the Suez Crisis, he moved away from the main stage and found reassurance in the American people.

In addition to his recognition from the USIA, Cooke received a plethora of accolades including a knighthood from the Queen, an invitation to address Congress on the Bicentennial of the United States in 1974, and the 1951 Peabody Award for "Radio's Outstanding Contribution to International Understanding." As this selection demonstrates, both sides of the Atlantic claimed Cooke, and this of course was crucial to his success. Yet while both countries laid claim to him, neither owned him and it was this independence that enable Cooke to explore America, its people and their lives behind the headlines. Alistair Cooke was a successful Ambassador, successful for his lack of Portfolio.

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9 Cooke, Letter from America, Number 503, recorded 27 December 1957, broadcast 29 December 1957, File 1, Box 11. Cooke’s broadcasts on race, as his daughter Susan Cooke Kittredge notes were sometimes criticized. His critics claiming that he did not consider racial unrest in the 1950s and 60s seriously. Cooke Kittredge contends “I think whatever reluctance he exhibited to joining in the righteous indignation of Northern liberals was born not of denial but of honest incomprehension. He had such had a fundamental belief in the equality of all people that he could not fully comprehend racial prejudice.” Susan Cooke Kittredge in Alistair Cooke, Reporting America, 27.
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