In the spring of 2002, columnist William Pfaff contrasted what he saw as Americans’ over-reaction to the events of September 11, 2001, with their steadfast behaviour during the Cold War. Despite the Soviet challenge and the threat of thermonuclear war, he asserted, “There was never much anxiety in the United States about future events, or fear of enemy attack, during the Cold War … .” But Pfaff’s memory seemed to have failed him, for at least one major Cold War episode did evoke fear of physical attack and doubts about national survival. Ironically, it was not a military action that triggered it but rather an ostensibly peaceful, scientific demonstration. On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union launched the first earth satellite, dubbed “Sputnik,” and thereby aroused both an immediate panic and a longer-range reassessment of America’s character, goals, and purposes, both reminiscent of and intriguingly different from the country’s reaction to the assaults on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Comparing and contrasting American public discourse about these two national crises reveals much about the shifting role of consumerism in American life. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, public spokespersons pointed accusing fingers at their countrymen’s allegedly sybaritic life-styles and hunger for ever more consumer goods, contrasting America’s satiated plenitude with the discipline and rigour that made possible the stunning scientific, educational, and diplomatic achievements of their Russian and Chinese rivals. Calls for sacrifice and criticisms of mindless consumerism filled the print
media and the airways. But in the wake of what everyone quickly began to call “9/11,” public tribunes, led by the president, embraced consumer excess as central to an American way of life against which Islamic fundamentalists raged. To be sure, forty years ago the same Jeremias who warned of popular material excess acknowledged that consumer spending was critical to the health of the economy; but whereas, for them, this fact was a source of dismay and perplexity, now it was the centrepiece of the nation’s ebullient response to violent attack.

***

Within an hour of the first reports of the events of September 11, a student journalist knocked on the history professor’s door. The campus newspaper, it seemed, wanted to run a story the next day featuring local reactions to the disaster, and the young reporter had come to the professor’s office seeking context. To what previous catastrophes in American history, he asked, might the World Trade Center–Pentagon (WTC) attacks be most appropriately compared? When the professor fumbled for an answer, the journalist helpfully suggested that, on news broadcasts, there was frequent mention of Pearl Harbor. Yes, indeed, the professor quickly agreed. In its shocking nature and devastating effect, Pearl Harbor was truly the closest parallel.1

Yet doubts soon surfaced. On reflection, the differences between the Japanese attack on US air and naval installations in Hawaii in 1941 and the WTC attacks seemed to outweigh the similarities. However unexpected, the Japanese raid was a military attack on military installations, conducted by the regular forces of a recognized government. Civilians had not been targeted, though naturally there was “collateral damage.” And, of course, Americans had to wait for the images, which were shown in the movie theatres only days later.

If December 7 was turning out to be not much of a parallel, were there other episodes that might be invoked? What about, for example, the sinking of the Lusitania on May 8, 1915? After all, writes historian David Reynolds, “For the early 20th century, this was the defining act of terrorism against innocent civilians.” True, this disaster hadn’t occurred on American soil or even involved an American ship. Yet many Americans—128—were killed, along with 1,500 other non-combatants. Although a recognized government was responsible, the attack was directed at unarmed civilians; and Ger-
many’s resort to submarine warfare did seem at the time to be a shocking violation of the traditional rules of war (Reynolds).

Indeed, to many Americans, even before the sinking, the behaviour of German troops in Belgium and northern France had already indicted Imperial Germany as singularly ruthless, barbaric, and conscienceless. Moreover, the German government’s lionization of Captain Schweiger and its initial refusal to disavow the attack made it seem as if a particularly brutal and callous enemy had murdered scores of Americans. Certainly, the American and Allied press condemned the Huns, whose dastardly acts put them beyond the pale of civilized society. Germany, declared an Irish court, was guilty of “wilful and wholesale murder,” and in the US, editorialists and pundits outdid themselves in denunciations of a German Kultur that was thought to have produced such barbarism. Indeed, in its bitterness and outrage, press response to the 1915 sinking rivalled the condemnations of the Islamic fundamentalists presumed to have perpetrated the September 11 attacks (Zieger, America’s Great War 22–5).

But, of course, the Lusitania had gone to the bottom of the Atlantic a long time ago. Despite the post-event hysterics, the Wilson administration did, in fact, compel the German government to apologize for the sinking and to pledge to end unrestricted submarine warfare. Never did the German government express contempt or hatred for the American people and their institutions. True, the Germans were, in fact, developing mega-submarines that could reach American ports—and in 1916, they did send one into American coastal waters. True, also, that some Americans did entertain fantasies of Hun-like hordes surging up the Mississippi to ravage the country while, in the words of inventor–author Hudson Maxim, “our wives and our daughters and our sweethearts would be commandeered to supply the women” for the marauding beasts (qtd. in Zieger, America’s Great War 38). But even at the worst of the wartime anti-German excesses, few people seriously contemplated an invasion of the US. Clearly, the Lusitania was a one-off, not the harbinger of ongoing physical danger to the people and institutions of the United States.

Having rejected these two episodes but continuing to ruminate on the journalist’s question, the professor found himself thinking back to his college days. He mentally ticked off the various crises and conflicts of the late 1950s: Hungary, Suez, Little Rock, Lebanon. And then the answer he should have given to the reporter became obvi-
ous: Sputnik!

At first glance, the orbiting of a satellite on October 4, 1957, might not seem a likely candidate for comparison with the lethal attacks of September 11, 2001. After all, its ostensible purpose was scientific, not military; and in fact, its launching was, at least nominally, part of a worldwide program of scientific collaboration—the International Geophysical Year—which involved, theoretically at least, cooperation among US and Soviet scientists. Indeed, many Americans, scientists and lay people alike, initially expressed admiration for the Russian feat. Thus, shortly after the launch, astronomer Franklin Brantley declared on national television that the Soviet achievement was “amazing … a breakthrough,” and stated openly his admiration for the Russians’ overcoming of “seemingly insurmountable” obstacles.2 Nor, of course, did the launch of Sputnik kill American citizens or destroy American property.

Nevertheless, this spectacular demonstration of Russian technological prowess exposed a number of closely related fears among American policy makers, politicians, and pundits. For the first time since 1814, the American mainland and the American people appeared to be under direct military threat. An enemy that could fire a satellite into space could also, it was widely believed, obliterate American cities. Flushed with success and determined to force concessions from the West over Berlin, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev did nothing to discourage these fears.

Editorials, news broadcasts, and public speeches reflected a sense of vulnerability and defencelessness previously unknown in American public discourse. In November, for example, the editors of mass-circulation Life magazine warned that “Khrushchev may well calculate that if he is ever to start a major war, now he will find the United States most divided and unnerved” (Editorial). Another Soviet launch on November 7—this one with a much larger payload, including the dog Laika—intensified the alarm. Scientist George Price, a veteran of the Manhattan Project, declared, “Unless we depart utterly from our present behavior, it is reasonable to expect that by no later than 1975 the United States will be a member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics” (126). Responding to a constituent’s shrill call for action in the wake of Sputnik, Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson commented on the man’s warning that it was “five minutes to midnight…. The alarmed constituent, declared the Senate majority leader “might have understated the
facts.... I cannot help but think it might be more appropriate to say 3, 2 or even 1 minute to midnight.” The American people, he agreed, “must be summoned to “battle stations’ [sic]” (Johnson, Letter).

Sputnik fed an emerging culture of crisis. Almost simultaneously with its launching, President Dwight D. Eisenhower received the report of the blue ribbon Gaither Committee he had appointed in the spring of 1957 to assess America’s ability to withstand a Soviet attack. To his dismay, this prestigious body painted a frightening picture of American weakness and vulnerability. It called for massive new programs of missile development, strategic bombing enhancement, and bomb-shelter construction. And only months after these twin alarms, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund issued a long-awaited and widely publicized special report that depicted a grim contrast between Russian achievement and resolve, on the one hand, and American recklessness and military weakness, on the other. Meanwhile, Senator Johnson was holding highly publicized hearings into the country’s alleged military inadequacies, while fellow presidential hopeful, Massachusetts senator John F. Kennedy, asserted that the country now faced its “[m]ost critical peril since the time of Lincoln” (Kennedy, “Can Democracy”). Charged Kennedy, “there is a missile gap, and ... this is a period of maximum peril ...” (United States, Executive Sessions 43).3

This sense of apocalypse-soon was not confined to Eisenhower’s political opponents. Sober and cautious commentators and even friends of the administration joined the chorus. Strident calls for a massive program of civil defense and the construction of thousands of bomb shelters echoed everywhere. The Gaither Committee’s report, with its alarming characterizations of US military weakness, was the product of the deliberations of business, academic, and governmental leaders chosen by Eisenhower himself and steered in part by MIT President James A. Killian, a trusted Eisenhower scientific advisor. In February 1959, another presidential confidante, former Harvard president James B. Conant, warned, “[W]e are in a period of real peril”; for even in the 1930s, “we were not faced ... with the kind of struggle which [now] characterizes our divided world.”

In reality, of course, we now know that the “threat” of Soviet attack and US vulnerability was non-existent, at least in 1957. The technology involved in firing a payload blindly into space bore little relation to that needed to hit targets on earth. There was, in fact, no missile gap. US achievement in miniaturization, computerization,
and missile technology generally was well ahead of that of the Soviet Union, even though premature efforts to demonstrate American space prowess ended in embarrassing failures. Eisenhower, his secretary of defense, and General Nathan Twining, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sought repeatedly to convince their fellow citizens that America’s massive superiority in strategic bombers, its missile-firing submarines, and the intermediate-range ballistic missiles being installed in Italy, Turkey, and Britain precluded Soviet attack any time soon (United States, Executive Sessions 40–3; see also Nash 5–33).

Yet, even as the initial shock of Sputnik wore off, the sense of national crisis remained. Even if we did not face immediate Armageddon, we had been outpaced by a nation hitherto regarded as primitive and backward. The Soviet regime, editorialists and commentators declared, had found ways to mobilize the intellectual and economic capacities of its citizens while Americans frittered away their patrimony in mindless consumption and frivolous amusements. Even if the Sputnik launches themselves did not, in fact, signify American helplessness before Soviet techno-military power—a concession that critics of US defence policies did not make until well into the Kennedy administration—they did throw into sharp relief the contest between an aggressive, purposeful, fully mobilized enemy and what a spate of critics described as a feckless, sybaritic, and undisciplined American populace, ill-equipped and ill-led to meet the Soviet (and increasingly “Sino-Soviet”) challenge symbolized by the Russian missile launches. Declared Democratic Senator Henry Jackson in the summer of 1960, the American people must face up to “the fact that we are now in a war” (United States, Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery 918).

In a very real sense, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Americans experienced a sort of “moral crisis,” triggered by Soviet scientific accomplishments, economic achievements, and diplomatic successes, and epitomized by the spectacular launch of the Sputniks. Even if Sputnik did not kill Americans, it fostered a sense of vulnerability and national crisis not paralleled until the WTC–Pentagon attacks. Comparing and contrasting American responses to the two dramatic setbacks is richly suggestive of who we were then, who we are now, and what we may become. In probing the differences and similarities in American responses, four themes stand out: the physical threat to the United States; the nature of the enemy; American behaviours and values; and views as to what is/was to be done.
Physical Threat to the United States

Fears about the physical survival of the United States were greater and more widely expressed in the post-Sputnik period than was the case even in the immediate wake of 9/11. It is hard to overstate the apprehension that very knowledgeable and sober-minded policy advisors then expressed. In the public media, in extensive congressional hearings, and in the more private reflections of politicians, academics, and journalists, themes of stark crisis and vulnerability were ever-present in the half-decade after the Sputnik launch. For example, while preparing to hold hearings in 1957 on the nation’s defence vulnerability, Majority Leader Johnson declared, “Today we face a peril even greater than that which confronted us after Pearl Harbor. We are in more deadly danger now than we were then … our country is face to face with the most serious challenge to its security in our national history … there is shocking evidence that we are woefully behind in the weapons of tomorrow …” (Johnson, Draft).

In the spring and summer of 1960, Senator Henry Jackson presided over hearings of the Senate Committee on Government Operations Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery, eliciting from a wide range of leading public intellectuals and business leaders their alarm at the nation’s plight. Life in America, said IBM President Thomas Watson, had become “nearly perfect” insofar as creature comforts were concerned, but he wondered if a satisfied people could “face the challenge of our lives in the Soviet Union,” for “we are in an emergency, and … our very future is threatened” (United States, Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery pt. 1, 92–6). New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, magazine magnate Henry Luce, and other national figures echoed these sentiments (United States, Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery pt. 7, 949–76; 912–29). Nor did the sense of imminent crisis quickly dissipate. A year later, Senator John McClellan, presiding over hearings into labour relations in the country’s space and missile development program, which had been accelerated in response to Soviet space achievements, was outraged over construction delays. Workers, he remarked bitterly, were waging strikes and holding up critical construction while the country was “struggling for its existence in a race that may mean we either survive or we perish” (United States, Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations 333).
In contrast, the stunning attacks on the WTC and the Pentagon have not called into question the likelihood of nation’s sheer physical survival. True, we have been warned (even as we are admonished to carry on business as usual) to expect more attacks, no doubt even more diabolical than those of September 11. We can only speculate as to the next targets—the Golden Gate Bridge; the Super Bowl—and the means of attack—nerve gas, deadly viruses. And we are also warned that we will have to accept at least temporary limitations on our legendary freedom of movement. Lines at airports grow longer. Proofs of identity are double-checked. The October 2001 Patriot Act grants federal police sweeping powers to monitor mail, bank accounts, and credit card records, along with unprecedented powers to detain and incarcerate both citizens and aliens. But physical survival has not been in question, as it was, at least in the view of prominent politicians, journalists, and public intellectuals, in the late 1950s.

The Nature of the Enemy

There is a basic difference between how America’s chief adversaries were viewed then and how they are viewed now. Of course, the Communists were then the Other, just as Islamic extremists are so viewed nowadays. But the Soviets, however hated their ideology and however much feared their power, were in a sense “our” others. That is, their ideology was a recognizable one, born of Western political ideas. Communism, in Clifford Geertz’s words, “had a Western pedigree.” Americans could recognize in Soviet Communism a coherent body of doctrine that they could connect to central traditions of Western political thought. Accepted and recognized organizations within the Western societies had certain affinities with Soviet counterparts. The labour movement, social democratic parties, and even New Deal liberalism shared, at least verbally, some of the goals of Communists. In the US and in Europe, Communists and non-Communists had collaborated in a wide range of political, cultural, and labour organizations. During World War II, the Soviet Union was our staunch ally. After the war, Communists had held posts in European coalition governments. The Soviet constitution proclaimed essentially Western values of personal freedom and social justice, however much Americans may have regarded these claims as hypocritical or dishonest. Indeed, in the early days of the Cold War, it was the very plausibility of Communism, its appeal to workers and intellectuals, that rendered it so dangerous in the eyes of anti-Communists.
The theme of enviable Soviet achievement—not only in terms of military hardware, but in terms of the discipline and determination of the Russian people and the advantage enjoyed by an ideological, centralized society in decision making and public mobilization—ran throughout the crisis talk of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, reported IBM President Watson, was “a formidable personality,” who had “a driving ambition,” along with “great vitality and leadership ability.” The Soviet people had performed heroically during World War II, he counselled, and “a similar energy exists today” (United States, Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery pt. 1, 92–6). Thoughtful Americans ruefully acknowledged that, under Communism, the material conditions of life for large numbers of people had improved. According to a leading US advertising executive, for example, the Russians were “a pioneering, intelligent, hard-working, and dedicated people” (Repplier, Report to the board). He acknowledged Soviet gains in medical care, social security, and education, declaring, on more than one occasion, that the average Russian was “better off than millions in our American slums” (Repplier, Letter).

The Russian educational system, many believed, was superior to our own in its ability to motivate youngsters and enlist them in the nation’s enterprises. And right behind the Russians stood the Chinese. In June 1960, General Dynamics CEO and former US secretary of the Army, Frank Pace, captured the ongoing sense of crisis, warning an audience of college students that “the cold hard facts still are that the Communist states are making giant strides, not only militarily but in the economic and psychological fields as well. We have no time to lose” (712). And looming beyond the Russian steppes, he added, was the spectre of “over half a billion dedicated zealots, the Chinese Communist nation,” challenging the West and competing for the hearts and minds of people of colour. (Indeed, a widely circulated, though likely apocryphal, story caught the national mood: “I imagine,” a citizen remarked to a US State Department functionary, “that a lot of people in the government are learning Russian.” “Actually,” went the response, “the optimists are learning Russian. The pessimists are studying Chinese.”)

Today, of course, there is no such admiration for the Taliban or Bin Laden’s Al Qaeda. These and other Islamicist groups may be credited with diabolical cleverness and tenacity. There is grudging acknowledgement of their logistical and organizational skills. But no one regards Bin Laden’s brand of ideology as a serious intellectual
or moral challenge to the most basic values of the West. There is no apprehension that Americans of any faith or in any social movement will be misled into adopting the Bin Ladenist ideology or forming a “popular front” with it. The enemy is not, as he could be seen during the post-Sputnik era, “one of us.” He is Other, and his appeal is thought to have no legitimate basis beyond sheer resentment and desperation.

In the 1950s and 1960s, social commentators often contrasted the allegedly hedonistic life-style of Americans unfavourably with those of their allegedly harder and more disciplined adversaries in Russia and China. In the wake of September 11, however, it is commonplace to advance precisely the opposite contrast—one that contrasts American freedom and plenty with the atmosphere of dour asceticism and fanatical commitment that breeds terrorist fantasies. An extensive scholarly debate over the complex roles of commodification and consumerism in shaping the post-colonial world order has little resonated in post-attack public discourse, however lively its presence in cultural studies arenas.7

American Values and Behaviour

Unlike the Sputnik launch, the attacks of September 11 have prompted no orgy of self-doubt and internal agonizing. Indeed, to the extent that we did step back to see ourselves, we saw heroic firefighters, brave airline passengers foiling the terrorists’ stratagems, and generous fellow citizens rushing to aid the afflicted. “It was,” President Bush declared, “as if our entire country looked into a mirror and saw our better selves.” The flag flew everywhere. After the initial shock and the necessary dirges, the country shifted into an assertive, belligerent posture. “United We Stand” became the watchword. Proclaiming a holy war against terrorists, the president was equally succinct: “Let’s roll,” he urged (United States, “State of the Union” 5).

How different things were back in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Sputnik triggered a nationwide crisis of conscience and confidence. The theme of popular complacency and self-indulgence took centre stage. Thus, for example, in 1962, Yale historian Samuel Flagg Bemis indicted the American people as “experiencing the world crisis from soft seats of comfort.... Our manpower,” the elderly scholar declared, had been “softened in will and body in a climate of amusement” (qtd. in Sherry 169). On the hustings in the fall of 1960, presidential candidate John F. Kennedy hammered away at the theme of
lethargy and lack of resolve. “A nation replete with goods and services, confident that ‘there’s more where that came from,’” he challenged, “may feel less ardor for questing” (“We Must Climb” 72). Bemis saw a public “debauched by [the] mass media …, fed full of toys and gewgaws” (qtd. in Sherry 169). Fabled newscaster and commentator Edward R. Murrow assailed the television networks for their role in making Americans “wealthy, fat, comfortable, and complacent” (qtd. in Baughman 45). Charged a trade union official participating in a symposium on American values sponsored by the Advertising Council, “[A]dvertisers whet our appetites for a still higher standard of living and make us still softer and more the slaves of the things they have taught us to use” (Mark Starr, qtd. in American Round Table 19).8

Lurking closely behind expressions of concern about sybaritic softness lay long-standing worries about feminization. Throughout the twentieth century, the notion that an urban, industrial society, far removed from the savage struggle for physical survival, was emasculating men was a staple of sociopolitical discourse. In the 1950s, the equation of consumption with femininity and of settled domestic life—otherwise celebrated in films and television comedies—with spinelessness, was the stock in trade of a wide range of comics, critics, and commentators. Frissons of sexual anxiety suffused Cold War rhetoric.9

Even before Sputnik, a spate of popular and scholarly indictments of virtually every phase of American life had burst forth. America, it seemed, once the stalwart guardian of freedom, had become a land of tail-finned gas-guzzlers, ticky-tack suburbs, decaying and inefficient schools, and hedonistic citizens. Americans, economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote, lived in an affluent society, in which private indulgence masked public squalor. Hidden persuaders, social critic Vance Packard warned, were corrupting a gullible and pampered public. Writer John Keats was particularly vocal, in a series of best-selling books whose very titles indicted an America seemingly awash in a sea of mediocrity, blandness, and indulgence. The Crack in the Picture Window (1956) savaged conformist suburban life-styles; The Insolent Chariots (1958) ridiculed the country’s love affair with dysfunctional automobiles; and Schools without Scholars (1958) joined a host of critics of the aimlessness and triviality of public education, as Keats and other critics of American education contrasted diligent, focused Russian youngsters with milkshake-slurping, slack-jawed American boys and girls.
Young congressional staffer Robert F. Kennedy, head counsel of probes into labour-union corruption, caught the Zeitgeist in his 1960 book *The Enemy Within*. Corruption in the Teamsters’ union, he declared, joined “other evidences of [America’s] moral and physical unfitness.” Economic abundance, charged the millionaire Kennedy, had “so undermined our strength of character that we are now unprepared to deal with the problems that face us” (306–7). “Disaster is our destiny,” he warned. “Unless we reinstall the toughness, the moral idealism which has guided this nation during its history” (Speech 38).

**What Is/Was to Be Done**

Proscriptions for future action also reveal sharp contrasts in the wake of these two national emergencies. The day after Sputnik began circling the earth, conservative Republican Senator Styles Bridges of New Hampshire sounded the keynote of post-Sputnik commentary when he warned in a much-quoted comment, “The time has clearly come to be less concerned with ... the height of the tail fin on the car and to be more prepared to shed blood, sweat and tears if this country and the Free World are to survive” (qtd. in Divine xvi). Thirty-four years later, Democratic Senator Debbie Stabenow of Michigan sounded a different response to the more grisly tragedy of September 11: Consumers, she admonished, should not be discouraged by the new national emergency. “If you were going to buy a car before Sept. 11, go and buy an American car and buy shares in American companies,” she urged (qtd. in Kiley).

Nor was Stabenow’s advice unique. President Bush himself insisted that “Americans must get back to work, to go shopping, going to the theatre [sic], to help get the country back on a sounder financial footing,” sentiments that New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who quickly emerged as a heroic and inspirational figure, promptly seconded (qtd. in Hopkins). A Nebraska retailer laid it on the line: “We have to get back to business as usual. We have to maintain our quality of life in this country. Part of that quality of life is being able to buy what we want when we want it” (qtd. in Finney). The administration hastened to reassure the citizenry that vastly expanded military and security expenditures would not entail material sacrifice. Quite the contrary, the president used the September 11 crisis to promote an economic package, the key features of which were economic stimulation and tax reduction. Predicted one reporter, “If the Department of Defense prints World War I–style propaganda post-
ers,” for the “War on Terror,” “they may read ‘Uncle Sam Wants You ... To Go Shopping!’” (Finney).

President Bush eventually did invoke themes of national resolve and occasionally hinted at great sacrifices to come. However, nowhere in the official and quasi-official statements of leading governmental figures was there any sense that the September 11 events called for any change in Americans’ character, values or habits. Writer Joan Didion, returning to her home in New York City after a book promotion tour in the aftermath of the attacks, found American flags blanketing midtown amidst “an entrenched preference for ignoring the meaning of the events in favor of an impenetrably flattening celebration ... [of] its victims and a troublingly belligerent idealization of historical ignorance.”

In contrast, Sputnik triggered national self-doubt and worries about the toughness and vigour of affluent America. Since Soviet success stemmed from greater Russian dedication and sacrifice, Americans had to, in the words of the director of the Advertising Council, “pull up our socks” (Repplier, Annual report) if we wanted to compete for the future of the world. Pundits, politicians, and moralists decried our lack of national purpose. In the spring of 1960, for example, the US Senate held hearings on the nation’s ability to deal with the perceived crisis initially associated with Soviet space successes. “Do we, as a people, now have a clear understanding and consensus about our national purpose?” was the question Senator Mansfield addressed to a galaxy of policy makers and opinion leaders that included Henry Luce, Nelson Rockefeller, George Kennan, and other luminaries (United States, Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery pt. 7, 912). Rockefeller, a leading proponent of the view that the Soviet Union, in fact, enjoyed the military superiority that Sputnik suggested, agreed with the question, calling it “the most important problem we face in the future,” a view endorsed by Senator Jackson, who added that “[t]his determines whether we will survive” (United States, Subcommittee on National Policy Machinery pt. 7, 961–2).10

The theme of America’s moral and ideological weakness in the face of a determined and focused foe suffused public discourse. And efforts to find a solution to the problem of national purpose abounded. Through the late 1950s and into the early 1960s, the Advertising Council invited leading academics, clergymen, businessmen, and moralists to participate in a series of roundtable dis-
cussions that sometimes veered dangerously close to criticism of capitalist excess and the stimulation of unnecessary wants. It launched a major pro bono advertising campaign resting on the premise that “We have never in our history faced this kind of worldwide struggle—a struggle in which the odds are, in many ways, against a democracy” (Repplier, Undated document). The Rockefeller brothers brought together a stellar array of social commentators, intellectuals, theologians, and philosophers in a series of panels presided over by Rockefeller’s protégé, a Harvard instructor named Henry A. Kissinger, to assess and evaluate “the Prospect for America.” In the summer of 1960, Life magazine ran a series of essays by Archibald MacLeish, David Sarnoff, Billy Graham, Adlai Stevenson, Walter Lippmann, and others, attempting to define “The National Purpose,” while during that same year, a Commission on National Goals, appointed by President Eisenhower, laboured to “identify the great issues of our generation” and to “sound a call for greatness … in the best traditions of the Founding Fathers” (Eisenhower, “Memorandum” 159).11

In short, Sputnik and related developments tapped into a broad stream of unease and apprehension about the legitimacy and trajectory of the “American way of life.” Americans gloried in our material plenty and yet feared that that very affluence would be our undoing—thus declared Senator Jackson: “The very richness of our system could be the seeds of our own destruction.” Public tribunes invoked sacrifice while, at the same time, if not always with the same mind, recognizing that commercial capitalism and continued economic growth depended on the stimulation of new wants. American leaders both feared and envied a more disciplined and ideologically driven opponent while at the same time celebrating—although sometimes it seemed with a new nervousness—the heterogeneity and acquisitiveness of life in capitalist America. The Ad Council’s lavishly funded and carefully engineered We Are Challenged campaign both reflected and sought to address these dilemmas. Beyond all the specific problems in technology, defence, education, and public life generally that the Soviet challenge exposed—Theodore Repplier, the Council’s articulate director, held—lay “a series of American attitudes—the attitudes of a people who have had it too good, too long” (Annual report). But of course, as Repplier fully recognized, it was the job of advertising—and, more generally, the job of American capitalism—to stimulate the very material wants that threatened to sap the nation of the strength and will it would need to compete with an aggressive and dedicated Soviet Union (see Zieger “Paradox”).
The wailing and gnashing of teeth that followed in the wake of Sputnik represented a kind of American Jeremiad. The people were being made aware of their fall from grace and goaded into moral rededication. It was an old American story, dating from the Puritans and running like a thread through American history. Perhaps its most recent manifestation occurred during the Carter administration, when the president detected a “national malaise” and urged the people to confront their excesses and weaknesses. But no such outcry followed the September 2001 attacks: We have, writes columnist Frank Rich, been quick “to rein in the freedom of debate even as we [have] paid lip service to … [the] moral distinction between us and them.”

In contrast, the post-Sputnik public discourse was not confined to hand wringing and self-blame. There were more productive efforts. Just as the post-Sputnik crisis called into question American performance across a wide range of activities, so all sorts of public initiatives could gain the rubric of national defence and liberals were not above using conservative concerns about national security to promote a post–New Deal liberal domestic agenda. Thus, in 1958, for example, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which, for the first time, provided for substantial federal aid for education, including scholarship assistance for college goers. It is no coincidence that the most substantial progress in civil rights, culminating in the 1963 March on Washington and the path-breaking 1964 Civil Rights Act, occurred in the immediate post-Sputnik era. Both initiatives indicated a broad pattern of public support for active government, characteristic even of a conservative administration in the wake of World War II, but no longer so in the post-Watergate America of George W. Bush.

Also in this vein, Eisenhower’s announcement of the appointment of the President’s Commission on National Goals called on a panel of “selfless and devoted individuals” to produce a statement of national purposes designed to “inspire every citizen” (Eisenhower, “Annual Message” 10–11). Meeting throughout 1960, the commission produced a report, Goals for Americans, that put forth a broad program of social reconstruction, using the introspective mood initially generated by Sputnik to call for constructive social programs, enhanced education, and racial equality. Broadly reflecting the experience of the ten white men of mature years who comprised the commission, the report exhibited a belief in purposeful public action and a conviction that meeting international challenges required social
action at home as well as in the military realm. In important respects, the commission’s report laid the groundwork for key Great Society programs.\textsuperscript{14}

It would be hard to imagine such an initiative today. External attack has not led to internal scrutiny or to programs of domestic reconstruction. Indeed, it appears that President Bush is using the approval he has gained through his anti-terrorist leadership to promote adoption of tax and economic policies that are designed to starve the federal government and diminish its capacity for assertive action in domestic affairs. Nor is national soul-searching welcomed. Typical is the statement emanating from the Council of Trustees and Alumni, a body founded by Lynn Cheney, wife of the vice president and a tenacious foe of effete liberalism. The council has assailed US universities for harbouring “Blame America first” critics and has averred that, “at a time when we are defending our civilization,” it is “incumbent on [teachers and scholars]” “to make sure US history and the heritage of Western Civilization is fairly transmitted on … [the] campuses” (qtd. in Knowlton).

In view of the “close ranks” climate prevailing in America and the call to arms against an “axis of evil,” perhaps the professor rejected the Pearl Harbor analogy too hastily. For all the differences in character and purpose of the two attacks—and unlike Sputnik, which spurred a national debate—both stimulated emotionally patriotic sentiment, narrowed the scope of permissible public criticism, and put civil liberties under duress. Let’s just hope that there is no Hiroshima at the end of this road.

Notes

1 Yes, the professor was I. Fortunately, student journalists found more articulate people to quote in their September 12 issue.

2 See also Dickson 9–27; Bulkeley 3–7. Indeed, pollster Samuel Lubell was distressed at the initial lack of urgency he detected among ordinary citizens.

3 On the Gaither Committee report, see Snead; Robert Watson, 137–9, 183–7. On the Rockefeller project, see Andrew. On Johnson, see Gaskin; Reedy; Siegel. See also Roman 23–33; McDougall 141–56.

4 Remarks of Senator Henry Jackson, June 28, July 1, 1960; see also Kaufman 103–5.


7 See, e.g., Appadurai, *Modernity; Globalization*; and Spivak.

8 See also Price 126.

9 On the recurrent theme of threats to masculine identity, see, e.g., Testi; Cuordileone. See also Sebald.

10 All remarks July 1, 1960.

11 See Eisenhower; Jeffries; Andrew “Cracks”; Jessup et al., *National Purpose; “Life”; Rockefeller Brothers*.

12 For a more recent bout of national soul-searching, see Raucher. On the Carter initiative, see Zieger, “Quest.” The theme of the “American Jeremiad” is discussed in Zieger, “Quest” 29, 45–56.

13 On the NDEA, see Divine 161–6; Clowse 151–61. On the post-Sputnik era in civil rights, see Dudziak 145, 209–14.

14 See Zieger, “Quest” 35–9; Jeffries.

Works Cited


—. “We Must Climb to the Hilltop.” Life 22 August 1960: 70+.


graph. Advertising Council [Board?] Minutes, Box 7, Advertising Council 
Archives, U of Illinois Library, Urbana.

—. Letter to Henry Wriston. 14 June 1960. Papers of the American Assembly, 

—. Report to the board of the Advertising Council . . . April 21, 1966. Rep- 
plier Papers, Box 1 (comments on Communism). Advertising Council 
Archives. U of Illinois Library, Urbana.

—. Undated document accompanying Repplier report. Minutes of board of 
directors meeting, 20 Sept. 1962. Advertising Council Minutes, Box 7, 
Advertising Council Archives, U of Illinois Library, Urbana.

29.


Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Prospect for America: The Rockefeller Panel Reports. 


Sebald, Hans. Momism: The Silent Disease of America. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 
1976.

Sherry, Michael S. In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s. New 

Siegel, Gerald W. Interview with T.H. Baker. 26 May 1969. 39–41. Lyndon B. 
Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX.

Snead, David L. The Gaither Committee, Eisenhower and the Cold War. Colum-

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a His-

Testi, Arnaldo. “The Gender of Reform Politics: Theodore Roosevelt and the 

United States. Cong. Senate. Committee on Government Operations Sub-
committee on National Policy Machinery. Hearings. 86th Cong., 2d Sess. 

—. Cong. Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (His-

—. Cong. Senate. Committee on Government Operations Permanent Sub-
committee on Investigations. “Work Stoppage at Missile Bases.” Hearings, 

