

The Contours of America's Cold War. By Matthew Farish. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. xxviii, 351 pp. Cloth, \$75.00, ISBN 978-0-8166-4842-9. Paper, \$25.00, ISBN 978-0-8166-4843-6.)

Matthew Farish's valuable study focuses on the transformation of American geographical thinking, broadly defined, during World War II and the early Cold War. Specifically, it traces how Americans, from policy makers to scholars to the general public, came to understand spatial categories—global, regional, continental, and urban—in strategic terms during the 1940s and 1950s. The book is more a work in cultural studies than a conventional history of American geography, and it contains the strengths and limitations that such an approach entails.

According to Farish the strategic transformation of geographical understanding started with the ascendancy of air power during World War II. As bombers became a key technology for fighting the global war, American geographers and a new crop of strategic analysts—including influential journalists—began to conceive of and publicize a new way of looking at traditional spatial concepts such as the globe with their military meanings highlighted.

This militarization of geography easily carried over into the Cold War as a potential nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union magnified the strategic dimension of geographical thinking. The advent of nuclear weapon-tipped missiles created a new appreciation of outer space as a vital strategic arena, and scientists became prominent geopolitical players. The American continent was no longer a static geographical area but was also a dynamic part of national (and international) defense strategy, prompting projects such as the construction of the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line that stretched from northern Alaska to Greenland and beyond.

In one of the most interesting chapters, Farish shows how the Cold War fostered area studies programs on university campuses to connect international studies with national security, thus having a far-reaching impact on American social scientific research. Cities came under the purview of strategic studies as they became targets of possible nuclear attacks. Calling it “anxious urbanism,” Farish explores how this new understanding of the urban space darkened the psyches of its inhabitants, reflected in and reinforced by academic studies, government propaganda, media reports, novels, and other forms of popular culture (p. 193).

Thus the book is wide-ranging and informative, but it is sometimes frustrating to read it as a historical work. Its structure is highly episodic and rarely follows through on any thread amid the many people, institutions, and programs it discusses. The lack of narrative cohesion is also heightened by the fact that earlier versions of most chapters were first published as journal articles and that the language is dense and laden with quotes from others.

Despite these largely disciplinary quibbles, the book should be of interest to a range of American historians concerned with the Cold War, science and technology, and popular culture.

They will appreciate its spirited and insightful commentaries on the militarization of geographical thinking and other aspects of American society and culture during the early Cold War.

Zuoyue Wang
*California State Polytechnic University
Pomona, California*

doi:10.1093/jahist/jar552

