

# Triumphalism, anxiety and nostalgia: new world order and the end of the Cold War

## *Triunfalismos, ansiedades e nostalgias: nova ordem mundial e o fim da Guerra Fria*

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Penny M. Von Eschen, author of *Paradoxes of nostalgia. Cold war triumphalism and global disorder since 1989* (Duke University Press, 2022), is currently *William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of American Studies* at the University of Virginia (Charlottesville, Virginia, USA) and *Professor of History* at the same university. She has previously published *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Harvard University Press 2004) and *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Cornell University Press 1997).

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) in 1991, but also the policies of fostering nationalism, conducted unilaterally by the USA, along with militaristic strategies implemented by the U.S. together with the NATO, among other phenomena, eventually led to the announcement of the end of the Cold War, under the aegis of Mikhail Gorbachev (1931-2022) and George H.W. Bush (1924-2018). *Paradoxes of nostalgia. Cold war triumphalism and global disorder since 1989* (Duke University Press, 2022) recounts the successive geopolitical transformations that took place after the dissolution of the

Eastern Bloc, in the context of perestroika and glasnost, internal movements of restructuring of the Soviet economy and politics, which generated, in Western thinking in general and in US geostrategic thinking in particular, a generalised idea of triumphalism in the face of a new world order.<sup>1</sup> The idea also spread that one bloc had achieved victory and that the other bloc would face defeat and humiliation, in a binary vision that sought to ignore the tensions resulting from a multipolar and dynamic reality, giving rise to successive post-Cold War wars, particularly in Angola and Mozambique, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf, but also in Georgia and Ukraine. Moreover, some ten years after the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, the attack on the twin towers in New York on 11 September 2001 was one of the terrible consequences of ignoring the complexities of this highly militarised multipolar reality, which produced tensions with a global impact, including on US territory.

On the other hand, Penny M. Von Eschen demonstrates, through multiple examples, the simultaneous emergence of a growing sense of nostalgia, evident in both blocs, not forgetting the bloc of non-aligned countries, in the face of the void left by defeated communism. These phenomena of nostalgia were fuelled by the promotion of the concepts of the *end of history*<sup>2</sup> and the *clash of civilisations*<sup>3</sup> and the attempt to assert a self-proclaimed hegemonic superpower by the US, and supported by the solitary victory of a neoliberalism based on extensive privatisation and freed from regulation, which no longer considered the quality of life of the masses as a central value of public policy. The vision of Mikhail Gorbachev, Václav Havel (1936-2011) and Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) of a new world order based on demilitarisation and multilateral cooperation was devalued and doomed to failure.

*Paradoxes of nostalgia* is divided into seven chapters, with an introduction and an epilogue. At the end of the book, there is a wide range of notes, an extensive bibliography and an onomastic index, which contribute to an in-depth reading of the topics covered. The research presented in this book on the multiple narratives surrounding the Cold War draws on political, diplomatic and cultural history, but also on the often contradictory narratives present in the public sphere, from politics, economics, journalism and *popular culture*.

In Chapter 1, “The ends of history” (pp. 21-55), the triumphal visits to Washington of Lech Walesa (b.1943) in November 1989, Václav Havel in February 1990, and Nelson Mandela in June 1990 serve as a backdrop to the difficulties and contradictions the US faced in demonstrating that it was on the right side of history while at the same time enunciating and controlling the narrative of Cold War victors. At the same time, the U.S. was internally debating the appropriateness of maintaining heavy military investments and an extensive intelligence and information community, while seeking to consolidate its political, military and economic hegemony without contemplation.

In chapter 2, “Out of order. Discordant triumphalism and the ‘clash of civilisations.’” (pp. 56-91), the actions of the United States under the administrations of George H.W. Bush (1924-

1. Joseph S. Nye, Jr. “What new world order?” *Foreign Affairs*, 71,2, Spring 1992, 83-96.

2. Francis Fukuyama. “The end of history?” *The National Interest*, 16, Summer 1989, 3-18; Francis Fukuyama. *The end of history and the last man*. New York: Free Press, 1992.

3. Bernard Lewis. “The roots of muslim rage.” *The Atlantic*, September 1990. [<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1990/09/the-roots-of-muslim-rage/304643/>] (accessed 23 August 2022). Samuel P. Huntington. “The clash of civilisations?” *Foreign Affairs*, 72,3, Summer 1993, 22-49; Samuel P. Huntington. *The clash of civilisations and the remaking of world order*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

2018), 41st President of the United States (1989-1993), and Bill Clinton (b.1946), 42nd President of the United States (1993-2001), are analysed.), 42nd US President (1993-2001), in various conflicts and crises: the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the invasion of Panama (1989-1990), the Gulf war (1990-1991), the fall of the *apartheid* regime in South Africa (1991), the Bosnian war (1992-1995), the Somali war (1993-1994), the genocide in Rwanda (1994) and the Kosovo war (1998-1999). In the late 1990s, the U.S. maintained its triumphalist discourse as the victor of the Cold War, but on the ground, this narrative was confronted with severe limitations on the ground and revealed an inability to understand the multiple cultural, political and economic tensions of a rapidly changing world.

As narrated in chapter 3, “Losing the good life. Post-Cold War malaise and the enemy within.” (pp. 92-130), the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the disappearance of an external enemy, facts recognised equally by Republicans and Democrats, will trigger in the U.S. the search for an internal enemy that would channel the multiple frustrations of a society that, by abandoning long-standing cultural and political consensuses, was beginning to question the values and norms of its democratic system as well as its institutions.

Throughout chapter 4, “‘God I missed the Cold War.’ Busted containers and popular nostalgia, 1993-1999.” (pp. 131-173), Von Eschen describes and analyses the cultural, political, social and economic transformations that took place in American society throughout the 1990s. The affirmation and internal consolidation of neoconservatism and the end of the bipartisan consensus on liberalism coexisted with narratives that pointed to the potential decontrol of the former U.S.S.R.’s nuclear arsenal and the emergence of new outbreaks of external violence, notably in Bosnia, Somalia and Rwanda, but also of internal violence, such as the 1992 Los Angeles riots. These circumstances called into question the hegemonic assertion of the US and fuelled the production of narratives that reinforced feelings of nostalgia for the Cold War and the old communist interlocutor. Cinema, video games, comics and fiction literature, among others, as vehicles of *popular culture*, facilitated the definition and crystallisation of successive narratives that fed on the triumphalism, anxieties and nostalgia that emerged in American culture during that decade.

Also in the territories of the former Eastern Bloc, or in countries seriously affected by Cold War tensions, such as South Korea, signs of a cult of critical, mythical or ambivalent nostalgia for the former regimes emerged, a cult associated with cultural and marketing operations, which oscillated between cultural contestation, the preservation of memories and *memorabilia*, the triumphal and vengeful narrative, and the exploitation of kitsch for a global market (p.176). Chapter 5, ‘Consuming nostalgia. Lampooning Lenin, marketing Mao, and the global turn to the right.’ (pp. 174-217), reports on the reconstruction of this past, concretised in museums and tourist attractions in Vilnius, Budapest, Prague and Berlin. Finally, the author returns to the USA, seeking to reflect on the internal consequences of these global dynamics.

Chapter 6, “Patriot acts. Staging the war on terror from the spy museum to Bishkek.” (pp. 218-258), is devoted to the period following the attacks on New York on 11 September 2001. The new “Global War on Terrorism” was legitimised by the US through the USA Patriot Act (2001) and later the USA Freedom Act (2015). All these circumstances reactivated in the American public a strong sense of unity in the face of an external enemy, immediately generating a global cultural war, largely mobilised by *popular culture* mechanisms, in close collaboration with US government agencies. Chapter 6 describes a range of content produced by the culture industry,

not only in the US but also in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Chapter 7, “Spies R Us. Paradoxes of US-relations.” (pp. 259-297), examines US-Russia relations today, analysing the paradox of rising tensions between the two countries, to the point where many analysts refer to a new Cold War, along with the closer relations between Vladimir Putin’s Russia (b.1952) and several US organisations, including the US National Rifle Association and the National Organization for Marriage (p. 260). Russia’s influence in the 2016 election process, which culminated in the election of the 45th US president, Donald J. Trump (b.1946), was a sign of the persistent rapprochement of far-right organisations in both countries, with authoritarian, nationalist and *Christian right* leanings, simultaneously anti-communist and anti-democratic. In this context, the expansion of the U.S.-led NATO and the invasions of Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2022) by Russia are both cause and effect of this paradox of a “new” Cold War, which popular culture had long ago detected and transformed into video games such as *Call of Duty* (2003) and *Modern Warfare* (2019) or television series such as *The Americans* (2013).

Russia’s current war on Ukraine, with the declared support of the NATO countries for the invaded country, is not an alternative reality, the product of *popular culture* or organised disinformation. It is a real war, raw and cruel as all wars are, revealing the imbalances and political tensions of a changing world order, but also the limits and impasses of diplomacy and the military power of the two great nuclear powers. Donald Trump’s support for the invasion of Ukraine by Putin’s Russia, confirmed by many prominent members of the Republican Party (p. 297), reveals once again that the future of democracies in general, and of US democracy in particular, will always be a complex and ever-changing process for which all citizens must feel responsible. Ignoring external and internal nationalisms, devaluing racisms and praising authoritarianisms are strong warning signs of the current degradation of the values, norms and institutions that preserve democracies.

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