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# Through a Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America's Image Abroad, by Martha Bayles

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one of the greatest war photographers of all time. His relationship with the similarly gifted and prominent photographer Gerda Taro (Gerta Pohorylle) forms much of the central narrative of the book. Finally, American novelists, journalists, and war correspondents Ernest Hemingway and Martha Gellhorn are the third couple, rounding out the book's six main characters.

*Hotel Florida* is much more than just an account of the Spanish Civil War—or the story of the six main characters during those years. It is as much a story about the nature of truth and reality in wartime as it is a gripping narrative of the seminal conflict of the interwar years in Europe. Vaill's characters become who they are through their interaction with the war, and they create themselves—and the meaning of their own lives—as much as they create accounts of the war's events, whether through the written word or the photograph. Their stories and pictures are in many cases used for propaganda purposes, and the characters know this. However, the fine line between truth and propaganda largely disappears, if it is ever distinguishable in the first place. With the exception of Barea and Kulcsar, the characters want to be close to the fighting, to see the troops and the refugees and the destruction caused by the war, so that they can capture its meaning and portray the tragedy to the world, which does not seem to understand the importance of defeating fascism. A host of minor characters appear, many of whom are fighters in the various International Brigades (to include the famous Abraham Lincoln Battalion of American volunteers). These characters might as well have walked right out of a Hemingway novel—tough whiskey drinkers hunting fascists and eating trout and vegetables

cooked over a fire. In fact *Hotel Florida* itself reads like a novel, and it is no irony that the book concludes with the first sentence of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* as Hemingway begins to type the first page, transferring his Spanish experience into his greatest literary work.

This book offers something for not only the student of European history, military history, or literature. It is a first-rate account of the political and military events of the Spanish Civil War. It is also a deeply philosophical examination of the relationship among war, truth, and propaganda. It asks hard questions that are immediately relevant today even as the media landscape has changed dramatically; the fundamentals of human nature have remained such that any of the main characters of this book could sympathize with reporters, photographers, and journalists today. I highly recommend this brilliant book to scholars and general readers alike.

JEFFREY M. SHAW



Bayles, Martha. *Through a Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America's Image Abroad*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2014. 336pp. \$30

This is a wonderful, wonderful book. It is very much more than even its title and subtitle suggest. And it's a great read even though it deals with subjects and policy debates about which most of us would rather not think because they're either upsetting, or too complicated, or both.

The first half of the book is devoted to the image of America that our low (and getting lower all the time) popular culture projects worldwide. When

I embarked on reading it, I was intimidated by how much of our popular culture Martha Bayles proposed to cover in detail by focusing on (seemingly) so many individual products. I felt I already knew how vulgar and vile the movies and television shows we export are. When the author started in on *Sex in the City*, I thought, “Well, better her than me at least: somebody needs to know about this particular offense, but not me.”

Then, I discovered that Bayles very cleverly combined her assessment of how that television program gives a debased view of America with the reactions of interviewees abroad. Every example (and there is a myriad of them in chapters “The American Way of Sex,” “Empire of Special Effects,” “Television by the People, for the People?,” and “From Pop Idol to Vox Populi”) proceeds in this way. While she means us to look at and understand the attraction of and “push back” against American pop culture from place to place abroad, she provides excellent analyses of the indigenous pop culture and non-American influences. This takes one into society and politics as much as culture, religion, taste, and inevitable interesting peculiarities. The outcome is a nearly complete global vision of popular culture that I don’t believe can be found anywhere else. Of course, Bayles means to show the guiding influence of American pop culture.

In dealing with popular culture, Bayles is slyly operating in the way in which she will eventually commend that public (or culture) diplomats proceed. She holds that public diplomacy is made up of four activities: listening, advocacy, culture and exchange, and news reporting. These ought to be discrete from one another but given equal importance. Accordingly, a cultural officer ought to

be able to tell foreigners how Americans really regard *Sex in the City* (no one takes the show as real or expressive of his or her attitude toward life); be able to explain how certain things fit (or don’t fit) into the real American ethos (this is the advocacy part); know enough about the local culture to understand the “push back” that should always be sought; and, finally, tell the truth.

In addition to the foregoing, this book does several other things, and all of them excellently. Bayles is well versed in American political thought and history—enough to produce a fine essay on the American ethos that combines the historical, political, and cultural into what is really American. Again, this is an example of what every U.S. public diplomat should know and what those abroad might learn if public diplomacy were properly practiced.

The book is also a thorough history of U.S. public diplomacy, from the first master, Benjamin Franklin, through the shutting down of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) in 1999, to the present. While she believes the abolition of the USIA was a mistake, the book does not advocate its revival. This is because Bayles is clearly more concerned with the content of government-provided information about America since the early 1950s (which is a distressing history) than she is about the institutions.

On top of it all, Bayles treats most related subjects—for example, the experiment in “strategic communications” as a kind of public diplomacy inflicted on the Department of Defense after 9/11 (and terminated by Admiral Michael Mullen, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in 2011); the history of the tight relationship between Hollywood and Washington that secured

the worldwide domination of American pop culture, while allowing its content to sink lower and lower; the troubled career of U.S. international broadcast; and the Internet and social media.

And yes, she deals also with the problem of U.S. promotion of democracy abroad. To quote from the last sentences of the book: “The premise of this book has been that a significant number, perhaps even a preponderance, of today’s tiny battles are being fought not in the news media but in the mundane realm of popular culture. The wisdom of America is clear and straightforward: political liberty can be sustained only by self-governing individuals and prudently designed institutions. Yet when our fellow human beings look at America through the screen of our entertainment, what they see most darkly is a rejection of tradition, religion, family and every kind of institutional restraint, in favor of unseemly egotism and libertinism. Attracted and repulsed by this image, they might be forgiven for not appreciating the part about self-governance.”

KENNETH D. M. JENSEN



Sander, Robert D. *Invasion of Laos, 1971: Lam Son 719*. Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2014. 304pp. \$29.95

“The only chance we have is to initiate bold moves against the enemy,” national security adviser Henry Kissinger confided in 1971. This was his advice to the administration of President Nixon, which sought to end the Vietnam War by creating “peace with honor.” “Bold moves” would include two new strategies. One was resumed bombing of North Vietnam. The second would

be new ground raids into Cambodia and Laos to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail—the network that allowed Hanoi to supply communist forces in the south, and that at its peak even included an oil pipeline from the Chinese border to the environs of Saigon. The raid into Laos, code-named LAM SON 719, is the subject of Robert Sander’s recent book *Invasion of Laos, 1971*.

Despite the term “invasion” in the book’s title, LAM SON 719 was designed as a cross-border raid on the town of Tchepone. It was here communist military supplies were shifted from trucks to porters, bicycles, and pack animals. The town had received attention from American military planners as early as the Kennedy administration. Sander quotes General Westmoreland explaining to General Abrams in March 1968, “I’d like to go to Tchepone, but I haven’t got the tickets.” Westmoreland’s plans called for at least four divisions to undertake the assault. For its part, the government of Saigon had been planning an operation into Laos from at least 1965. In reality, as Sander notes, the United States had been conducting CIA and covert air operations in Laos since the 1950s.

President Nixon’s policies of détente and outreach to China meant a reduction of the chance that expanding the war into “neutral” Laos would trigger Soviet or Chinese response.

Congressional restrictions designed to limit the war meant that American involvement in the 1971 operation would be confined to supporting roles in artillery and fire support. Yet, as Sander points out, this was still a bloody battle for the Americans. American casualties ran high, with over two hundred killed and at least 1,100 injured. Sander, who was a pilot during the battle, observes