Shaped by the '70s

by Kenneth J. Heineman in the October 17, 2006 issue

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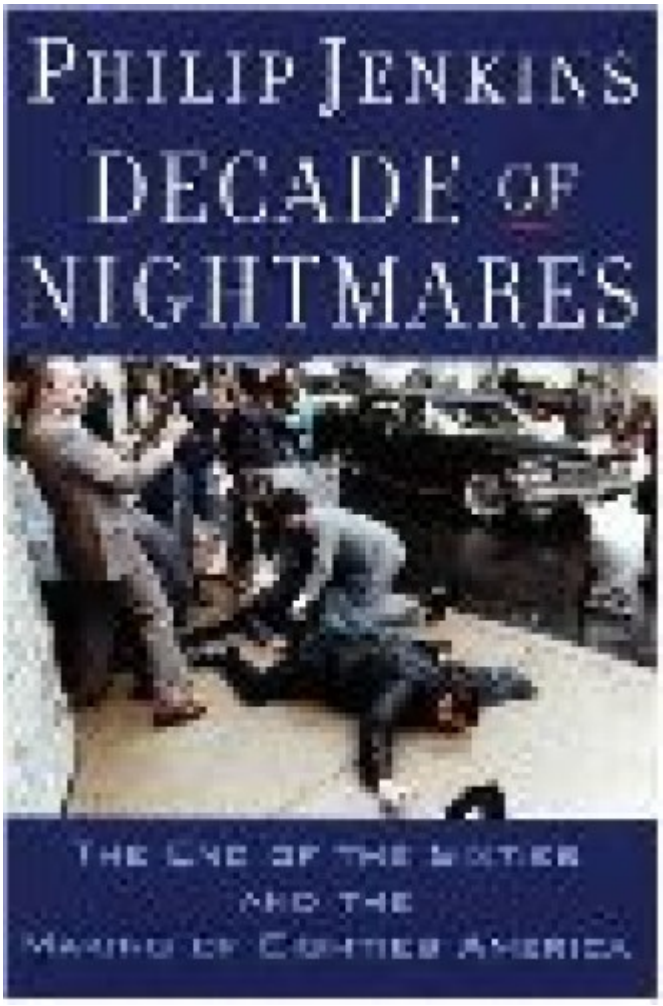

Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America

Philip Jenkins
Oxford University Press

Only in retrospect do most people come to believe that they have lived through a historic moment. In my case that moment came during my high school senior trip in the spring of 1980. For the bus ride from Michigan to Washington, D.C., our class burnouts had made a plate of hashish brownies, which they proceeded to devour—and then spent the night regurgitating in the aisles. We arrived in D.C. to the news that Secretary of State Cyrus Vance had resigned in protest of President Jimmy Carter's operation to rescue American hostages in Tehran, an attempt that proved unsuccessful. Of more immediate concern to us was that the fact that with rocketing inflation, it was next to impossible to find affordable meals. Back home, Michigan was unable to compete with Japanese industry and was in the midst of losing 250,000 high-paying, unionized automotive jobs. My largely blue-collar graduating class would be the first since the Great Depression not to line up for work outside the Oldsmobile plant in Lansing.

Looking back on teenage drug abuse, the Iranian hostage crisis and America's wrenching industrial dislocation, the 1970s do appear as a decade of nightmares, as historian Philip Jenkins writes. At the same time, Jenkins reminds readers, the 1970s witnessed some positive developments. There were greater career choices for college-educated women, and Hollywood experienced a burst of creativity that has not been matched since, with *The Godfather II* (1974), *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Breaking Away* (1979).

Drawing on films, novels and television shows, as well as political journals, newspapers, and memoirs, Jenkins joins the ranks of academics and pundits who have sought to make sense of the U.S. in the aftermath of the divisive Vietnam War. His particular focus is the "nightmare decade" from 1975 to 1985.

Politically, Jenkins's disturbing decade begins with assassination attempts against President Gerald Ford by Charlie Manson cultists and ends with the reelection of Ronald Reagan—the first conservative president since Herbert Hoover. (Conservatives do not consider Richard Nixon one of their own.) For those with a popular-culture bent, Jenkins brackets the era with the films *Soylent Green* (1973) and *Rambo II* (1985). In *Soylent Green* the rich literally eat the poor—marking this film as the ideological and gastronomical heir to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906). Twelve years later, newly empowered conservative politicians allowed John Rambo to refight and—this time—win the Vietnam War. If *Rambo* seems too improbable a creation to be taken seriously, it is worth recalling that in the 1980s Reagan

employed a decorated Vietnam veteran named Oliver North to fight communism in Nicaragua.

One of Jenkins's key arguments is that "the triumph of social liberalism in the mid-1970s contained the seeds of the later reaction." Historians and sociologists have typically focused on the events of the 1960s to mark the initiation of a conservative backlash, using in their discussions of the decade such evocative titles as "Campus Wars" and "The Politics of Rage." But for all the anger at racial and student unrest in the 1960s, the reorientation of U.S. politics and culture required real and imagined threats that most Americans found more disturbing than the Black Panthers and the Students for a Democratic Society. In the 1970s gay liberation and the mainstreaming of pornography, coupled with Soviet aggression and economic collapse, achieved what the upheavals of the 1960s had failed to: they put Reagan in the White House and turned a poor Penn State graduate student into the millionaire creator of Rambo.

Out of the 1970s backlash, Jenkins contends, a "new society" came into existence. "Whether dealing with drugs or sexuality, foreign policy or military action," he writes, "this new society frames its problems in terms of moral absolutes, of dangerous, evil outsiders who can be identified and combated." And this new society continues to speak the language of moral absolutes at the expense of rational dialogue, Jenkins concludes.

Although there is much to deplore in post-1970s political discourse, a caveat is in order. Is Americans' embrace of a mentality of moral absolutes necessarily a new phenomenon? After all, political scientist Richard Hofstadter diagnosed what he called the "paranoid style in American politics" in 1965. According to Hofstadter, Americans have a tradition of looking for external threats and internal subversion and then placing blame for all of society's problems on the shoulders of those who have deviated from the norm.

So too, historian David Brion Davis analyzed "the fear of conspiracy" in 1971, charting Americans' efforts to root out the evil in their midst from the colonial era to the 1960s. Davis's catalogue of evildoers included British tax collectors, southern slave owners, Roman Catholic immigrants, saloon owners and communists. Does the addition of cultists, drug dealers, feminists, gays and pornographers to this list of the devil's handmaidens represent a historical departure?

As scholars of early America might put the matter, the U.S. inherited from Great Britain not only the principle of constitutional governance, but also a suspicion of established authority that can express itself in flights from reason. The U.S. is also a child of the Protestant Reformation. Although the Reformation ultimately advanced the cause of religious freedom, a number of its progeny sought to root out Roman Catholic “subversion” with the same intensity with which Jenkins’s actors combated sexual license in the early 1980s.

It is true that the 1970s spawned a noteworthy reaction, but I would recommend that readers view the decade in the broader sweep of U.S. history. It is also useful to keep in mind that in spite of the pattern of cultural backlash, paranoid conspiracy theories and moralistic (and sometimes opportunistic) political reformers, upheaval in the U.S. has yet to equal the bloodshed of the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution or China’s Cultural Revolution. Democratic societies’ self-correcting mechanisms kick in before grievances and reaction to perceived internal threats become too extreme.

Jenkins is at his most insightful, as well as his most contrarian, when he is discussing Reagan. If he runs against conventional wisdom in contending that public concerns over pornography, child molestation and violent crime in the late 1970s and early 1980s were exaggerated, he also finds himself in the lonely company of those academics who find some merit in Reagan’s presidency.

Many diplomatic historians hold Reagan responsible for escalating cold-war tensions with the Soviet Union. In their telling, it was reform-minded communist leader Mikhail Gorbachev, with the support of the American and Western European peace movements, who maneuvered Reagan to the negotiating table. Jenkins, in contrast, sees Reagan as the central actor who left Gorbachev little choice but to normalize relations with the West and loosen Moscow’s grip on the Soviet economy and the U.S.S.R.’s satellites.

Jenkins makes his most significant contribution with his discussion of Reagan’s domestic policy. In the 1980s progressives in the media and the academy charged the Reagan White House with being a fundamentalist Protestant clearinghouse for moral crusades against crime, drugs, gay intercourse and pornography. (George W. Bush’s presidency just means that the name of the defendant has changed; the charges remained essentially the same.) Since the mid-1990s a handful of conservatives have echoed their progressive foes by emphasizing Reagan’s

traditionalist domestic-policy credentials.

Jenkins is justifiably skeptical of such arguments. Reagan did generously employ Christian references in his speeches, but so did Franklin Roosevelt, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. And though Reagan condemned abortion and many socially liberal trends during his presidency, he never did anything about them that would have required expending political capital to advance a socially conservative domestic agenda. His priorities were stimulating economic growth and winning the cold war.

Yes, Reagan authorized Attorney General Edwin Meese to head a commission to study pornography. Yes, Reagan addressed pro-life marches on the annual anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. But sometimes establishing a commission to study a problem is the best way to ensure that nothing is ever done to solve it. And rather than address in person the pro-lifers picketing the Supreme Court, he sent them recorded speeches.

Jenkins does not question Reagan’s moral sincerity. He just recognizes that one does not become a successful labor union and political leader, as Reagan did, without being able to convince all sides that they are getting their way. As the great 1970s band Supertramp sang, supplicants “give a little bit” in hopes of receiving love in return. Only later do they realize it was a one-night stand.