

From Submarines to Suburbs: Selling a Better America, 1939–1959. By *Cynthia Lee Henthorn*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006. xv + 368 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$59.95; paper, \$26.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-821-41677-4; paper, 0-821-41678-2.

Reviewed by Lisa Jacobson

This beautifully written and richly illustrated book examines how and why American “consumer engineers”—experts in fields of advertising, design, and public relations—promoted corporate leadership and military spending in the 1940s and 1950s as the chief benefactors of material progress and a higher standard of living (p. 5). Cynthia Lee Henthorn argues that commercial imagery produced during and after World War II sought to rehabilitate the tarnished image of big business following the decade-long Depression and to persuade Americans that industry, rather than the New Deal regulatory state, would lead the way to military victory and postwar prosperity. Consumer engineers, Henthorn shows, presented a seductive but ultimately unrealizable vision of a utopian “world of tomorrow,” characterized by modern comforts and conveniences and optimal hygienic standards.

*From Submarines to Suburbs* explores familiar themes in mid-twentieth-century U.S. history: how business animosity toward the New Deal informed corporate public-relations campaigns; how the American standard of living increasingly became associated with the “American Way”; and how promises of postwar consumer abundance in wartime advertising helped make sacrifices on the home front (i.e., rationing, conservation, and deferred spending) more palatable. Although the terrain she covers is familiar, Henthorn’s analysis of commercial imagery and oft-overlooked industrial designers deepens our understanding of these cultural transformations and the array of business interests that sought to derail the New Deal. Henthorn’s study also yields new insights by exploring such themes in a broader chronological framework than many other war studies. By straddling World War II and the early years of the cold war, Henthorn underscores just how thoroughly commercial narratives of military progress were

enmeshed with commercial narratives of domestic progress. In the process, Henthorn illuminates how “the technological mystique of modern warfare...became an enduring trait of the American Way” (p. 240).

According to Henthorn, business attempted to “wrest the mantle of public savior from the New Deal” by demonstrating that its managerial expertise and technological innovations could solve social and economic ills and win the war (p. 47). Wartime advertising often featured a “consumer-shock” plot, in which the corporation reassured housewives daunted by shortages of consumer goods that the same business ingenuity that had produced technological breakthroughs in wartime would create superior domestic technologies in peacetime (p. 68). Wartime advertising and public-relations campaigns also championed business as the benefactor of a better postwar America—one in which synthetic fibers and plastics would liberate housewives from drudgery and homes from dirt and contagions. Even industrial design, some argued, could play a key role in sustaining economic growth and keeping government intervention at bay. Industrial designer Walter Dorwin Teague, for example, believed that attractive design promoted free enterprise and corporate interests because it reminded Americans of the wonders of consumer choice and made them yearn for more and better goods.

Despite the wartime hype, the postwar world of futuristic home designs and automated kitchens was slow to materialize and capture consumer fancy. Polls indicated that American consumers preferred the traditional kitchens of prewar years to the streamlined aesthetics of modern kitchens. In the wake of wartime disruptions and in the midst of cold-war turmoil, traditional models, it seemed, satisfied nostalgic longings for security and stability. And this was just as well. Owing to the challenges of retooling production for civilian markets, many manufacturers opted to roll out prewar models. Doing so also calmed business fears that production delays would slow economic growth and, in turn, invite more government regulation of the economy.

The much-vaunted “world of tomorrow” failed to deliver on other promises as well. Labor-saving kitchen designs and appliances made routine tasks easier, but elevated standards of cleanliness ultimately deprived housewives of greater leisure. Nor did the postwar order democratize a middle-class standard of living for all Americans, especially African Americans, who remained invisible as consumers in advertising,

despite growing corporate interest in their buying habits. The cold war was partly to blame, Henthorn argues, as military spending diverted resources to defense needs that “*could* have universalized the ‘world of tomorrow’ and elevated all members of American society equally” (pp. 212–13). Cold-war commercial propaganda obscured such contradictions and even sanitized war by persuading many that a perpetual war economy fueled the American standard of living and that innovations in defense technology were also producing revolutionary domestic technologies. The arms race, so conceived, thus fulfilled civilian demands for modern conveniences as well as national security.

Henthorn acknowledges that business and government both associated greater consumer purchasing power with the American Way, but she contends that a deep ideological rift lay beneath their superficial harmony. “By equating democracy and freedom...with a utopian postwar world of unprecedented consumer choices and access to affordable higher standards of living,” Henthorn argues, “the techno-corporate order, with the assistance of industrial designers, was able to ensure that a ‘business-dominated social and economic order’ would prevail over wartime collectivism and New Deal regulations” (p. 141). There is substance to this argument, but the ideological rift is at best implied in many of the advertisements Henthorn analyzes, and such commercial imagery was by no means a fail-safe guarantee that business interests would prevail. The promises of consumer abundance that suffused visual culture in the 1940s and 1950s, one could argue, suggest that the ideal of freedom of consumer choice increasingly diluted the ideal of “Freedom from Want,” with all its connotations of welfare-state liberalism, but did not entirely displace it.

Readers will appreciate the numerous illustrations as well as Henthorn’s deft analysis of advertising copy and imagery. A skillful synthesis that yields new insights, *From Submarines to Suburbs* is a valuable contribution to both business and cultural history.

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Market in the Early Twentieth Century (2004) and is presently working on a history of alcohol promotion and consumption after the repeal of Prohibition.