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**Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*
Basic Books, New York 2008, 302 p.**

Elaine May's *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* provides an expansive look at the relationship between politics and culture in the mid-twentieth century. "Why did postwar Americans turn to marriage and parenthood with such enthusiasm and commitment?" (p. 4). In the process of answering this question, May examines contemporary survey respondents, public policies and popular media, concluding that cold war ideology and the normative values of domesticity in the postwar years fully reinforced one another. In other words, political consensus fueled domestic conformity; in a self-perpetuating turn, this pressure to conform and adopt therapeutic models prompted individuals to adjust themselves to undesirable situations thereby weakening the possibility of social activism and political dissent.

Containment and security are the central metaphors here. Various movers and shakers – from federal officials and the burgeoning class of professional experts to Hollywood and mass-marketed magazines – sought to contain subversive elements in society, whether communism or sexual perversion (defined very broadly to include everything from rape and pedophilia to homosexuality and premarital sex). May also incorporates a very long periodization of the era to illustrate origins, outcomes and long-term trends. In fact, she guides the reader through lengthy sections covering the depression and World War II years and does not arrive at the cold war until the fourth chapter (ninety pages in). May locates the source of cold war notions of domesticity in the 1920s (sometimes even referring to Victorian era conceptions of the home and family) and examines the aftermath as it developed into the 1960s counterculture and the subsequent rise of the New Right in the 1970s and 80s. In the book's latest edition, May even offers a new epilogue on cold war echoes in post-9/11 America, warning that foreign and domestic policy alike in the first decade of the twenty-first century are frighteningly similar to that found among the previous generation.

May also speaks to many of the larger themes in twentieth-century American history. For one, she maintains that ideas of abundance and consumption, promoted in part by cold war propaganda, stimulated the suburban exodus and led to an increase in spending on homes and household items. But perhaps the most significant contribution this book makes to the narrative of U.S. history is its implicit theoretical analysis of the chessboard

model, of the potential for individual agency in light of structural limitations. Throughout May contends the federal government created public policies that reflected and encouraged the dominant ideology; this ideology then fostered and reinforced widespread cultural values and norms. Moreover, although individuals made choices and the outcome “might have been otherwise” (p. 5), institutional and cultural constraints severely limited their alternatives. Put differently, historical prescriptions shaped the meaning of individual experience. According to May, however, the values of these individuals also molded the governing institutions that affected all Americans. Thus complicity existed between parents, the government, professional experts, and the makers of popular culture. The consequent picture *Homeward Bound* therefore depicts is neither top-down teleology nor Howard Zinn-style people’s history but rather an interconnected system of ideas, influences, institutions, and initiatives that is much more complicated and fluid.

May turns often to demographic data, to film and novels, and to professional literature and guidebooks. Yet the greatest resource May has at her disposal is the Kelly Longitudinal Study (KLS), a collection of respondent surveys psychologist E. Lowell Kelly compiled over the course of two decades, from the late 1930s to the mid-1950s. The “data” here are 300 couples, all married and most rearing children in suburban homes. Every few years the couples completed questionnaires and frequently attached extra pages detailing their innermost thoughts on marriage, sex, children, careers, dreams and discontents. This is a veritable gold mine of primary sources.

Nevertheless, this particular asset also becomes one of the book’s few shortcomings. As May points out, all 600 of the KLS individuals were without exception white, middle class parents residing in the northeast. This has larger implications for the thrust of May’s thesis. Put simply, it appears May believes that just as non-whites and working class heroes were excluded from the KLS surveys (not to mention the noticeable absence of single adults and children), so too were they prevented from influencing public policy or the dominant domestic ideology. For this reason May excludes them from her study as well. She therefore concludes that the white middle class established society’s norms, standards, and ideals and in this way posed the standard against which everyone was judged. As a result, these white middle class values were relevant for all Americans at this time, even for those who could not attain this way of life (that is, anyone who was not a middle-class white) or for those who never bought it in the first place (for example, such countercultural groups as the intelligentsia, feminists, Beats, and civil rights activists). Or so the argument goes.

Likewise, another methodological weakness is May’s over-reliance on Hollywood cinema and magazines such as *Life* and *Ladies Home Journal*. Of course, speaking generally, popular culture often reflects and even fosters

cultural norms. But, unfortunately, the author does not provide her readers with any information on the creators of her specific cultural examples (writers, producers, and the like) much less their consumers (besides those elite figures who comprise the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and award Oscars). Rather, she merely claims that Hollywood was an expression of the nation's dominant ideology. Thus one comes away without a real feel for how representative her mass media illustrations are or what effect they had on the values of everyday women and men in the postwar years.

Still, in the final analysis this is an important and persuasive work. Though the elite figures that comprise May's focus here may not have been representative of the country as a whole in the postwar years, their lasting influence on American politics and culture has considerable implications for scholars interested in the connection between society and visions of morality.