

Reading Guide – Domestic Containment and the Nuclear Family

Today we close out unit one, “The Bomb and Atomic Culture,” with a discussion of how the Cold War shaped family life in the US and led to what historian Elaine Tyler May calls “domestic containment.”

Assigned Materials

- Elaine Tyler May, “Cold War, Warm Hearth: Politics and the Family in Postwar America,” in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, Fraser and Gerstle eds. (1989) 153-176.
- Elaine Tyler May, “Explosive Issues: Women, Sex, and the Bomb,” in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, May, ed. (1989) 154-168.
- Lynn Spigel, “Television and the Family Circle,” from *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (1992) 36-72.
- Mrs. Dale Carnegie, “How to Help Your Husband Get Ahead,” [1954] in *Women’s Magazines, 1940-1960: Gender Roles and the Popular Press*, Walker, ed. (1998) 126-136.

Questions to Consider

Elaine Tyler May is one of the foremost scholars of the “cultural cold war.” Her essays, “Cold War, Warm Hearth,” and “Sex, Women, and the Bomb” offer in-depth examinations of the impacts of nuclear age ideology on gender roles and family life in the United States. What, according to May, led so many Americans to pursue domesticity during the postwar years? What was so attractive about the nuclear family as an ideal? Did Americans retreat to the home primarily because of “pull factors” (a conscious desire to do so), or were at least some of them “pushed”? What does May mean by the term “containment”?

Lynn Spigel is a cultural historian of media, technology, and gender. Her work on the history of television has been extremely influential in many fields. How, according to Spigel, did nuclear age ideas about family and domesticity help shape early television (and vice versa)? Was TV as source of unity in the home, or a source of division? What can Spigel’s research tell us, in a general way, about the ever-changing role of technology in American life?

“Mrs. Dale Carnegie” was the wife of the enormously successful self-help book author Dale Carnegie. His book *How to win Friends and Influence People* remains a best seller, and has been so since the late 1930s. Both Mr. and Mrs. Carnegie were key players in the postwar explosion of advice literature written by “experts.” What, according to this 1954 article, makes for a good nuclear-era wife? Put this primary source in conversation with the other readings for the week. In what ways does it confirm or complicate arguments made by May and Spigel? Which pieces of advice from this article strike you as particularly interesting, troubling, or significant?

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