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Cold War University: Madison and the New Left in the Sixties

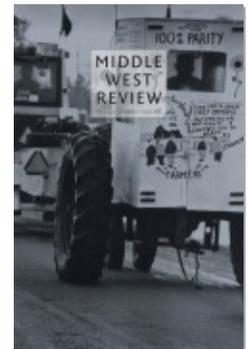
by Matthew Levin (review)

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Middle West Review, Volume 2, Number 1, Fall 2015, pp. 78-80 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mwr.2015.0057>



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Matthew Levin, *Cold War University: Madison and the New Left in the Sixties*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013. 234 pp. \$26.95.

In the 1960s, the term “military-industrial-academic-complex” began to ripple across certain American university campuses. In this fine study, Matthew Levin explores how one institution of higher learning, the politically active University of Wisconsin (UW), was challenged by and responded to the Cold War. More than any of its peers, Levin contends, more than Berkeley, or Michigan, Columbia or Kent State, did Wisconsin capture the democratic reform spirit that characterized the decade. Unlike these sister schools, UW could point to a long history of state inspired progressivism that informed its sharp questioning of the “cultural apparatus” that underlie the newly christened Affluent Society.

Levin has contributed to a thriving area of scholarship that shows no signs of letting up. Studies of Madison, Wisconsin, during its radical heyday have become something of a cottage industry. These include Paul Buhle’s edited work, *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950–1970* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), Tom Bates’s *Rads: The 1970 Bombing of the Army Math Research Center at the University of Wisconsin and Its Aftermath* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), David Maraniss’s *They Marched into Sunlight: War and Peace, Vietnam and America, October 1967* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), and most recently James G. Morgan’s *Into New Territory: American Historians and the Concept of US Imperialism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).

While some repetition of material is inevitable, Levin’s book is particularly adept at distinguishing the thick network of economic, social, and scientific relationships that UW forged with the central government. On the surface this might appear to be nothing new, Progressive era Wisconsin scholars such as Richard Ely and John Commons, after all, had worked hand-in-hand with the state government in Madison to weigh in on such matters as labor law, tax reform, and utility rates. Then-UW President Charles Van Hise embraced this concept of employing the University’s resources to improve the quality of life for all Wisconsinites, whether in agriculture or health care, industry or education. In 1904 he called this mutually beneficial town and gown relationship the “Wisconsin Idea”—a phrase still resonant when thinking about the potential effectiveness of state universities.

As Levin shows, however, the Cold War forged a different type of rela-

tionship between Wisconsin and the “State.” Influenced by the Manhattan Project’s success, the federal government began to fund large-scale scientific activities along the lines of the Atomic Energy Commission (1946) and the National Science Foundation (1950). In this age of increasingly costly—and often secretive—projects, UW was one of many top tier universities to use its laboratories in the name of securing the freedom of the Free World. It became a major government grant-winner, perhaps most conspicuously housing the Army Mathematics Research Center (AMRC) on campus. Designed to be a source of mathematics knowledge and research for the Army, it proved by the late 1960s to be a provocation to many in Madison. In the fight against “Big Science” and somewhat more broadly in response to the welter of issues and ideologies that shook the decade, four radicals bombed Sterling Hall in 1970, the campus building that housed AMRC.

To its critics, “Army Math” symbolized the shifting priorities at the University of Wisconsin and, more generally, American higher education. Levin is quite good at showing how the tremendous growth of UW (from a single campus into a massive “System” encompassing more than two dozen campuses) was to some extent nurtured by the school’s relationship with the federal government. And to put it mildly, many students resented this partnership. Envisioning their college careers as years of exploration and growing intellectual independence, they were disappointed to see that so much of their education offered little more than a Cold War point-of-view. Too often, critical teaching and research took a backseat to redbaiting and keeping the spigot of federal dollars flowing to campus.

As Levin argues, the late 1960s upsurge in activism at UW needs to be understood within a larger frame of reference. From the Wisconsin Idea to the Progressive initiatives of Robert La Follette to the election of Victor Berger, the first socialist congressman in the United States, Wisconsin has demonstrated an admirable capacity to accommodate political dissent and pursue reform agendas. In the 1950s UW housed a chapter of the Labor Youth League (the Communist Party’s youth group); a handful of its graduate students established the radical journal *Studies on the Left*; and the influential “Wisconsin School” of foreign policy thought insisted that America could not be understood without accounting for its imperialist ambitions. In other words, the activism that came to define the university in the 1960s should not be seen as an aberration, but rather as part of a longer and continuous progressive tradition.

One finds in *Cold War University* thoughtful commentary on the major set

pieces that came to distinguish UW at this time—the Dow riots, the Black Strike, and the aforementioned bombing of Sterling Hall. What stands out from other studies on Madison during this period is Levin’s attention to campus conservatism. Right-leaning speakers and publications were part of the UW culture, and attention to this facet offers a useful reminder not to overplay or romanticize the size or impact of the “Movement” in Madison.

If Levin is correct and what transpired at UW in the 1960s was part of a larger crossgenerational progressive tradition then one might well ask: What of that tradition today? Is it still active? Does it still speak to us? It is a claim of *Cold War University* that if we enlarge our reading of the progressive backdrop to include contemporary attitudes on race and gender, environmentalism, and same sex marriage, then we can see plainly their connection to the sixties. On these terms, Levin’s contention that Madison’s legacy is secure as “a center of the political and cultural activism that helped establish this shift . . .” is altogether defensible (14). In any case, the long list of studies devoted to the University of Wisconsin suggests a certain and ongoing relevancy. Perhaps in this small slice of our academic past we seek inspiration to confront more immediate concerns—on our campuses and beyond.

David Brown

ELIZABETHTOWN COLLEGE

Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania

John E. Miller, *Small-Town Dreams: Stories of Midwestern Boys Who Shaped America*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014. 544 pp. \$29.95.

The field of midwestern history is bearing rich fruit these days. And isn’t it exciting. Once at the center of the United States and a good part of American history, the Midwest is reemerging from the bicoastal dominance of recent decades. In 2013 Kai Rissdahl of American Public Radio’s *Marketplace* called Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the “center of the economic universe.” And James Fallows in an *Atlantic* magazine series called “American Futures” identified it both as “one of the most interesting towns in America” and a place that “represents a long-standing part of the essential American bargain.” A 2014 *New York Times* series by Damien Cave and Todd Heisler went from Laredo, Texas, to Duluth, Minnesota—up Interstate 35—to look at immigration in “the middle of America.” Jon Lauck, historian and attorney, has recently published (with the University of Iowa