'The Noir Forties': Those weren't the days

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By Glenn Altschuler /

During the second half of the 1940s, film scholar B. Ruby Rich has written, noir movies "etched a metaphor of light and shadow into the popular psyche; rain-slicked streets, feelings of loss, fear and betrayal, male bonding, femmes fatales, postwar malaise, atomic pressures, Communist threats, melodrama and gangsters, all coalesced under its banner."

In "The Noir Forties," Richard Lingeman, the longtime senior editor of The Nation and author of "Don't You Know There's a War On: The American Homefront, 1941-1945," appropriates this thesis in an examination of the immediate aftermath of World War II in the United States.

Although the joys of homecoming were genuine, the years between the surrender of Japan and the Korean War, he argues, were suffused with anxiety. As the Cold War took hold, demagogic politicians undermined the progressive New Deal values that had helped sustain the United States through depression and war. Torn apart by division and distrust, Hollywood -- and the nation at large -- lost the spirit of idealism, turned away from personal problems and painful situations, and played it safe: it was time of "chances missed, choices made, roads not taken."

To portray the late 1940s as a dark time, in which "paranoia was re-directed against communism while upholding authority," Mr. Lingeman rounds up the usual suspects. Fear of nuclear war and the "rumors, half-truths and official lies" that became known as McCarthyism, he writes, produced "The Great Syllogism," which was endorsed and implemented by politicians in both parties, government bureaucrats, studio executives, school administrators, neighbors, noseybodies, employers and employees: "Communists favor peace. X favors peace. Therefore X is a communist (read: traitor, subversive, liberal, disloyal American etc.," who deserved to be blacklisted). And the invasion of South Korea provided the "crisis" the Truman administration needed (and wanted) to persuade Congress (and American voters) to support vast and permanent increases in "the defense" budget.

Virtually all historians agree that politicians "scared the hell" out of Americans to forge a Cold War consensus. Nonetheless, Mr. Lingeman's characterization of the popular mood of the era as uncertain, disillusioned, and cynical is, at best, one-sided.

The World War II-induced preoccupation with death actually faded quickly. As did the "reconversion jitters" about the likelihood that millions of returning GIs would raise unemployment rates to levels similar to those in the Great Depression. Most Americans, Mr. Lingeman acknowledges, "were in a
mood to move on to prosperity and hope." He has little to say, however, about the millions of men and women who did just that.

Also problematic is Mr. Lingeman's choice of former Vice President Henry Wallace (who served as Truman's Secretary of Commerce until he was fired for criticizing the administration's foreign policy) as the protagonist of his "exercise in alternative history." The Progressive Party candidate for president in 1948, Wallace did, indeed, raise issues ignored by Democrats and Republicans. But it's not at all clear that he "accomplished more than many historians begrudge him" -- and it may well be that in accepting the support of Communists he set back, instead of opening up, a national dialogue on alternatives to the Cold War.

Shortly before he enlisted in the Army in 1953, Mr. Lingeman declared that the Korean War was all "Stalin's fault" -- and fighting for a just world order was the right thing to do. Concluding now that "awareness is all," he is clearly trying with "The Noir Forties" to explain and atone for the "pathetic ignorance" about the causes of and alternatives to war he attributes to himself and his fellow Americans.

Although his history is far from definitive, it does help us understand that time -- and our time.

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