Pray for Peace but Fight Your Insect Enemies: U.S. Postal Messaging and Cold War Propaganda

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Abstract

In this essay, we examine “slogan cancels”—postal messages used to deface or “kill” a stamp—produced and disseminated on U.S. mail during the early Cold War. Slogan cancels, like postage stamps, afford spaces the state, through its postal service, can use to send messages to a mass public. While stamps celebrate national identity, slogans instruct citizens how to behave. In the Cold War, such instructions often concerned impending disasters and the ultimate threat of nuclear annihilation. Since the juxtaposition of slogans and stamps occurs randomly, it is not surprising that among the artifacts emergent from the process—the envelopes arriving in the mail—can be found some in which the slogan’s message is not consonant with, and even contradicts, that of the stamp. Despite the Post Office’s functional efficiency, the artifacts delivered by the system emerge bearing messages that are in some respects random. This mechanically produced randomness is a literal embodiment of the ideological content of the slogans (“Pray for Peace”), which testify to an apparently powerful state’s concerns about its own lack of agency in a dangerous world.

Keywords: agency; Cold War; postal cancelations; propaganda; U.S. postage stamps

Introduction

[Defense attorney]: I’d like to submit the following facts in evidence. It concerns the Post Office Department, an official agency of the United States government. […] The Post Office Department is one of the largest business concerns in the world. Last year, under Robert Hannigan, it did a gross business of one billion, 112 million, 877 thousand, 174 dollars. Your honor, the figures I have just quoted indicate an efficiently run organization. Furthermore, the United States postal laws and regulations make it a criminal offence to willfully misdirect mail or intentionally deliver it to the wrong party. Consequently, the department uses every possible precaution […]. Your honor,
every one of these letters is addressed to Santa Claus. The Post Office has delivered them. Therefore, the Post Office Department, a branch of the federal government, recognizes this man, Kris Kringle, to be the one and only Santa Claus.

[Judge]: Since the United States government declares this man to be Santa Claus, this court will not dispute it. Case dismissed!

—Miracle on 34th Street

Readers of a certain age may remember envelopes arriving in their household mail during the Cold War with the words “Pray for Peace” printed over or alongside the U.S. postage stamp in the upper-right corner (Figure 1).

“Slogan cancels” such as this one were first used at the turn of the twentieth century, taking the postal necessity of defacing a stamp (to prevent it from being reused) as the occasion to disseminate a message. The “Pray for Peace” cancel was authorized by an act of Congress in 1954 and put into circulation in 1956. The United States Postal Slogan Cancel Catalog gives 1967 as its last date of use (Luff 86), but one can find envelopes canceled with the slogan as late as 1990. The catalog error testifies to the difficulty of tracking the dissemination of such cancels through time and space. Even more difficult to track are citizens’ responses to this form of messaging. What did they make of a voice seemingly from nowhere—stamped randomly on some of the items in their incoming mail—instructing them how to behave in the face of perhaps the most salient issue of their time, the threat of nuclear annihilation?

Slogan cancels are only one of the many messages that may appear on a mailed envelope: an address and return address identify a recipient and sender; a postmark indicates the moment and place of mailing, and is usually accompanied by other markings to deface or “kill” the postage.
Pray for Peace but Fight Your Insect Enemies

According to the Machine Cancel Society, a unit of the American Philatelic Society, a machine cancel of the type that produced the slogans discussed in this paper can be defined as follows: a mechanical device for simultaneously postmarking and stamp invalidating, consisting of a geared process which spaces (separates) and moves mail into position to receive an imprint (marking) of revolving dies geared to print a postal marking upon the same location on each piece of mail (Savakis 5).

Stamp; and the stamp itself bears symbols identifying the nation-state of which the postal system is an agent. Most of these messages have been mechanically reproduced: postage stamps are printed by the millions; postmarks are applied by machinery automatically processing the mail; and addresses are often supplied by preprinted labels. No doubt hand-written addresses remain the one personally-produced message on many envelopes, but even these conform to a formula determined in advance by a bureaucratically rationalized system capable of assigning a postal location to every person resident in the nation-state. The envelope that arrives at its destination—the finished object, as it were—thus bears multiple messages that have been added at various stages of its journey and that can be random in their relationships (both spatial and semiotic) to one another.

In 1959, the Post Office estimated that “about one tenth of the stamped mail” bore slogans (Bradley). The default choice to deface the stamp was a block of wavy lines (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Default cancellation, wavy lines without slogan (Handler’s personal collection).

Nonetheless, thousands of slogan cancels were authorized (through a bureaucratic process we describe below) by the U.S. Post Office throughout the twentieth century. Most were used at only one or two post offices to advertise local events held during a brief and specified period. Those we discuss in this paper were backed by national organizations (from charities to government agencies), which had sufficient resources to have their cancels widely disseminated (via distribution of the relevant die hubs to be used in canceling machines) to hundreds and even thousands of local post offices. And yet the central postal authorities never had much control over whether local offices actually installed the die hubs for the slogans or, if they used them, whether they did so according to the approved timetables.

In this article, we focus on “Pray for Peace” and a few other Cold War examples to examine state messaging and control—especially efforts to make legible the ability of the state to protect its citizens in the face of disasters—at a time when such messaging was unusually fraught.
To tell citizens to pray for peace would seem to be both an assertion of power and an admission of powerlessness on the part of the federal government: the postal voice presupposes the authority of the government to tell citizens what to do, but simultaneously announces its inability to guarantee their safety. Similarly, that voice hails the agency of the citizenry (there is something they can do to effect the desired outcome) and their lack of agency (only God can help them). Such contradictory statements about control were typical of much Cold War propaganda, but our concern in this paper is not simply the messages themselves, but the messages in relation to their production by the people, machines, and routines of the postal system, which is a good example of what Jane Bennett calls an assemblage, with its “distributive and composite […] agency” in which control eludes any single actor (446). The products of such an assemblage, in the form of envelopes bearing randomly juxtaposed messages, make materially manifest the problem of control that the slogans announce in print.

Slogan Cancels as Propaganda

In our analysis, we draw on the increasingly vibrant field of Propaganda Studies to understand how the U.S. government, through its post office and the private entities that petitioned that agency to promote their causes, crafted messages it could not entirely control. Especially useful has been Saunders’s 1999 monograph The Cultural Cold War, which tracked the proliferation of CIA-front organizations engaging in “soft diplomacy” to combat the rise of Communism by promoting highbrow U.S. culture. Others have confirmed the scale of such programs across U.S. government intelligence and policing agencies and their often-bumbling nature and unforeseen consequences. For one thing, these programs were not necessarily coordinated: the CIA and FBI under J. Edgar Hoover’s leadership frequently butted heads and worked at cross purposes, to name one particularly famous example. Moreover, the government’s Cold War cultural programing generated pushback from some artists and writers. For instance, in his study of the FBI and mid-twentieth-century Black literature, Robert Maxwell (2015) registered Black artists’ knowing and often arch responses to government propaganda, bullying, and surveillance, such as when novelists incorporated FBI rhetoric into their detective-style fiction or when Richard Wright titled a poem “The F. B. Eye Blues.” Indeed, Maxwell contended that Black writers influenced the FBI as much as the agency shaped the trajectories of Black publishing and promotion, a tactic that turned the tables on state surveillance and mass messaging and called into question the state’s power and reach (see also Barnhisel; Monson; and Von Eschen).

Beyond such unforeseen consequences is a more general contradiction, one emphasized by Giles Scott-Smith (i-ii). U.S. Cold Warriors wanted to demonstrate that democracies offered a more fertile field for
Discussions of postal messaging in stamps and slogan cancels similarly ran into the problem of how to influence national ideas while remaining true to democratic aims. Though philatelists, politicians, and pundits viewed postal messaging as important to portraying U.S. culture in a positive light for domestic and international audiences, they also fretted about how to promote such ideals without descending to tactics seen as characteristic of Communist and other authoritarian governments (“Hungarian Reds Protest”; Modaressi). We track tensions such as these in the sometimes contradictory and incoherent messages the Post Office produced in pursuit of the government’s Cold War aims. Students of the propagandistic uses of stamps have noted that because governments have “complete control over stamp design,” they can use stamps “to send any kind of message” they want (Elliott 59). Our analysis of the complex processes and spheres of influence that led to the slogan cancels’ production shows that governments have less control over the messages delivered by the postal system than an analysis of the messages on the stamps alone can reveal.

Slogan cancels, like postage stamps, afford spaces the state can use to send messages—propagandistic or otherwise—to a mass public. Both stamps and slogan cancels are didactic, but their modes of didacticism differ: stamps show, whereas slogans command. Stamps bear images meant to symbolize the nation; to do such work, they usually refer to the past. Slogans instruct citizens how to behave, and thus are oriented toward the present and future. Because, as we explain below, the juxtaposition of slogans and stamps occurs randomly, it is not surprising that among the artifacts emergent from the process—the envelopes arriving in the mail—can be found some in which the slogan’s message is not consonant with, and even contradicts, that of the stamp. Despite the agency of the agency (the Post Office’s efficiency, as celebrated in our Hollywood epigraph) and the agency of at least some postal patrons (who choose their stamps and design their envelopes with care) the artifacts delivered by the system emerge bearing messages that are in some respects random. This mechanically produced randomness is a literal embodiment of the ideological content of the slogans, which, as we have suggested and as we will further argue, testifies to an apparently powerful state’s concerns about its own lack of agency in a dangerous world.  

Postal markings thus serve as an example of ‘visuality’ in Nicholas Mirzoeff’s terminology: “both a medium for the transmission and dissemination of authority, and a means for the mediation of those subject to that authority” (xiv). Or, to borrow from W. J. T. Mitchell, examining postal messaging and iconography instructs us in how images can be used both to order a world and to create a sense of world order. In prior work we have sought to bring together Visual and Material Culture Studies in analyses of U.S. postage stamps commemorating world’s fairs (Handler) and depicting Native Americans (Goldblatt and Handler). In both cases, we posit that postage stamps and their use constitute a sphere of limited control on the part of both the government and postal patrons.
Commemorative Stamps and Slogan Cancels

From the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth, no agency of the federal government has been more routinely involved with the citizenry of the United States than the Post Office (Balogh 218–26). Scholars such as Richard John and David Henkin have given us rich accounts of how the Post Office played a central role in knitting together the United States as a political society and creating new forms of community in what Henkin calls “the postal age.” Throughout this period, the Post Office’s primary function, as conceptualized by its architects and proponents, was to allow citizens to communicate with one another, and their government with them, across continental distances quickly, efficiently, and cheaply.

The envelopes and packages that arrive in people’s mail bear messages on their outside as well as concealed within. The outside messages are primarily functional, to aid in the delivery of the mail. But the surfaces of most envelopes and packages host vacant space available for additional messaging, and, as Dan Rose has suggested, in the object-rich world of industrial consumer culture, blank surfaces tend to fill up with writing and images. From the middle of the nineteenth century, when the adhesive postage stamp was adopted as the device that allowed for the efficient collection of postal fees, stamps have provided a space available for government messaging beyond what is required for mail delivery. Stamps became tiny billboards, dotting the postal landscape by the billions.

Thus, from the moment the United Kingdom issued the world’s first stamp, the famous Penny Black of 1840, stamps bearing nation-state symbolisms have been ubiquitous items of material culture. For most of the nineteenth century, U.S. postage stamps (and those of other nation-states) bore lettering (“US” or “United States”) that named the nation state but, beyond that, depicted almost nothing but the busts of political leaders, founding fathers, and military heroes. This changed with the advent of commemorative stamps at the end of the century. The first U.S. “commemoratives,” as stamp collectors term them, were the Columbian Exposition issue of 1893, released to advertise the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago and to commemorate Columbus’s voyages. In the following decades, many U.S. fairs managed to garner their own commemorative stamps. At the same time, patriotic and ethnic groups began lobbying for stamps to honor their contributions to U.S. history (Brennan 97–128).

When Franklin D. Roosevelt (celebrated to this day among philatelists as a great stamp collector) became president, he expanded the range of commemorative stamp topics to promote the achievements of the federal government during the New Deal (Ganz and Piazza). During the Second World War, U.S. stamps concentrated on war messages, but the decade after the conflict saw more and more commemorative
Stamps on an ever-wider range of topics of interest to citizens, interest groups, and the elected officials who represented them. The Eisenhower administration took advantage of this situation to disseminate its Cold War message on postage stamps. As the postmaster of New York City put it, to combat the “false propaganda” of the Communists, the United States needed its postal messaging “to sell the American way of life” both at home and to “the people of the world” (“Postmaster Goldman”). Thus, for example, the Champions of Liberty stamps (1957-61), which featured foreign leaders considered to be avatars of democracy in countries threatened by Communism, were each released in two denominations, to meet the domestic first-class and international airmail rates. The stamps for domestic use were issued in dull grays, greens, and blues, but the predominant color of the international stamps was gold. The Champions allowed U.S. citizens to address their correspondents abroad with stamps honoring such figures as Ernst Reuter, Lajos Kosuth, José de San Martín, and Mahatma Gandhi.5

This proliferation of commemorative stamps and topics was matched by a proliferation of slogan cancels. An initial typology of twentieth-century U.S. slogans would include those promoting: (1) world’s fairs, industrial expositions, and other conventions; (2) U.S. government bonds; (3) military participation; (4) the use of postal services; (5) national charities; (6) public service campaigns; (7) days or weeks dedicated to a cause or organization; and (8) commemorations and anniversaries. In addition to these types of slogans, which the Post Office made widely available, there have been thousands of local cancels, used to mark a unique event such as the opening of an airfield or the first baseball game of the season.

A quick look at a few widely used slogans (Figure 3) will give a sense of the genre. Many advertise an event simply by announcing it: “World’s Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco 1915.” Others demand action. For example, from the early twentieth century to the present, the Post Office has issued slogans that advertise its services—“Air-Mail Saves Time”—and instruct its clientele how to use them—“Address Your Mail to Street and Number.” Of most interest to us here are those that urge the public to join together in a mass action for a cause, often conceptualized in militaristic terms. Calls to join and to fight are often combined with injunctions to help charitable causes: “Strike Back at Cancer/Give/American Cancer Society” and “Fight TB/Support Your TB Association.” Moreover, joining and fighting are central ideas in those slogans urging citizens to purchase U.S. war or defense bonds or to join one of the armed services.

Decision-making with regard to the issuance of slogan cancels is less public and political than that leading to the issuance of postage stamps. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, interest groups and politicians have lobbied the Post Office to create stamps, while both the popular and philatelic press have regularly reported and commented on new stamp issues. In contrast, slogan cancels emerge from an almost...
invisible (to the public) administrative process, in which organizations promoting events or causes “for some national purpose” or “of general public interest and importance” make written application to the central postal administration (in Washington) and then must wait to “be informed of approval or denial,” as the cryptic language of a 1921 Postal Manual puts it (USPOD 146).

Before saying more about slogan cancels, we need to consider the postal patron procuring stamps. A national postal system makes it possible for any citizen, at any address within the nation-state, to communicate with any and all other fellow citizens (as well as internationally, with

Figure 3. Selection of Slogan cancels: “World’s Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco 1915” (1913); “Air Mail Saves Time” (1937); “Address Your Mail to Street and Number” (1962); “Red Cross Roll Call Join” (1937); “Fight Infantile Paralysis” (1954); “Strike Back at Cancer” (1965); “Fight TB” (1965) (Handler’s personal collection).
the citizens of other polities with modern postal systems). Focusing, for our purposes, on the individual citizen buying stamps to mail letters for personal and business reasons, we see citizens as consumers with choices afforded them by the Post Office. Such choices among stamps available for purchase have existed since the time of the first commemoratives, at first in limited amounts, but in increasing numbers since the Second World War. We might say that over the course of the twentieth century, postal patrons were taught that they were also postal customers who, while they had no choice about the cost of the service they were buying (postage rates being fixed by law), were entitled to some degree of choice regarding the images and messages their stamps bore.

Many mailers, both individual persons and businesses, pay no attention to the imagery of the stamps they use and are content to buy large quantities of the same iconic stamp. Other postal patrons, however, give considerable thought to their choice of stamps. Some attend to the entire envelope as an aesthetic object, treating stamps, address, and return address as interrelated parts of a single design intended to show attentiveness to the addressee and good taste on the part of the sender. Still, the moment of mailing a letter is the moment when their control over the messages that appear on their envelope dissolves, as it becomes fodder for a different communicative game.

**Appealing to Citizens, Appealing to God**

The first years of the Cold War have been marked by many as an important inflection point for the U.S. federal government, particularly in terms of the ascendancy of the security state. But this period also saw the rise of new mass media, particularly television, which proved crucial to the birth of new systems and modes for state messaging that the government relied on for its national and geopolitical aims (Horowitz 1-9). The tension between the agency wielded by the federal government and that wielded by individual citizens was latent in various federal agencies’ instructions to citizens in the early years of the Cold War. As with the opacity of internal postal workings, state processes and even the state’s ability to direct resources to achieve particular outcomes were not divulged in these instructions. Instead, these messages hail citizens as dutiful members of an orderly body politic without providing an explicit justification or logic for their duties. If slogan cancels make literal the mechanics of control (in the deployment of the stamp on the stamp), then Cold War messaging provides the metaphor for this control in its mass-mediated appeals to citizens.

Beginning in the 1950s, the federal government and various departments within it invested in a series of connected warning systems intended to communicate disaster instructions to a geographically vast and demographically diverse population. The effectiveness of the sirens, tones, and instructions depended upon citizens’ ability to recognize
them and internalize disaster precautions, a necessity that led to an aggressive education campaign on the part of the federal and state governments that included radio broadcasts, public service announcements (PSAs), magazine advertisements, and, as we will show, slogan cancels. These various media coached citizens in what to do when threatened by an enemy attack or a natural disaster, casting these threats as dire enough to elicit attention, but also quotidian and manageable if all citizens followed the same instructions.

The most well-known of these warning systems pertained to the threat of nuclear attack and came in two forms with paired instructional aims: first to educate citizens about the threat, and then to instruct that newly indoctrinated population on how to manage the situation and remain safe. TV segments devoted to both of these aims aired on the major networks as part of an effort Guy Oakes and Andrew Grossman have described as a defining feature of the Cold War state: “emotion management” (375). These broadcasts were designed to inculcate a palpable fear of nuclear attack, while convincing viewers of the potential for survival if they abided by state instructions. Moreover, they were rhetorically similar to other forms of disaster preparations also in development during the Cold War, such as tornado warnings and forecasts—the first of which was made in Oklahoma City in 1948. Indeed, Cold War slogan-eering assuring citizens of the state’s ability to protect them against the most extreme crises became strangely homologous to messaging about less apocalyptic threats (Brinson; Casey; Jacobs), flattening the differences among them and in that way depoliticizing the nuclear question.

Similar to PSAs preparing citizens for nuclear attack, 1950s slogan cancels told citizens how to respond to an increasingly violent and chaotic world, as in the case of the 1956 “Pray for Peace” cancel. In one sense such appeals to God go back at least to the Declaration of Independence. But the Cold War moment and the Eisenhower administration’s approach to it gave such appeals renewed significance. The cancel originated with Democratic Representative Louis Rabaut who, two years earlier, had been a central actor in writing legislation to insert the words “under God” into the U.S. “pledge of allegiance” to its national flag. Signing the bill on Flag Day in 1954, President Eisenhower noted in his statement for the occasion that “man everywhere is appalled by the prospect of atomic war” (qtd. in Harrington 10). Facing such a prospect, he averred, revising the pledge would highlight “spiritual weapons” as the “most powerful resource” of a country in which “religious faith” was central to the national “heritage” (qtd. in Harrington 10). A year later, arguing on the House floor for the bill that led to the cancel, Rabaut echoed Eisenhower: “we have tried, without real success, every method known to man to attain peace. Why not turn to God? […] ‘Pray for Peace’ upon our cancellation die will go far in expressing our attitude of dependence upon the Supreme Being and of our striving for a true peace in our time” (qtd. in United States Cong. Rec. 13820). Rabaut’s
bill further enjoined that the cancel be widely distributed and that Post Office funds be used for that purpose—even though postal regulations required the sponsors of slogans to pay for the manufacture and distribution of the die hubs (U.S., Cong. House).

Rabaut’s appeal to religiosity was in keeping with Eisenhower’s appeal to spiritual weapons, a central theme in his administration’s orientation to the Cold War. This outlook had been articulated immediately after World War II by John Foster Dulles, who would become Eisenhower’s secretary of state. Writing at first in the magazine *Life* and then in a 1950 book, *War or Peace*, Dulles depicted Soviet atheism and materialism as the opposite of the founding principles of the United States. Developing a longstanding theme in the conservative Republican critique of Roosevelt’s New Deal, Dulles argued that the success of the United States as a national ideal, and as a model for people everywhere, depended upon its foundational faith in responsible, God-fearing individuals who worked hard to achieve material prosperity. But such prosperity was never merely material, nor was it guaranteed; it resulted from obedience to God’s law. For these reasons, prosperity was not, nor could it ever be, a function of government intervention. The Soviet Union’s atheistic materialism was especially threatening to Dulles because, as he saw it, the wealth produced by the capitalist economy had led people in the United States to abandon their spiritual heritage, the national resource they most needed to combat the seductions of Soviet ideology (Dulles, *War or Peace* 8, 254-55, 257-61).

Thus, it would seem that the “Pray for Peace” slogan spoke not only to U.S. politicians’ anxieties about national security in the nuclear age, but also to their concern for their nation’s spiritual degeneration. The citizenry, increasingly seduced by the material successes of capitalism, needed to be instructed to relearn submission to God’s authority. In Dulles’s view, a free people “under God” will “willingly cooperate” to achieve necessary social works, but “governmental authority” must be “limited” and “government action must stop short of seeming to shift social responsibility from the individual to government” (Dulles, *War or Peace* 260). Too much government intervention violated capitalism’s religion, as it were, undermining individual initiative and throwing obstacles in the way of successful entrepreneurs.

Given such a vision, it is not surprising that in its messaging, the “Pray” cancel takes a contradictory approach to questions of control and agency. It directs its readers in their citizenly duties as the state asserts its control over the body politic, instructing them to take an action. This action makes them doubly submissive: first, to the mandates of the state to pray for a particular outcome and, second, to a postal system that controls the messaging they receive. But if the state (and the Post Office as its representative) seems to direct its population and their daily behaviors, its power is belied by the message of the slogan, which suggests that peace is not the result of human actions, but of divine intervention. War is thus an opaque process, like the inner workings of the post of-
fice. The production of this slogan cancel, then, and its wide accessibility to post offices around the country, appeared to abrogate the federal government’s responsibility to maintain the peace, suggesting it lacked the power to do so. Rather than reassuring the citizenry by claiming to protect them from apocalyptic crises, here, through the slogan cancel, the state mollifies the body politic by portraying itself as without agency.

This suggests a corollary to Oakes and Grossman’s analysis of emotion management: it is not just the citizen who is without power, but the state as well, which becomes a co-conspirator in its inability to effect meaningful change. Ultimately, the “Pray” slogan acknowledges that citizens can take a certain type of action—prayer—yet political actions, such as appealing to representatives, organizing, demonstrating, or declaring war upon the government, are nowhere in sight.

**Fight Your Insect Enemies: God, Science, and Nature**

If “Pray for Peace” encouraged citizens to see war as beyond human control, other slogan cancels instructed citizens to use scientific knowledge to triumph over nature. In 1954, the Post Office released the “Fight Your Insect Enemies” cancel (Figure 4) as part of a centennial celebration of professional entomology in the United States.

At the same time, the Entomological Society of America (ESA) notified the public of the anniversary through radio, television, open houses, pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers (Russell 190). And “in observance of the centennial,” the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) published a bulletin, *Fighting Our Insect Enemies: Achievements of Professional Entomology 1854–1954* (back cover).

According to the USDA bulletin, the government’s employment of entomologists, beginning in 1854, facilitated the development of the field as a professional endeavor. Insects—portrayed as a biblical, and hence age-old, scourge—“have ruined farms and farmers the world over” (6), but modern entomology has made it possible to control them
and minimize “their destructiveness” (5). The government’s marshalling of scientific expertise resulted at first in what the pamphlet calls “natural” techniques, as in a 1900 “swat that fly” campaign that “taught the public that the house fly contaminates food with germs” (8). While such public health methods may not have been much advanced beyond the time when “Southern plantation owners employed small boys to shoo the insects away with large fans” (14), they led to ever more technologically sophisticated tools such as “screens, traps, poisoned baits, and (when they became available) insecticide sprays” (8). By the date of the centennial, entomologists were “applying the techniques of atomic science to the investigation of insects” and using radioactive materials to sterilize them (20-21). With its quotation from the book of Joel about grasshoppers (“called locusts in the Bible”) (2), its depiction of primitive techniques of insect control (with an example from the U.S. South), and its account of the ultimate triumph of modern science, Fighting Our Insect Enemies places its story celebrating science on a Judeo-Christian footing, a rhetorical move that echoes the “Pray for Peace” cancel in its relation to atomic technology.

Like the USDA pamphlet, which describes entomologists moving seamlessly between employment in the public and private spheres, the ESA publicity campaign drew on the cooperation of government and industrial entomologists as they worked to develop both pesticides and chemical weapons. As Edmund Russell recounts, the first chemical weapons used during World War I were derived from early pesticides, and, as he argues, “war and control of nature coevolved” in the twentieth-century United States (2). So important were pesticides to the government’s aims that the state and industry cast public support of domestic chemical manufacturers as patriotic and a way to stay abreast of foreign threats, given that prior to World War I, Germany had the most advanced chemicals program. Domestically, the federal government relied on these businesses to supply materials that guaranteed a home front capable of feeding a civilian and military population. In fact, pesticides were considered so salutary that for a period of time, chlorine gas was prescribed as a cure for the common cold (Russell 2, 36-42, 62-63).

Indeed, health benefits were an important justification for the chemical industry’s expansion. In addition to being touted by chemicals-enthusiasts as a more humane way to wage war and a method to ensure crop yield, pesticides were seen by the U.S. Army as a key method of disease control given typhus’s role in the Allied victory during the First World War. Because typhus is caused by a bacterial infection spread from person to person through fleas and ticks, interventions that kill these insects were seen as an important way to stem the spread of the disease. The armed forces eventually collaborated with other government agencies and private manufacturers to discover a way to kill disease-carrying insects on soldiers’ clothing and skin without harming
those soldiers (Russell 25, 49). In the years between World War I and II, the Chemical Warfare Service continued such experiments to great public fanfare, pitching them as part of a patriotic triumph over nature and a way to protect citizens from disease.

Pesticides and chemical weapons nonetheless had critics. Some civilians and soldiers disputed the notion of chemical warfare as humane: Given gas’s physical properties, non-combatants would necessarily be caught up in the fray. Further, well before Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962, those opposed to the proliferation of toxic chemicals questioned pesticides’ safety: If they could kill insects and unwanted plants such as weeds, what would they do to humans and desirable crops? Such protesters frequently noted that the most effective chemicals tended to kill *everything* they came into extended contact with, regardless of their intended use. Beyond the domestic scene, religious groups spoke out against the use of chemical weapons that killed enemy combatants and civilians alike “as though they were worthless flies” (Russell 188).

As Russell demonstrates, chemical manufacturers believed that advertisements were the key to winning the hearts and minds of the U.S. population and their elected representatives. In their attempts to rebrand themselves as crop protectors, in peacetime and war, federal entomologists engaged in a propaganda campaign that portrayed insects as swarms of “enemies” and suggested that they threatened human survival altogether (Russell 76-78). At the same time, just as entomologists promised to exterminate destructive pests, so too did the language of extermination and vermin come to be associated with enemy soldiers and their host nations. As in many other instances, this portrayal of enemies as “vermin” threatening “annihilation” had a racial component to it: while Mussolini and Hitler were treated as horrifying though individualized threats, Japanese and other non-white groups were associated with insects and other pests in federal discourse and private advertisements (Shinozuka). Further, chemical manufacturers brought the war in Europe home when they suggested that insects like the “Japanese beetle” were “insect saboteurs’ working in aid of the enemy” (Russell 110). In personifying insects as humans and then casting human enemies as insects, these campaigns racialized challenges to the United States and flattened the differences between certain human groups and pests.

Within this context, the pugilistic imagery of the 1954 slogan cancel is hardly surprising. As reported in the philatelic press, when David Hall—chair of the ESA centennial committee, a USDA employee in charge of its agricultural research publications (thus responsible for *Fighting*), and also a philatelist—failed to secure a postage stamp, he promoted the slogan cancellation instead (Newcomer). That cancel, “Fight Your Insect Enemies,” adapts the title of the USDA pamphlet, transforming the gerund “fighting” into a directive, “fight,” thereby giving citizens a task, one connected to the intertwined themes of war and
patriotism that characterized pesticide use. Further, in transforming the collective “our” into “your,” the cancellation makes this fight singular, personal, and domestic, portraying the war against pests as an individual mandate that must be waged on the home front as well as the battlefield. Thus, even as the slogan cancel purportedly celebrates a collective effort in which citizens, aided by the government, triumph over nature, it doubles back on itself and describes the fight as the purview of the solitary citizen. As with the mails, though, each individual citizen fits into the state machinery in the same way, making the distinctions between them illusory and immaterial: we (all receivers of this slogan cancel) have the same insect enemies (in our own backyards).

Released on the eve of the war in Vietnam, just after the end of the Korean War, and only five years after the Communist takeover in China, the “Fight” slogan suggests a domestic front that mirrors the battles of the Cold War. Yet, rather than acknowledging the federal government’s role in the development and deployment of pesticides and other toxic chemicals, the cancel vests citizens with the responsibility for this fight. In doing so, the Post Office suggests that the success of agricultural processes depends upon individual actions, rather than federal programs. Unlike New Deal initiatives birthed out of the Great Depression, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act (1933), Civilian Conservation Corps (1933), Farm Security Administration (1935 and 1937), and Soil Conservation Service (1935), which treated farming as a process regulated and safeguarded by the federal government, the “Fight” cancel elides the distinction between war and peace on the farm or in the home garden and suggests the singular citizen must wage this battle. Indeed, the slogan presupposes war itself, again casting geopolitical strife as inevitable and beyond legislative processes, despite wondrous advances in human technology. If the insect threat has been eliminated, why radioactively tag and track pests, if not out of fear of an incomplete or pyrrhic victory? Nature can be somewhat controlled, but the decision to engage in that battle at all is a foregone inevitability.

Along these lines, the conjunction of religious and scientific worldviews in the pamphlet, as in the “Pray for Peace” cancellation, speaks to a conflicted sense of power rather than a conflict between religious and secular forces. In the literature promoting entomology, these Cold Warriors repeatedly document their control of fabulous scientific capabilities—not just chemicals, but also atomic markings and weapons. Nonetheless, this and other documents suggest that God, not humans, ultimately controls nature. It remains unclear where to draw the line between the possibilities of scientific progress and the limits of human action: at any moment, God can supersede the scientific as the final arbiter of humanity’s fate. While promotional materials at times suggest that technocratic knowledge and its inventions benefit humanity in exponential ways—those benefits will only continue into infinity—at other times, they suggest that real control lies specifically in the spiritual
realm. In other words, can human ingenuity triumph over nature or does such absolute power lie elsewhere?

“Remember Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires”: Smokey the Bear and Infantile Citizenship

“Fight Your Insect Enemies” was not an aberration in equivocating about the locus of control in political and natural processes. In 1948, the Post Office released a slogan cancel reading “Remember Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires” (emphasis in original) (Figure 5).

The cancel appeared in thirty-eight cities and was suggested by the Forest Service following a rash of forest fires that had destroyed millions of acres of forest and killed scores of people (Johl). This slogan came to be associated with the cartoon Smokey the Bear, who himself appeared on a 1984 commemorative stamp. The “Remember” catch phrase replaced an earlier slogan (“Smokey Says—Care Will Prevent 9 out of 10 Forest Fires”) in 1947 and remained in use until 2001.

Figure 5. Cancel “Remember Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires” (1957) (Handler’s personal collection).
The injunction to remember in this cancel returns us to the site of war, in that memorials are frequently devoted to battles in both their monumental and linguistic form (for example, “Remember the Alamo”). That Smokey is dressed as a park ranger—a law enforcement officer—only amplifies the bellicose tone. As a representative of the state and state messaging, Smokey reminds citizens of their duty to prevent forest fires, tacitly threatening them with legal repercussions should they shirk their obligations. And, as with the “Fight” cancel, “Remember” casts forest fires and their prevention—as well as their legal consequences—as the responsibility of individual citizens. Just as the state can single out those who abrogate their social and legal contracts, so too can Smokey direct his reminder and warning towards an undifferentiated mass, prosecutable as individuals. The “only” doubles down on this proposition, portraying each individual citizen as legally culpable, locked in an atomized battle without recourse to aid or support from others.

Despite the cataclysmic events that led to the development of Smokey the Bear as a mascot and his related messaging, the slogan elides the social causes and consequences of forest fires, casting forests not as part of national patrimony (in contradiction to the establishment of national parks via the creation of the National Parks Service in 1916) but as private property that individual citizens must protect. Smokey’s injunction to act individually to protect the public good derives from a longer tradition of U.S. thought that marries individual citizenship to community spirit by enjoining everyone to “do their part,” as in the “coercive volunteerism” of World War I (Capozzola 8). Like the other slogan cancels we have discussed, “Remember” describes citizens as having agency—albeit of a kind limited to their own backyards—while also treating them as children to be entertained and instructed by anthropomorphic characters. Here as elsewhere the federal government becomes a parental figure with the agency to give instructions and protect, but not to determine the conditions that produce risk in the first place. The cancel makes no mention of larger programs that were in use for decades to limit the reach and impact of forest fires, such as strategic development plans, fire resistant materials for housing, and controlled burns in forests.

This context—the collective prevention of catastrophe—returns us to the present day, in the wake of the Camp Fire and other forest fires in California that resulted in the greatest loss of life and destruction of property in the state’s history (Wootson, Jr.). In the early days of the crisis, President Donald J. Trump blamed the Forest Service and other first responders for the fire and its casualties, for instance in a November 10, 2018, tweet: “Billions of dollars are given each year, with so many lives lost, all because of gross mismanagement of the forests. Remedy now, or no more Fed payments!” In this dog whistle meant to curry favor with private logging interests, nothing is said of the decades-long push to deprive the public agency of the resources it would need to prevent and contain forest fires in the first place. Perhaps unwittingly, then,
Trump became the spokesman for Cold War messages about individuality, agency, and war brought to their logical conclusion. In doing so, he also articulated the material consequences of policies that limit the workings of federal agencies and increasingly make individual citizens and private entities responsible for social projects. But Trump was not alone in his acknowledgement of how former policies have produced our current outcomes. A popular internet meme circulating in the wake of the partial government shutdown which began on December 22, 2018, prominently features Smokey the Bear in the midst of a ravaged forest (Figure 6).

This image is framed at the top by his familiar motto (“Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires”) and a more topical addition at the bottom: “No Seriously, I’ve Been Furloughed.” As Trump and the meme show, forest fires and other human-made natural disasters have indeed become inevitable as we live out the manifestation of Cold War ideology and the policies it inaugurated.

**Conclusion: Mechanically Mixed Messages**

In addition to its role as public infrastructure, we can also consider the Post Office to be a mass media system—perhaps the most foundational of all in the history of democratic mass societies, for it made possible the circulation of “news” and, especially, of newspapers. But among the great nineteenth- and twentieth-century mass media—newspaper, radio, television, telegraph, telephone—the post office is unique in this combination of attributes: it circulates messages as physical artifacts, either writings or parcels, sent by individual persons or organizations to other individual persons or organizations, and it does this, unlike its for-profit competitors (such as FedEx and UPS) as a public service.

As it does its work circulating messages, the post office makes use of postage stamps and slogan cancels not only as receipts recording the payment of postal fees, but as spaces in the public landscape which governments can use to celebrate their virtues. We might liken stamps and slogan cancels to the commercial advertisements of broadcast media including newspapers, radio, and television. Like those ads, stamps and slogans attach themselves, parasitically, to other messages, the content of which may have nothing to do with the content of the ads. But unlike broadcast ads, postal ads attach themselves to personalized, mes-
sage-bearing physical artifacts which acquire their secondary messages (stamps and slogans) not at the moment of creation or production but during the delivery process—as postal patrons attach stamps to their mail and the postal processing machinery adds an additional message in the form of a slogan cancel.

Broadcast media convey messages “broadly,” not to specific individuals but to mass audiences. Try as their operators might to make broadcast messages seem personal, they are, structurally, impersonal. Similarly, the ads that accompany broadcast messages target audiences in various ways, but they arrive attached to mass messages, and how to measure their effects is one of the great conundrums of the advertising industry. It is only apparently ironic that the Postmaster General who oversaw the first U.S. commemorative stamps (the Columbians of 1893) and who foresaw their possibilities as an advertising medium was the department store magnate John Wanamaker, to whom is attributed one of the industry’s most cherished maxims: “Half my advertising is wasted. I just don’t know which half” (Compaine and Cunningham). Something of that spirit was captured sixty years later by Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield on June 20, 1956, when he announced the advent of the “Pray for Peace” cancel: “I believe that by repeating this message on millions of letters and other mail matter passing through the cancellation machines, we will reaffirm our faith in prayer to achieve the nation’s most cherished hope—everlasting world peace” (qtd. in “Pray for Peace’ Cancellations” 786). Here Summerfield has faith, as it were, that the mechanical reproduction of millions of messages will hit home, enough of them connecting to the citizenry to prompt them, in turn, to be faithful to God, country, and government.

While the mechanical reproduction of slogan cancels makes possible the mass dissemination of the same message, it simultaneously introduces a random dimension into the semiotic process, as no one controls the pairing of slogan and stamp. On envelopes, slogan cancels and postage stamps interface in various ways. A slogan applied directly on a stamp can render the message of one or both illegible, depending on the positioning of the strike and the colors, ink, and paper of the stamp. When both messages remain legible, they can reinforce or contradict one another. “Pray for Peace” slogans paired with stamps depicting war heroes or weapons (as in Figure 7, with the cancel printed over Molly Pitcher in battle, a B-52 bomber, and Sam Houston posing with his rifle) physically reproduce the central contradiction that Cold War slogans suggest: an all-powerful state which has convinced its agents (like Rep. Rabaut) and its citizens that it is powerless, and which must therefore ask those citizens, and God, to do its work.
This contradiction is heightened given that the figures on these stamps were enjoined to fight by or on behalf of the state and then implicitly chastised by the slogan cancel for having done so.

While the long life of many Cold War slogans suggests that the public either ignored them or at least was not disturbed by them, there is some evidence that postal patrons of the period were aware of the semantic infelicities they could create. For example, the 1960–1961 slogan enjoining patrons to “report obscene mail to your postmaster” (Figure 8) was retired after the Post Office received “some complaints about their appearance on Christmas cards and other personal mail” (“Post Office Acts”).

Figure 7. Cancel “Pray for Peace” (1958, 1964, 1978) (Handler’s personal collection).

Figure 8. Cancel “Report Obscene Mail to your Postmaster” (1960) (Handler’s personal collection).
And after the election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency, the literary critic Paul Fussell (1960) wrote to the New York Times to complain about both the “obscene mail” and “Pray for Peace” cancels, which he termed “pious party line postmarks” of the outgoing administration. Fussell found “the hypocrisy and thus the vulgarity” of the second to be matched by the infantilizing injunction of the first (30L). Both should be done away with, he suggested, recommending that the consequent savings in postal operating expenses be devoted to “improving the appalling designs of our postage stamps” or facilitating “a return to twice-a-day delivery” (30L). Other readers excoriated the obscenity cancel for its assumption that either postal patrons or postal workers could easily identify obscene materials, and the “Pray for Peace” cancel for violating the separation between church and state in government operations (Gettel; Ober).

All such objections—on aesthetic, ideological, legal, or functional grounds—could be expressed only after the fact; there, after all, was the message, stamped on a citizen’s incoming mail. And while U.S. citizens, and especially stamp collectors, have always had the opportunity to complain to the Post Office about its products and services, the mechanical processes of designing, printing, and distributing stamps and die hubs, and the consequent production of a massive stream of message-bearing artifacts, can be at best modestly revised but never stopped. After all, before the rise of the internet, what alternative did citizens have, if they wanted to send and receive mail?

But even public figures with the political and social capital to gain privileged access to the mass media could not control the ways their messages might be paired with advertising messages. Consider Dulles’s 1946 Cold War manifesto in Life. His worries about the spiritual degeneration of the United States brought on by excessive materialism could not have been assuaged by the ads that accompany his text. Looking at the magazine’s table of contents, readers might note that Dulles’s essay occupies fifteen pages. But more than half the space of those pages is filled with ads for soft drinks, watches, clothing, grooming aids, pens, cigarette lighters, pipes, hearing aids, mattresses, and toilet cleaners. While the cartoonish illustrations of most were probably sufficient to alert readers that they were ads, a full-page ad for Squibb pharmaceuticals, illustrated by black-and-white photographs, each with a caption and text illustrating “victories in medical research,” could have been mistaken for a news item (“Thoughts” 121). Indeed, this ad’s presentation of “a dangerous epidemic disease peculiar to Japan,” illustrated by Japanese prisoners of war and captioned “Another Jap Enemy Beaten,” would seem to blend seamlessly with Dulles’s discussion of Cold War enemies (125).

To construct a close reading of the Dulles text is one thing. To treat the presentation of that text in the pages of Life as an artifact conveying both text and advertisements yields different insights. Then we discover the archetypical Cold Warrior, worried almost to death
about the spiritual rot of materialist capitalism, yet forced to rely on and mingle with the very rot his message denounces. There is perhaps no better example of the strange combination of power and powerlessness we have found in other artifacts of the period, envelopes bearing stamps canceled with slogans like “Pray for Peace” and “Fight Your Insect Enemies.”

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