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HEADLINE: Black Cloud In American Dream

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BODY:

**COLD WAR CIVIL RIGHTS:** Race and the Image of American Democracy. By Mary L. Dudziak. Princeton University Press, 330pp, Pounds 19.95. ISBN 0 691 01661 5.

**AMERICAN CRUCIBLE:** Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century. By Gary Gerstle. Princeton University Press, 325pp, Pounds 19.95. ISBN 0 691 04984 X.

The scholarly study of "race" in US politics has been transformed by the quality and quantity of academic research published in the past ten years. Important new themes include: the redundancy of the concept "race" as an essentialist notion and obversely its value only as a sociological and historical construct; the importance of broadening race to include reflection on the position of white Americans and of whiteness as a social force; the significance of federal institutions in the construction and maintenance of segregation and opportunities for reform; the racialised legacy of welfare and housing policy; the historical and contemporary relationship between immigration, race politics and American identity; and the empirical significance of placing civil-rights reform in an international context.

It is on this last topic that Mary Dudziak's meticulously researched and eloquently composed study, *Cold War Civil Rights*, is focused. Since publishing her seminal paper in 1988, "Desegregation as a cold war imperative", Dudziak has been the leading student of external influences on civil-rights reform. The main thesis is straightforward:

"Civil-rights reform was in part a product of the cold war... At a time when the United States hoped to reshape the postwar world in its own image, the international attention given to racial segregation was troublesome and embarrassing." This proposition is investigated in a chronological narrative, from 1945 to 1965, charting the international response to the US's grim domestic race politics.

Europeans pointed in horror to the callous lynching of African-Americans.

Citizens in new African and Asian democracies wondered how the US could act as a democratic model when it denied equality to black Americans (until the mid-1960s) and discriminated against black diplomats in New York City or Washington DC.

Communist countries mercilessly exploited the propaganda coup provided by racism. The Little Rock crisis in 1957 -when nine African-American children were denied entry to a white school -became a staple of anti-American Soviet propaganda: Izvestia reported that "behind the facade of the so-called 'American democracy' a tragedy" was unfolding, in which "national guard soldiers and policemen armed to the teeth bar Negro children from entering the schools, threaten them with bayonets and teargas bombs and encourage hooligans to engage in violence with impunity".

Dudziak's readable narrative provokes numerous questions. The most pressing is how much effect these cold-war pressures had on the passage and enactment of civil-rights legislation. Dudziak marshals archival material to demonstrate how much attention American race conflicts received globally and how much time officials devoted to countering this tarnished image. But it is improbable that, in the absence of the civil-rights movement, such external pressures would have led to reform. It is also difficult to calculate their effect on the Supreme Court: Dudziak notes the absence of any direct evidence of judicial knowledge of such pressures as the decision about Brown (in 1954, ordering desegregation) was reached, though she reports that Justice William O. Douglas had been extensively questioned about race during a visit to India in 1950; and testimony in Congress in the 1960s often invoked international priorities.

This ambivalent impact of foreign scrutiny on decision-makers is perhaps well conveyed in President Kennedy's reaction when presented with an inventory of the abuse experienced by black diplomats journeying between the United Nations in New York and Washington DC on Maryland's Route 40:

"Tell them to fly!" Gary Gerstle's book, *American Crucible*, also represents the culmination of a decade's research. In his first book, *Working Class Americanism*, Gerstle documented how a mill town in Massachusetts "Americanised" its immigrant workers. Like other scholars, an interest in Americanisation has led to fuller analysis of race and American identity. In a series of remarkable historical essays that form the background to his new book, Gerstle has dissected the racial, nationalist and ideological elements constituting Americanism and redefined our understanding of this political tradition. *American Crucible* is a brilliant interpretation of how ideas about race and national identity have defined the US in the 20th century.

Gerstle argues that what he terms America's "civic nationalism" (the bundle of beliefs about equality and individual rights) has coexisted with a racial nationalism, whose proponents conceive "of America in ethnoracial terms, as a

people held together by common blood and skin color and by an inherent fitness for self-government". Both are traceable, ironically, to the founding of the republic that simultaneously endorsed individual rights and the constriction of naturalisation to free white persons. The resulting contradictions and racisms pervading US political culture rendered the American Dream, in Malcolm X's pithy comment, "the American nightmare". For Gerstle, the "history of the American nation in the 20th century" can be understood only by juxtaposing these conflicting civic and racial nationalisms.

The dialect between the two nationalisms is fascinating and enduring. Progressives and reformers looked to civic nationalism as a set of ideological beliefs and values that could be gradually but consistently widened to enlarge the definition of who was an acceptable American; racial nationalists fought this process tooth and nail. Yet even within the civic tradition, Gerstle uncovers real barriers to expansion. Interaction between the two nationalisms produced what Gerstle terms the Rooseveltian nation (after both Theodore and Franklin) that structured politics between the 1930s and mid-1960s: committed to economic opportunity for those present in the US, this ideology was accompanied by clear restrictions (both domestically and externally) on who was an American. This constipated Americanism imploded in the 1960s as the US's tolerance of racists and institutionalised, judicially legitimated discrimination ceased. Gerstle emphasises not just the effects of the civil-rights movement and black nationalist separatism but the tremors initiated by American involvement in Vietnam, a war that in contrast to previous foreign engagements "could not be turned to nation-building purposes. To the contrary, it tore apart the nation to which Theodore Roosevelt and World War I had given birth."

In his scintillating opening chapter, Gerstle locates the origin of American racial nationalism in the masculine and selective assimilationism of Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt recruited his Rough Rider regiment for battle against the Spanish in Cuba in 1898 generously to include the odd Italian or Irish-American and some Native Americans for their fighting ability but purposefully excluded black Americans and Chinese, believing their inferiority a threat to American racial strength. A decisive presence in three of the four major battles against the Spanish in Cuba, the Rough Riders and Roosevelt became national heroes. But the Rough Riders' triumph in Cuba was marred by their reliance on support from black American units: it thus serves as a compelling metaphor for the version of American nationalism held dear for many decades -the US was not actually the white nation that many desired. Gerstle examines the unravelling of this nationalism through the decades of the second world war, cold war, 1960s radicalism, the 1970s and concludes with a discussion of the reconstituted nationalism articulated during the Reagan to Bush presidencies.

Engagingly written, wearing its historical learning lightly and combining pertinent cultural examples with political events, *American Crucible* is a work of profound historical originality and political significance that confirms

Gerstle as the doyen among historians of Americanism.

Taking account of race in American history and politics still seems to make some scholars uncomfortable. Convinced that the US history of gradualist inclusion both obviates the racist blemishes of the past and precludes the need for multiculturalism, they want to "move on" by recycling the glories embodied in the American Dream narrative. Both of these fine books supply crucial evidence about the continuing cost of this blindness to the past.

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