College of Wooster

The Man Behind *Corduroy*: The Life and Art of Don Freeman

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to name Don Freeman an important American artist whose decades of artwork can function as a lens into the social, political, and cultural climates in which he worked. It also seeks to develop scholarship on Don Freeman's life and work. Despite the worldwide popularity of his children's book *Corduroy*, little scholarship exists on Don Freeman himself. This study explores five decades of Freeman's art and places it in historical context. It follows his transition from a Great Depression-era artist to a postwar children's book author and illustrator. Central to this study are Don Freeman's Depression-era sketches, including his self-published semi-annual magazine, his World War II illustrated book, and his 1950s and 1960s children's books. With close analysis and historical context, all of Freeman's work reveals a social conscience and a celebration of common folk. Freeman's upbeat, lighthearted artistic vision is important in context of the trying times in which he created art.

Writing Sample

CHAPTER TWO

A Dogface in Distress

In 1943, Freeman, a thirty-five-year-old New York City artist, received his draft notice and soon found himself at Camp Gruber in Muskogee, Oklahoma, surrounded by young, fighting GIs. He stood out immediately but did his best to convince himself and his wife back in New York that army life was "not as bad as I sometimes paint."[1] When he was not sketching in the margins of his letters to Lydia, he was working in the 42nd Infantry "Rainbow" Division as a U.S. Army artist, getting paid under the title of "Entertainment Specialist."[2] He captured scenes of "trees in the twilight…fellas I know…leaves stuck in the helmet nets…trucks and other cars all carefully camouflaged."[3] Not everyone valued his work. His first sergeant protested when Freeman was assigned to paint murals: "I don't care if he is painting Jesus Christ or carrying a bucket of water—I want him here!" Freeman could take the snide remarks. But as an egalitarian he found it hard to tolerate the "stubbornness between the ranks."[4] Freeman soon found that this stubbornness masked something much darker: entrenched racism within a strictly segregated society.

One night at a regiment-wide party, Freeman witnessed a few army higher-ups go against regulation and harass several black infantrymen. As Freeman sat in one corner of the room, sketching portraits by request, he watched some lieutenants drunkenly yell racial slurs at black GIs. Though Freeman does not say much in his personal accounts about the unsettling scene, it must have been a serious infringement of federal law and of

[1] Don Freeman to Lydia Cooley, unknown date, the personal papers of Don Freeman, courtesy of the Freeman Family, Lucerne, Switzerland.
[2] Ibid, October 20, 1943.
[3] Ibid, unknown date.
[4] Ibid, October 1943.

army regulation.[5] Freeman, who "sweated blood" and became really "burned up" about this discrimination, was honorably discharged from the army quickly thereafter.[6] His discharge papers stated he got out due to AR 615-369, a regulation that demanded servicemen have a "required degree of adaptability" for service.[7] Freeman, who had become incensed by such violent racial discrimination and had spread word of it around camp, did not possess that adaptability. Perhaps the underlying reason for his discharge was the fact that he had witnessed such blatant misconduct by ranking officials. Camp Gruber could afford to lose an Entertainment Specialist, but they could not afford to make their racial harassment and illegal imbibing public knowledge. In November of 1944, Freeman returned to civilian life. He had never adapted to an environment that necessitated a passive social conscience.

These instances of racial discrimination at Camp Gruber inspired Freeman to write, or rather draw, a book about the qualms of army life and segregation. *It Shouldn't Happen (to a Dog)* details the adventures of Albert C. Bedlington, a GI who turns into a dog at training camp. Though he does not encounter much trouble at camp, the soldier-turned-dog does run into challenges when he begins to navigate the modern world outside of the army. Despite its fantastical premise, it is not a children's book. It incorporates serious subjects like politics, race, and class. It serves as a clear allegory for segregation both in the army and in civilian life, as much as Freeman would refute this claim after the book's publishing. Even with these heavier themes, *It Shouldn't Happen* exhibits Freeman's characteristically upbeat, comical style. Its satire is comparable to

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[5] In the 1940s, Oklahoma was a dry state, so any liquor the lieutenants had was highly illegal. "Prohibition," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, www.okhistory.org.
[6] Don Freeman to Lydia Cooley, the personal papers of Don Freeman, courtesy of the Freeman Family, Lucerne, Switzerland.
[7] Army Regulation 615-369 went into effect in July of 1944, just a few months before Freeman's honorable discharge. This AR stated that army personnel could be honorably discharged if they were "inapt" for service. For more on Army Regulations, see R.S. Anderson (ed.) et al, *Neuropsychiatry in World War II*, Vol. 1: Zone of Interior (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, 1966), 484.

that of other artistic chronicles of army life from the 1940s, like Bill Mauldin's *Willie and Joe* or Theodore Geisel's editorial cartoons. However, its Kafkaesque, surrealist narrative and its protest against racial discrimination distinguish it from other wartime books. *It Shouldn't Happen* alludes to Freeman's own experience among "dogs" in the army, but more than that, it tells a story of triumph amidst hardship. It stands, too, as Freeman's first book to feature a protagonist who is defined by his difference but later celebrated because of it.

Albert C. Bedlington, an infantryman during World War II, wakes up one morning at training camp out West and realizes "what he'd been fearing for months had happened": he has become a dog. He perseverates over the fact that the face looking back at him in the mirror is no longer that of a gruff young man with an overbite, but rather a black and white mutt. Freeman writes, "he needn't have worried," because none of his camp buddies noticed any change. "And so life went on as usual."[8]

Figure 2.1-2.3: Don Freeman sketches Albert C. Bedlington, a soldier-turned-dog, alongside his army buddies. Don Freeman, *It Shouldn't Happen (to a Dog),* Dover Edition, (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2014).

[8] Don Freeman, *It Shouldn't Happen (To A Dog)*, Dover Edition, (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2014).

Freeman's dogface protagonist encounters his first challenges after he goes on leave and is forced to navigate civilian life. He hops on a bus with the other GIs, hoping to make it to town in time for the USO dance. But Bedlington soon runs into trouble with civilians, especially middle-to-upper class white civilians. The chiseled, intimidating bus driver banishes Bedlington from the front of the bus. The old woman reports Bedlington to the cops for sitting on the same park bench as her. Similar trouble breaks out on Bedlington's next furlough. This time, he gets on a train headed for New York City and with the help of the poor baggage man and the African American porter, finds an upper berth to spend the night in. The next morning, passengers begin yelling in a fit of rage when they find a dog has been given such a luxurious spot in the car. The story makes front page news, and Bedlington soon realizes many upper-class civilians are out to get him, the most furious being a Southern senator.

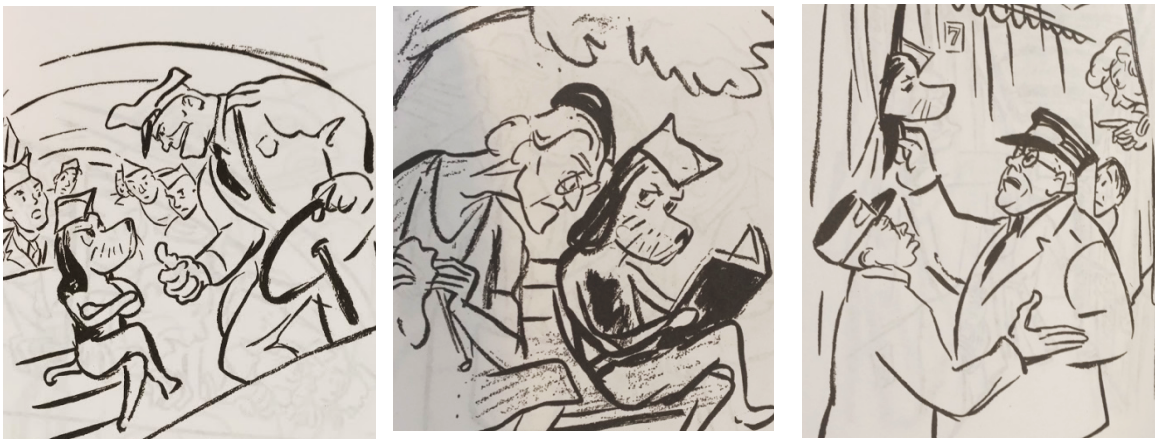

Figure 2.4-2.6: Bedlington runs into trouble with a bus driver, an old woman, and a train conductor when he enters life outside of training camp. Don Freeman, *It Shouldn't Happen (to a Dog)*.

After some dilly-dallying around the city, Bedlington heads back to camp, only to find that the rest of his unit has gone off on maneuvers. Feeling forgotten, but not enough to drop out of the army, Bedlington decides to join the only option left for him: the K9 Corps. Just as he is delivering an impassioned speech to the other canines, the senator shows up to camp, ready to confront Bedlington personally. But Bedlington,

confident in his fighting skills, gives the angry senator what he deserves: a bite in the rear. Officers receive word of the attack and declare Bedlington a "real fighting man."[9] Bedlington peers out of his doghouse, revealing his now human face, and ships off to overseas combat with the rest of his unit.

Figure 2.7-2.9: The senator symbolizes southern segregationist politics with his stereotypical planter suit. Bedlington returns to his human form after nipping the senator in the behind. Don Freeman, *It Shouldn't Happen (to a Dog).*

Consider the way in which Freeman depicts Bedlington visually against his human male counterparts as evidence of Freeman's view of the nature of the infantryman at training camp. No matter where he is on the camp grounds, Bedlington, even though he is a dog, does not stand out—he is a literal dogface. Whether Bedlington and his buddies are standing at attention, getting their gas masks checked, or riding in the back of a transport truck, Bedlington blends right in. His Kafkaesque transformation goes unnoticed at camp. [10] Never once does another army guy say something about

[9] Freeman, *It Shouldn't Happen (to a Dog).*
[10]Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1912) tells the story of a man who wakes up one morning to find himself inhabiting a giant cockroach's body. His surrealist transformation disgusts those around him. The transformation was one of the first of its kind in literature, causing literary adaptations of such transformations to be called "Kafkaesque." P. A. Martin "The cockroach as an identification: With reference to Kafka's metamorphosis," *American Imago: a Psychoanalytic Journal for the Arts and Sciences, 16*(1), 65.

Bedlington's changed appearance. The other soldiers in the book may as well be dogs, too.

These artistic choices draw upon more than Freeman's own opinions of army life; they make obvious references to colloquial army lingo during World War II. In the army, dogfaces were soldiers, and dog tags were personal identification badges.[11] Dogfaces set up pup tents for temporary shelter and shot at enemy lines from foxholes. The origin of the term "dogface" is unclear, but the word rose to popularity through GI culture. An early use of the term appears in a 1942 spirited battle song "Dogface Soldier," written by two soldiers in the 3rd Infantry Division:

> I'm just a dogface soldier
> With a rifle on my shoulder
> And I eat a kraut
> For breakfast ev'ry day
> So feed me ammunition
> Keep me in Third Division
> Your dogface soldier's A-Okay[12]

Newspapers brought the term to popularity, especially Bill Mauldin's *Willie and Joe* cartoons that appeared in the military paper *Stars and Stripes* and followed the gritty everyday lives of two World War II dogfaces in the army.[13]

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[11] The exact origins of such dog-related terms are difficult to trace. William Randolph Hearst first used the term "dog tag," during the 1930s. In the early days of the Social Security Administration, Commissioner Arthur J. Altmeyer ordered a prototype of a metal tag as a way of keeping personal Social Security records. Hearst responded in a heated report that such "dog tags" would lead to government probing of personal information. When the U.S. entered World War II, the Army began issuing rectangular metal ID tags that resembled the prototype from the 1930s. "The Infamous Dog-Tag," The Social Security Administration: Social Security Numbers, accessed November 2018, https://www.ssa.gov/history/ssn/dogtag.html.
[12] Büchl, "Dogface Soldiers: U.S. Infantry Riflemen and the War against Hitler's Wehrmacht in the Mediterranean and Northwestern Europe," 2016, 15-16.
[13] Büchl, "Dogface Soldiers," 19.

Freeman presents Bedlington as just another dogface GI at camp, but this status changes each time Bedlington heads into town—a metaphor for the treatment of black infantrymen. The discrimination Bedlington faces, whether from the bus driver, the crotchety old woman, or the Southern senator, makes it clear that he is no longer accepted by those around him. City dwellers notice his Kafkaesque transformation and treat him like a lowly dog. When he occupies the same space as white civilians, he becomes different and is harassed because of his difference.

". . . I'll never splash mud on a dogface again (999). . . . I'll never splash mud on a dogface again (1000). . . . Now will ya help us push?"

Figure 2.10: Bill Mauldin's Willie and Joe cartoon with accompanying caption, from "Bill Mauldin Cartoons," *Armchair Travel*, accessed December 2017, https://blogs.gonomad.com/armchairtravel/2006/05/bill-mauldin-cartoons.html.

With these encounters, Freeman draws upon his own experience in the army of witnessing the violent harassment of black soldiers. But such harassment was not unique to Camp Gruber. Camp Gruber was located in the segregated South where black Americans were completely shut out of white society and Jim Crow laws promoted virulent racism. The camp was just southeast of Tulsa, Oklahoma, the site of one of the most violent race riots in history.[14] By the time the U.S. had become involved in World War II, twenty years after the Tulsa riots, African Americans still faced complete marginalization from the mainstream. Seventy-five percent of black adults had not completed high school, and almost ninety percent had incomes below the federal poverty line. Southern politicians ran for office on platforms that endorsed segregation and upheld white

[14]In June of 1921, white Tulsans and city police attacked the homes and businesses of black Tulsans, leaving nearly 300 dead and dozens of buildings destroyed. Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot Of* 1921 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 1982).

supremacy. They fought to silence black voices by thwarting black suffrage. Fewer than five percent of African Americans across the country could exercise their right to vote.[15]

It is in this context that Freeman develops not only Bedlington as a character, but the Southern senator, too. If Bedlington represents the unjust treatment of black infantrymen, then the Senator is the antagonist and the perpetrator of such unjust treatment. Freeman introduces the senator after news of a dog getting the upper berth hits the press. The senator is seen dozing off during a committee meeting, but when another government official shows him the newspaper with Bedlington's story on the front page, he is immediately up and ready for a fight. Before the senator even speaks, he is depicted as a Southern man, donning a stereotypically Southern planter suit and billowing tie (Fig. 2.7). Once he does express his determination to "get to the bottom of this scandal," raising a fist and furrowing an angry brow, the senator becomes a segregationist.[16] His outrage towards a "dog" occupying the same sphere as wealthy white citizens reflects the segregationist platform Southern politicians preached.

Freeman extends the allegory for segregation in this section of the book by placing Bedlington in a unit segregated from the rest: the K9 Corps. While his old army buddies are overseas, putting their months of training to the test, Bedlington is left with the dogs of the dogs. And as another reminder that he is not up to par with the other infantrymen, his commanding officer says, "on all fours now, no foolishness."[17]

In this section of the book, Bedlington experiences another reality for black Americans during World War II: segregation within the armed forces. Military camps across the country were segregated, if not all black. And many black men in the armed forces ended up training in the segregated South. In 1944, of the 650,000 black

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[15] David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press) 1999, 765.
[16] Don Freeman*, It Shouldn't Happen (to a Dog).*
[17] Ibid.

servicemen in the U.S., 80% trained at southern camps. Only 25% of them trained for combat; the large majority trained for service units, as white officers saw African American men as unfit for duty.[18] Segregation both in the army and in southern civilian life made it easy for white officers to discriminate. Black servicemen were often bypassed for promotions that would put them above the rankings of whites. Laws that prohibited this employment discrimination within the armed forces, like Executive Order 8802, did not affect much change in such an entrenched segregated society.[19]

Freeman has every opportunity to make the U.S. Armed Forces Bedlington's enemy, given his own experience in the army. Yet he chooses homegrown discrimination as the story's antagonist. Bedlington's story could easily turn into one of discrimination within the army, just like Freeman witnessed. Instead, Bedlington has a happy ending: he gets shipped overseas with the rest of his army buddies. Freeman chooses to target the senator, the embodiment of hatred towards the non-white and non-wealthy, and strips him of his power. In this act, Freeman champions the everyday American and undermines the unjust. He draws upon his own witnessing of discrimination in the army and gives the upper hand to the one facing discrimination. Bedlington, a regular army dogface who emerges victorious in a world full of hate, saves the day.

It Shouldn't Happen serves as a protest against racial segregation and echoes the organized protests against segregation of the 1940s. With the federal government taking very little effective action towards prohibiting racial discrimination, especially during a time in which white and black Americans both fought for the same country, black civilians staged demonstrations against segregation. In 1943, students at Howard University organized a sit-in at a restaurant. Led by law student and civil rights activist Pauli Murray, student protesters crowded the restaurant, chanting, "We Die Together,

[18] Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience during World War II* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 49.
[19] Ibid, 52.

Let's Eat Together." They distributed flyers that read, "Our brothers are fighting for you. Why can't we eat here?" A year prior, the newly-formed Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) staged similar sit-ins at Chicago restaurants.[20] Protesters realized that the America that black GIs were going to return to was not a free one.

Compared to the other wartime books of the era, *It Shouldn't Happen* was not that unusual or provocative, at least on the surface. The *Washington Post* compared it to Bill Mauldin's cartoons of army life, which were compiled in one volume and published as a book in 1945—the same year Freeman's book hit stands.[21] The *Post* also compared it to Marion Hargrove's lighthearted stories of basic training, "See Here, Private Hargrove," a bestselling book in 1942.[22] Most reviews highlighted Freeman's clever portrayal of life in the army as a dog's life. Tennessee's *Kingsport Times* warned "The doghouse for you if you don't read it."[23]

Some reviews acknowledged the book's underlying message. The *Chicago Defender*, one of the leading black newspapers at the time, called it slightly "off the beaten track," noting the symbolism behind Bedlington getting "bounced off the bus," by a "Dixie bus driver" and hitching a ride with a poor Latino farmer that "got him into town faster than the bus."[24] The *Chicago Tribune*, the city's conservative paper in 1945, even applauded its message: "treat 'em like men and they'll be men."[25] The *New York*

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[20] Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience during World War II,* 81.
[21] Bill Mauldin's cartoons were compiled in a volume titled *Up Front* in 1945. "The Post's Books of the Week," *The Washington Post*, July 15, 1945.
[22] John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, Vol. IV (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1981), 21.
[23] W.G. Rogers, "The Literary Guidepost," *Kingsport Times,* July 19, 1945, accessed November 2017, https://www.newspapers.com/image/75365203/?terms=%22DON+FREEMAN%22+%22IT+SHOULDN%27T+HAPPEN%22.
[24] Ben Burns, "Off the Book Shelf," *The Chicago Defender (1921-1967)*, August 4, 1945, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, accessed November 2017, https://search.proquest.com/docview/492787190?accountid=15131.
[25] Fanny Butcher, "GI Becomes Comic Dog," *The Chicago Tribune*, July 22, 1945, accessed November 2017, https://www.newspapers.com/image/370092969/?terms=%22DON+FREEMAN%22+%22IT+SHOULDN%27T+HAPPEN%22.

Times review of the book made the most blatant statement about the book's allegory for segregation. The reviewer, "P. E.," saw Bedlington as a symbol for the discrimination black GIs faced, but P. E. littered so many brazen remarks about Freeman's "violent" intent throughout his review that he overshadowed his own claim. He begins by explaining that the book does more than just illustrate army life "à la Bill Mauldin." P.E. says Bedlington represents a black infantryman. The story would be "meaningless otherwise." Where P.E. goes awry is in the second half of the review, where he claims *It Shouldn't Happen* promotes "race propaganda" and touts the idea that "justice is best achieved by violence." The moment in which Bedlington bites the senator is Freeman encouraging "bitterness and hatred." By conveying such a violent message about black Americans, says P.E., Freeman has dismantled any national attempts for racial integration.[26]

The review shocked Freeman, both as an insult to he as an author and to Bedlington. Freeman and a friend of his, Norman Corwin, offered rebuttals to P.E. in the *Times* the following month. "Bedlington must raise his voice," Freeman writes. The dog "assures all lovers of democracy that he does not advocate violence." In fact, Bedlington advocates "most emphatically the opposite," as he gives an enthusiastic speech to his fellow dogfaces about fighting fascism abroad in the name of preserving democracy. Corwin, too, defends Bedlington's democratic intentions, stating that such accusations against the dog are like accusing "Ignatz of Krazy Kat for inciting a riot against established law and order."[27]

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[26] "Review of It Shouldn't Happen (to a Dog) by Don Freeman," *The New York Times,* August 26, 1945. Clipping in the personal papers of Don Freeman, courtesy of the Freeman Family Lucerne, Switzerland.

[27] *Krazy Kat,* a popular comic strip by cartoonist George Herriman, ran from 1913 to 1944. The strip revolves around a "triangular relationship" between Krazy Kat, Ignatz the mouse, and Offisa Pup. Ignatz makes it his mission to torment Krazy Kat, reversing the usual cat-mouse role seen in literature and film. Offisa Pup lands Ignatz in jail many days, but all in good fun. See more on Krazy Kat in Miles Orvell, "Writing Posthistorically: Krazy Kat, Maus, and the Contemporary

Freeman's defense of his book looks askew when he states that the dog was never intended to represent a black infantryman: Bedlington simply "awoke one morning…to find himself a dog. Yes, just that, a dog." His adventures "have nothing to do with any of the implications" about race that P.E. makes. In refuting P.E.'s claims of violent intent and defending his own honor, Freeman refutes his other intentions. He undermines the entire allegory he created. Bedlington does represent a black infantryman—one who endures the same "grievous trials" that black infantrymen were enduring across the country. His challenges are clear allusions to segregation, and Freeman made a conscious effort to create this allegory. In his earliest days of drafting, Freeman envisioned the book's message as, "If you can learn not to discriminate against a guy because he fought next to you, you can do the same when you have adjoining gardens."[28]

The same injustice that angered Bedlington and his allies and fueled Freeman's narrative was still all too prevalent postwar. It took until July of 1948, nearly three years after Japan's surrender, for segregation in the military to become illegal. It was not until sixteen years later that *de facto* segregation was abolished. Racism in the segregated South postwar still led to violent clashes and deaths. Between 1945 and 1947, at least twenty-five racial killings occurred, the majority taking place in the South. [29] While the government took action to ease the transition from life at war to civilian life with the GI Bill, it excluded black servicemen from some of the bill's benefits, such as low-cost mortgages and guaranteed unemployment compensation.[30] In the following decades,

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Fiction Cartoon," *American Literary History* 4, no. 1 (1992): 110-28. Norman Corwin, letter to the editor, *The New York Times*, September 23, 1945.

[28]Don Freeman to Tom Murray, unknown date, the personal papers of Don Freeman, courtesy of the Freeman Family, Lucerne, Switzerland.

[29] Executive Order 9981, signed by President Truman, outlawed segregation in the armed forces. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed by President Johnson, made segregation in public places illegal. Wynn, *The African American Experience during World War II,* 13, 85, 91.

[30]"After the War: Blacks and the G.I. Bill," Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed November 2017, http://americanexperience.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/After-the-War-Blacks-and-the-GI-Bill.pdf.

African Americans would fight for racial equality, with organizations like CORE spearheading voter registration drives in the South, and new organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee creating new groups of young activists.[31] Freeman did not become directly involved with any of these efforts, but his art and his stories would allude to the same fights for democratic progress and social equality that defined the era.

[31] James Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).