



Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America

By Philip Jenkins

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Drawing on a wide array of sources--including tabloid journalism, popular fiction, movies, and television shows--Philip Jenkins argues that a remarkable confluence of panics, scares, and a few genuine threats created a climate of fear that led to the conservative reaction. He identifies 1975 to 1986 as the watershed years. During this time, he says, there was a sharp increase in perceived threats to our security at home and abroad. At home, America seemed to be threatened by monstrous criminals--serial killers, child abusers, Satanic cults, and predatory drug dealers, to name just a few. On the international scene, we were confronted by the Soviet Union and its evil empire, by OPEC with its stranglehold on global oil, by the Ayatollahs who made hostages of our diplomats in Iran. Increasingly, these dangers began to be described in terms of moral evil. Rejecting the radicalism of the '60s, which many saw as the source of the crisis, Americans adopted a more pessimistic interpretation of human behavior, which harked back to much older themes in American culture. This simpler but darker vision ultimately brought us Ronald Reagan and the ascendancy of the political Right, which more than two decades later shows no sign of loosening its grip. Writing in his usual crisp and witty prose, Jenkins offers a truly original and persuasive account of a period that continues to fascinate the American public. It is bound to captivate anyone who lived through this period, as well as all those who want to understand the forces that transformed--and continue to define--the American political landscape.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In a timely account, Jenkins (*Dream Catchers*) argues that between 1975 and 1986, Americans reacted against '60s radicalism, setting the stage for conservatism's triumphs in the 1980s. During these years, Americans panicked: about angel dust, the Equal Rights Amendment, decaying cities, school busing, crime, and gas prices going through the roof. This panic, Jenkins argues, led to a new pessimism and a view that these problems were "a matter of evil, not dysfunction." Jenkins's most innovative discussion focuses on how children became the subject of political debates—activists on both the right and left focused on child pornography, child abuse and abduction of youth into cults, and channeled some of this concern into a large-scale war on drugs. Jenkins values pop culture as an illuminating tool; he writes not only about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which "moved American politics substantially to the Right," but also about the 1976 blockbuster *Rocky*, which lionized a certain type of masculinity then under attack by feminism. Jenkins, a professor of history at Penn State, presents an able contribution to the burgeoning historical literature on the 1970s and '80s, and a nice counterpoint to books like David Frum's *How We Got Here*. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [Booklist](#)

The capital-S Sixties (roughly 1963-74) may seem the most recent momentous era in America's past, but Jenkins offers another candidate. The period between the fall of Saigon and Reagan's second term, he argues, foreshadowed subsequent events and attitudes far more than the Sixties did. In the mid-1970s, domestic terrorism was at an all-time high, the Soviet Union was intervening aggressively throughout the world, and prophecies of imminent ecological catastrophe abounded. Soon there would be oil shortages, major child-abuse and serial-killer scares, Islamic radicalism and the Iran hostage crisis, and the notion that the nation was suffering from a great malaise. Ronald Reagan's optimistic leadership dealt with some of these woes effectively but also morally polarized politics, massively increased federal budgets, flouted the law, and seemed to launch "wars without end." Jenkins considers political and cultural events and weighs the reactions to and opinions about them of press and public to fashion an interpretive history whose depth and cogency may steadily increase as historical perspective lengthens. *Ray Olson*
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Review

"Jenkins has produced a humdinger.... He provides an engrossing tour of the recesses of the American mind, demonstrating that the '70s were about more than 'Saturday Night Fever' and 'Smokey and the Bandit.'"--Jacob Heilbrunn, New York Times Book Review

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"Decade of Nightmares offers an important reinterpretation of the 1970s and a compelling explanation of how America moved from Woodstock Nation to the Reagan Revolution. Expertly blending political history and popular culture, it elegantly shows how Ronald Reagan and the conservative movement rode powerful social currents to triumph in 1980. Philip Jenkins has produced a sophisticated and readable account of a pivotal period in recent history." --Michael W. Flamm, author of *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s*

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