

Cold War Liberalism: Power in a Time of Emergency

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In the mid-twentieth century, Cold War liberalism exerted a profound influence on the U.S. state, U.S. foreign policy, and liberal thought across the North Atlantic world. This talk examines the history and practice of Cold War liberalism as a significant ideological and political force in U.S. history. It argues that Cold War liberalism was characterized by two core features: deep skepticism of mass democracy and commitment to American global hegemony. These traits emerged from Cold War liberals' response to perceived existential threats, particularly Soviet communism, which led them to embrace emergency powers and create permanent national security institutions. While Cold War liberals achieved some progressive domestic reforms, their emergency politics often undermined liberal democratic principles. In particular, the ideology's emphasis on the necessity of U.S. empire had lasting consequences, establishing patterns of governance and military intervention that were anathema to liberal ideas and that continue to shape the world today.