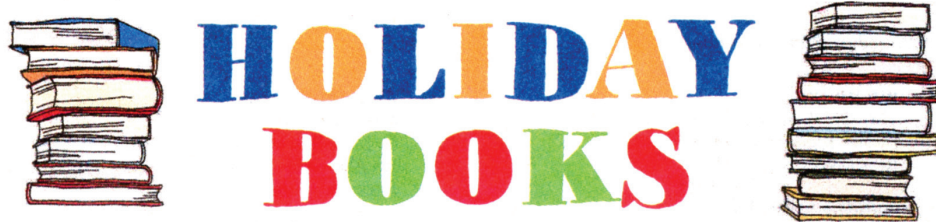


The New York Times

# Book Review

December 2, 2012



## TRAVEL

By Joshua Hammer

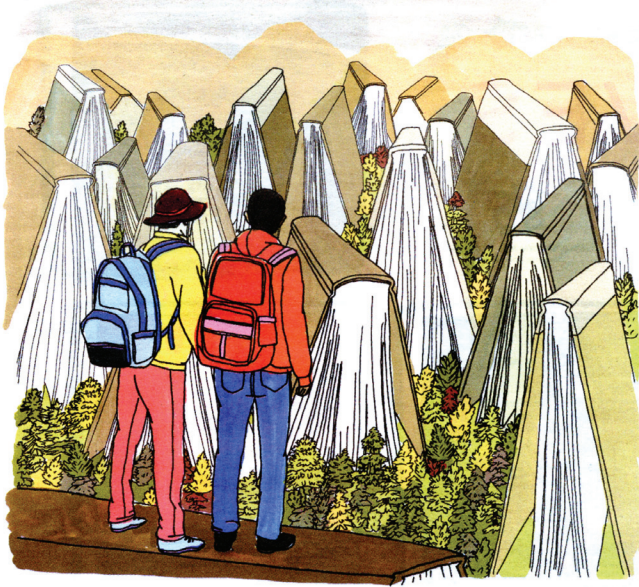


Illustration by Julia Rothman

**HOW WE FORGOT THE COLD WAR: A Historical Journey Across America** (University of California, \$34.95), by Jon Wiener, is a political argument masquerading as a travel yarn. A professor of history at the University of California, Irvine, Wiener visits cold war memorials and historic sites, seeking to debunk claims that the United States-Soviet conflict was a heroic struggle on a par with World War II. This effort, he writes, has been met with “public indifference, skepticism and apparent resistance to what historians have called ‘cold war triumphalism.’” Wiener recounts the doomed attempt to build a \$100 million Victims of Communism Museum in Washington and comically searches the Maryland countryside for the pumpkin patch exhibit commemorating Whittaker Chambers, the anti-Communist whose testimony exposed Alger Hiss as a Soviet spy in a case that boosted the career of then-Congressman Richard Nixon. “Like other cold war commemorative efforts,” Wiener notes, after tracking down the bronze plaque to an unmarked barn that receives an average of two visitors a year, “the pumpkin patch National Historic Landmark is remarkable primarily as a failure.”

The problem, Wiener argues in this persuasive yet sometimes heavy-handed polemic, is that the cold war was no Manichaean struggle pitting the American white hats against a black-hatted Evil Empire. Rather, it was an ambiguous showdown between two superpowers driven by self-interest and geopolitical competition. Wiener’s accounts of his trips to nuclear test sites, missile-launching control centers and fallout shelter exhibits contrast the guides’ cheerful patter with the prospect of Armageddon, and his visit to a former plutonium processing plant serves as a reminder of the environmental costs of the arms race. His journey ends at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which stands as a stark rebuttal to those who have glorified the proxy wars fought in the name of defeating Communism. “It is the one monument of the cold war era that resolutely denies a triumphant interpretation of the conflict. With its sunken black granite walls carrying the names of all 58,000 Americans who died in the war, the memorial steadfastly refuses to celebrate heroism in a battle between good and evil.”



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A nuclear test site from “How We Forgot the Cold War.”