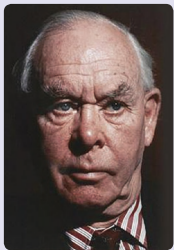


From the bomb to Apollo 13: Bowlby and the Cold War

How did child psychologists contribute to the Cold War discourse of 'National Security'? Carolyn Laubender discusses the relationship between attachment theory and political anxieties about the protections offered by the nation state.



John Bowlby
(above). Nuclear
family in nuclear
shelter (top)

John Bowlby's career as a child psychologist and psychoanalyst spanned the roughly four decades of the Cold War, starting in the 1950s and continuing up until his death in 1990. Although Bowlby had worked with 'delinquent' children in schools and state institutions throughout the 1930s and 1940s, his most renowned and influential work began in 1951 with the publication of his best-selling book, *Maternal Care and Mental Health*. This text sold almost 500,000 copies in English alone and was translated into six different languages in Bowlby's lifetime. After its initial publication, it became a staple for experts and lay-people alike, inspiring countless self-help parenting books in the decades to come and launching Bowlby into the public eye as a postwar specialist on child psychology.

Yet, *Maternal Care and Mental Health* did not begin as a public-facing self-help book designed to satiate a generation of transatlantic baby boomers newly fascinated with 'expert' advice on childrearing.

After World War II, the World Health Organization commissioned Bowlby to write a report on the state of homeless children's mental health and emotional wellbeing. In light of the massive urban air raids throughout the war and the consequent exodus of children to the countryside – not to mention the largescale *Kindertransports* that had ferried Jewish children out of Germany and surrounding countries before the outbreak of the war – many children living in the UK were left either orphaned or permanently separated from their families. Children's institutions expanded throughout the UK to answer this postwar need, including the Bull Dogs Bank Home, the Tavistock Clinic, and the Hampstead Nurseries. Child psychologists and psychoanalysts, like Bowlby, Anna Freud, and Donald Winnicott, lent their specialties to both governmental and non-governmental initiatives alike, which strove to safeguard the children of a nation.

During the war and immediately after it, Bowlby worked in some of these children's institutions, seeing

children who had been severely traumatised by wartime violence and separation. But when writing his report for the WHO – the report that would become *Maternal Care and Mental Health* – Bowlby did not defend the necessity of the state-sponsored children's institutions where he had worked. Rather, he championed the necessity of specifically *maternal* care, insisting (through the very title of his text) that it was maternal care that was indispensable for children's mental health. According to Bowlby, what was 'essential for mental health' was not public support or even clinical intervention, but a 'warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with [the] mother' (Bowlby, *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, 67). On Bowlby's reading, neither state welfare nor group homes were sufficient for the project of developing 'secure' child psychologies. Even the best group home was but a meager substitute for the incomparable effects of a mother's love.

Over the course of his career, Bowlby would work to develop, refine, and support these early claims about the determinative importance of maternal care for childhood wellbeing, crafting a unique theory of childhood psychology known as 'Attachment Theory'. As Bowlby expanded his work, he culled research from psychologists like Mary Ainsworth and ethologists like Harry Harlow and Konrad Lorenz. From this, he proposed that the attachment bonds that children form with their primary caregiver – a figure that Bowlby unflinchingly argued ought to be the biological mother – were determinative of the child's future capacity for 'secure' or 'insecure' relationality. In Bowlby's understanding, children were preprogrammed with the capacity for satisfying and secure relationality. By 1988, with the publication of Bowlby's final major text, *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*, he had distilled this focus on security even further, suggesting that childhood attachments were the crucible of all future secure psychologies, adult and child alike. Through Bowlby's attachment theories of childhood, 'security' moved centerstage as a major postwar psychological virtue.

Not insignificantly, for Bowlby the curation of this emotional 'security' was the primary job of the woman-as-mother. More than any other postwar psychoanalyst, Bowlby positioned the mother's care as the exclusive bulwark against what he would come to describe as 'insecure attachments'. '[I]t is a characteristic of a mother whose infant will develop securely,' writes Bowlby in *A Secure Base*, 'that she is continuously monitoring her infant's state and, as and when he signals wanting attention, she registers his signals and acts accordingly' (*A Secure Base*, 131).



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'Security' was thus born, practiced, and produced in the domestic home, through the psychologies that mothers cultivated in their children. As the Cold War escalated, the mother ensured 'domestic security' on all fronts.

But child psychologists like Bowlby were not the only figures throughout the Cold War interested in producing security. Indeed, the discourse of 'security' was on the move in many spheres, gaining traction as an aspirational virtue not only within child psychology but also within politics. During the Cold War, Britain, like the US, felt acutely that Eastern European and Asian communisms introduced a 'national security' crisis, one that posed a dual threat to the West's global capitalistic expansion and to

global military peace. In fact, the US National Security Act of 1947, the document that codified the discourse of American 'national security', was also the document that inaugurated the what many consider to be the first official year of the Cold War, for Britain as for the US. What this means is that, from a Western perspective, Cold War politics are inseparable from the political project of ensuring national security. Only during the Cold War, with its combined military and political-economic crises, did the discourse of 'national security' truly find its footing.

It was in this exact historical shift that Bowlby's work on childhood emotional security emerged and found an audience. The very span of Bowlby's publications – from *Maternal Care and Mental Health* in 1951 to *A Secure Base* in 1988 – bookended the decades of the Cold War. In this way, Bowlby's work registers the dual ascent of psychological and political security discourses throughout the Cold War. While Bowlby, along with other child psychologists, often collaborated directly with governmental agencies in these decades, his theories about childhood attachments also index a level of ideological collaboration, one that balanced the very real insecurity of the Cold War nation state against the new forms of psychological security being promoted in and promised to children as future citizen-subjects. Put another way, in the context of the Cold War, child psychologies were anything but apolitical.

To see this collaboration between child psychology and the state, we need look no further than one of Bowlby's most influential papers from 1958, 'The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother'. Explaining his understanding of the ideal, secure mother-child attachment, Bowlby writes that

'[I]n healthy development it is towards her [the mother] that each of the [infant's] several responses becomes directed, *much as* each of the subjects

of the realm comes to direct his loyalty towards the Queen; and it is in relation to the mother that the several responses become integrated into the complex behavior which I have termed 'attachment behavior', *much as it is in relation to the Sovereign that the components of our constitution become integrated into a working whole.*' (Bowlby, 'The Child's Tie to His Mother,' 370, emphasis added)



Bowlby's attachment theory helps pronounce the extent to which the valorisation of childhood psychological security is anything but separable from a global climate of insecurity experienced throughout the Cold War

Even as Bowlby was a vocal defender of the apolitical 'objectivity' of scientific psychology, in this passage he nevertheless articulates the infant's attachment behavior through a political analogy with Britain's monarchy. Such an analogy has a double effect. In the first instance, this rhetorical flourish politicises maternal care, putting domestic maternity on the 'right' side of Cold War politics. Implicitly, it suggests that women ought to mother on behalf of the motherland. But at the same time, by using the vocabulary of psychological 'health' to talk about the organisation of political power and government, it simultaneously naturalises the Commonwealth of Nations and makes clear that UK liberal democracy is tantamount to psychological wellbeing. In his Cold War narration of the child's attachments, Bowlby effectively makes a case for how attachment to the mother – that is, to the Queen mother – is the naturalised state of security both for the individual child *and* for the entire nation.

Thus, as Bowlby crafted his theories about psychological normality, childhood attachment, and emotional security, he did so with an eye trained on a larger Cold War climate anxious to effect security on multiple fronts. The popularity of Bowlby's work, which promised an individualised kind of psychological security that the Western nation state could never fully guarantee, was inextricable from the context of the hyper-vigilante, security-minded West during the Cold War.

But the Cold War also helped set the very terms within which Bowlby crafted his psychological theories in the first place. It was the climate through which Bowlby was able to substantiate and justify the importance of his child-focused psychological research. The Cold War was thus inextricable not only from how Bowlby came to define childhood psychology, but also from how it was that the child's mind came to matter on such a large scale at all. This intertwining of childhood psychological security and the Cold War is seen perhaps

most clearly in a lecture Bowlby delivered in the US in 1970. Explains Bowlby:

'Astronauts rank high as self-reliant men capable of living and working effectively in conditions of great potential danger and stress. ... The performance of the crew of Apollo 13, which met with a mishap en route to the moon, is testimony to their capacity in this respect. ...

Turning to their life histories we find that these men 'grew up in relatively small well-organized communities, with considerable family solidarity and strong identification with the father... During childhood, they said, they had felt with mother above everything else secure.' (Affectional Bonds, 129-30)

With Apollo 13's technological crisis fresh in the minds and hearts of millions of Americans, Bowlby praises US astronauts not just for their bravery, patriotism, and skill – that is, not just for their willingness to advance the West's economic and ideological agenda in the Cold War – but interestingly for their psychological stability and emotional maturity. The fact that Bowlby's discussion of emotional security in this passage revolves around a group of men in a profession that advanced the West's international standing in a 'space race' that emblemised the Cold War is hardly insignificant. It should perhaps come as no surprise that, for Cold War psychologists, national heroes also become psychological exemplars. Yet, what is vital to recognise here is that Bowlby traces their success as astronauts back to their childhood, making clear that childhood psychology is the true foundation of political integrity. It was, Bowlby notes, these men's experiences of maternal security that, 'above everything else', formed the bedrock of their exceptional contributions to national security.

What Bowlby's attachment theory thus helps pronounce is the extent to which the valorisation of childhood psychological security is anything but separable from a global climate of *insecurity* experienced throughout the Cold War. The prized aspects of psychological health in Bowlby's rubric are also the prized qualities of the liberal, Western nation-state, perched precariously on the brink of nuclear war. As Bowlby writes forebodingly in his early 1946 article 'Psychology and Democracy,'

'with the advent of the atomic bomb ...the hope for the future lies in a far more profound understanding of the nature of the emotional forces involved and the development of scientific social techniques for modifying them.' (76)

Through Bowlby's theory of childhood as a site of viable, realisable security, his psychological work helped to shore up the global insecurities introduced by the Cold War.

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