In August of 1952, MR published an article by William Appleman Williams, a History Professor at the University of Oregon, entitled "Second Look at Mr. X." It forcefully challenged the thesis put forward by U.S. diplomat George Kennan (using the pseudonym "X") in Foreign Affairs that the United States needed to "contain" the Soviet Union. Such an article in Monthly Review, a socialist journal that had refused to side with the West in the Cold War, would not have surprised readers, but the author might have. Here was no son of an immigrant proletarian, no graduate of a worker's school. Instead, the author was a small-town midwesterner who could trace his family on both sides back to the American Revolution. A graduate of the United States Naval Academy and a decorated Second World War veteran, he had earned his Masters and Phd. in History at that center of early twentieth century Progressivism, the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

The article on Mr. X was actually the last chapter of a full-length monograph, American-Russian Relations, 1787-1947. The publisher had submitted the chapter to Foreign Affairs. Not surprisingly, the magazine rejected it as too sharp a criticism, and so Monthly Review got to publish it.(1)

This incident is one of many fascinating nuggets of information available in the book under review. For those of us who knew Bill Williams as a teacher, colleague, friend, or public figure, this book is guaranteed to fill in many gaps in our knowledge of one of the intellectual giants of the United States, post 1950.(2) For those who have not yet been exposed to his scholarship, especially the pathbreaking Tragedy of American Diplomacy and the Contours of American History, this book provides an excellent introduction to these and all his other major works. It is written with tremendous care by admiring yet critical scholars, Paul Buhle and Edward Rice-Maximin, who used interviews, autobiographical writings, and the great corpus of serious intellectual work created by its subject (the bibliography has 112 separate entries of Williams's writings, the footnotes cover 42 pages) to produce a balanced, well-rounded analysis of Williams's intellectual contributions and political impact. There are also very useful analyses of the context in which Williams went to graduate school and began his career, particularly the impact of the Cold War and McCarthyism on the study of history after the Second World War, as well as the response of the mainstream historians' establishment to the challenges posed by Williams and other dissident critics of the 1960s and later.

Bill Williams was not just a serious scholar who helped an entire generation conceptualize the specific character of U.S. imperialism and who challenged the history profession with a creative interpretation of the entire sweep of U.S. history. He was also, as the authors stress in a very valuable early chapter, a "public intellectual." Beginning in the 1950s, he not only researched, thought, and published in his field of diplomatic history and U.S. expansionist thought, he wrote for the public at...
William Appleman Williams analyzes the complex tragedy of American diplomacy through historical relations between the U.S. and Cuba from the Spanish-American War through the Cold War, and beyond. This was a very enlightening text, where Williams challenges the traditional views of the cause of the Cold War, while explaining the U.S. government's agenda for economic expansion. Read more. 3 people found this helpful. Tragedy broke with the traditions of exceptionalism that is still strong today. Even half a century later it is still a challenge to scholarship of American foreign relations. Read more.