Layperson Summary: "An Analysis of the Change in Message and Discourse Associated with Domestic American Propaganda during the Cold War"

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, American domestic propaganda shaped the public perspective of U.S.-Soviet relations and highlighted the tension that existed between the two countries during the Cold War. Much of the propaganda published in the United States during this era preached a message of mutually assured destruction, perpetuating fear among the American citizenry. The Cold War was an era between 1945 and 1991 when relations between the United States and the Soviet Union were constantly strained. However, the intensity of the conflict between these two nations was not static, but instead changed at several points throughout the half-century. Similarly, the message, imagery, and discourse associated with American domestic propaganda changed throughout the Cold War.

The proposed thesis will trace American domestic propaganda through the Cold War era in an attempt to analyze why the message, imagery, and discourse in propaganda changed from 1945 to 1991. Many previous historians focus on the American government’s propaganda campaigns abroad; however, few discuss the evolution of domestic propaganda during the Cold War. My thesis will look specifically at propaganda involving the threat of nuclear war and how it evolved from the early days of the Cold War, through the first Soviet nuclear tests and the arms race that ensued, until the final decades of the century when both the U.S. and the Soviet Union began the process of disarmament. Nuclear war was among the greatest fears of the American people throughout the last half of the twentieth century; however, few historians have traced the causes and reactions of this fear through the entire Cold War.

My thesis will analyze American editorial cartoons published in American newspapers from 1945 until 1991 that specifically reference nuclear war, in an attempt to show how the
message, imagery, and discourse of propaganda evolved during the Cold War. I will seek to understand the differences in the propaganda from the early days of the conflict in the 1940s, through each decade until the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Using editorial cartoons published in American newspapers as a primary source, and looking specifically at cartoons dealing with the threat of nuclear war, I will be able to explore a niche in history that few historians have previously discussed, in an attempt to understand why the message, imagery, and discourse in American domestic propaganda changed throughout the Cold War.