

ated the spark of life seemed almost preposterous. Yet after nearly half a century of searches for extra-terrestrial intelligence with increasingly powerful telescopes and data mining techniques, the night sky has yielded no messages, no aliens, and no spacecraft.

The likely explanation for this, Bostrom writes, is that the path to life forms capable of colonizing space leads through a “Great Filter,” a term he borrowed from George Mason University economist Robin Hanson. This filter consists of one or more steps that must be negotiated against odds so great as to

make a particular process essentially impossible—except once. If the filter is in the human past, maybe it was traversed 3.8 billion years ago, when life first shows up in the fossil record. Or maybe it happened after single-celled organisms became more complex eukaryotes 1.8 billion years later. That’s Bostrom’s optimistic scenario.

But what if the Great Filter is ahead of us? This would mean, according to Bostrom, that some horrific probability lies in our future—nuclear destruction, climate catastrophe, genetically engineered superbugs, or high-energy physics

experiments run amok. If other advanced civilizations were born but failed to pass through the filter, could our earthly civilization be any different?

If traces of some creature are found on Mars, it could mean that the emergence of life is not so rare. If it could happen twice in a single small solar system, it’s probably occurred in galaxy after galaxy. It could mean that all the civilizations created by the life forms that evolved over time were somehow destroyed before they could colonize or communicate with others. It could mean the Great Filter is in Earth’s future.

ARTS & LETTERS

Yoknapatawpha Diplomacy

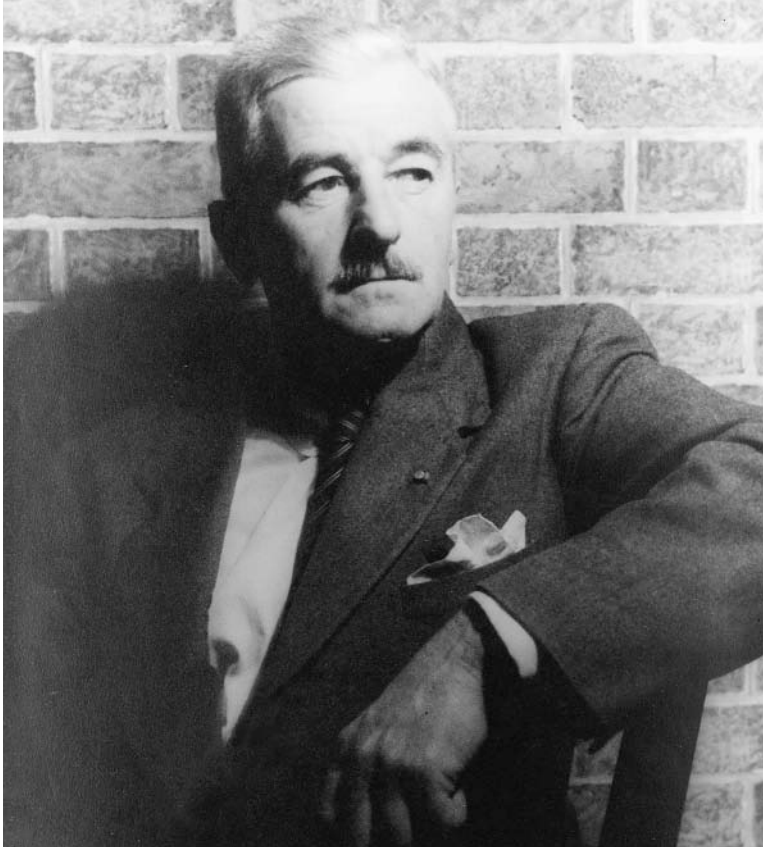
THE SOURCE: “Combating Anti-Americanism During the Cold War: Faulkner, the State Department, and Latin America” by Deborah Cohn, in *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 3.

A HALF-CENTURY AGO, DURING a period of particularly fervent anti-Americanism, the U.S. State Department launched a massive campaign, quaint by today’s standards, to win hearts and minds around the globe. At the height of the Cold War, America mobilized not seasoned diplomats and practiced public-relations specialists, but intellectuals. Nobel Prize-winning novelist William Faulkner was dispatched to South America.

Faulkner (1897–1962) was a curi-

ous emissary in a propaganda war. One of the world’s most reclusive celebrities, he had to be persuaded to attend his own Nobel Prize ceremony in Sweden in 1950. But as the Soviet Union filled the world canvas with portraits of a grossly materialistic America without cultural achievements, Faulkner responded to appeals to his patriotism and agreed to represent the United States internationally. Acclaimed as a writer earlier in Europe and South America than in his home country, Faulkner “fulfilled the wildest dreams and underlying political agenda” of the government that sent him, writes Deborah Cohn, a professor of Spanish literature at Indiana University.

He ran into a rough patch in Brazil on his first Latin America foray, in 1954, when he drank himself into a “pre-coma” state and was unable to participate in as many activities as the State Department had hoped, but redeemed himself with gracious press interviews on the rest of the trip. In 1961, on a tour to Venezuela, where Vice President Richard Nixon’s motorcade had been stoned three years earlier, Faulkner lectured, gave press conferences, and conversed with unsympathetic Marxist critics and pro-Soviet journalists as a “nonpolitical, modernist author who addressed ‘universal truths,’” Cohn says. A year later, when the National Guard was called in to enforce the desegregation of the University of Mississippi near his home, State Department officials noted in internal communications that he provided a counterbalance to Soviet efforts to define America as a land of bigotry and race riots.



William Faulkner served as a successful cultural emissary for the State Department during the Cold War, despite occasional alcoholic overindulgence, and helped introduce international writers to Americans.

The U.S. government's enlistment of highbrow cultural figures in its "propaganda wars against Communism," Cohn writes, was inspired by a belief that promoting greater understanding and respect between cultures would "ultimately benefit national security." The years of the Cold War were heady times for American artists and intellectuals, when they were considered not only relevant but vital to U.S. foreign policy.

The public diplomacy of these figures took a sometimes unpredictable course. Faulkner's travels in Latin America spurred interest in the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, and

Mario Vargas Llosa in the United States. Thus, the effort to bestow the blessings of American literature on Latin America wound up enriching American letters by introducing more people to writing from south of the border.

ARTS & LETTERS

Imperial Edifice

THE SOURCE: "McEmbassy" by Kurt M. Campbell, in *The American Interest*, May–June 2008.

THE ROMAN MOTIFS OF WASHINGTON'S earliest public buildings convey the exalted aspirations of

the fledgling American nation. And the futuristic architecture of Brasília illustrates Brazil's goals of half a century ago. Now the new Chinese Embassy rising on a hill in Northwest Washington reflects the architectural aesthetic of a giant new rival on the world stage, writes Kurt M. Campbell, CEO of the Center for a New American Security. At 250,000 square feet, it will be the largest embassy ever built in the United States.

Since the restoration of relations with the United States three decades ago, the Chinese have been holed up in a fortress-like former hotel on one of the capital's busiest thoroughfares. The old embassy, with its drawn curtains and shuttered windows, seems emblematic of the xenophobia of the Cultural Revolution, and completely out of step with the "mercantilism" of modern China. The vast new steel-and-cement embassy, while discreetly shielded from passing commuter traffic, bids to establish the nation as a more prominent player. As China has opened up to the world, its embassy staff has begun to work the town, talking to reporters, entertaining members of Congress, making friends, influencing people—and keeping trade flowing despite contaminated dog food and lead paint on toys.

The new embassy building, designed by three Chinese Americans, including I. M. Pei, is being built by a consortium of four non-American corporations that cut their construction teeth on Shanghai's dramatic new skyline. Despite its illustrious architects, its sheer