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978-0-521-75722-5 - The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1965

Alan Petigny

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## The Permissive Society

*America, 1941-1965*

*The Permissive Society* points to the emergence of a liberalizing impulse during the Truman and Eisenhower years in contrast to those who see the 1950s as a conservative period and who view the 1960s as a time of rapid moral change. The book shows how a traditionalist moral framework was beginning to give way during the 1950s to a less authoritarian approach to moral issues as demonstrated by a more relaxed style of childrearing, the rising status of women both inside and outside the home, the increasing reluctance of Americans to regard alcoholism as a sin, loosening sexual attitudes, the increasing influence of modern psychology, and the declining influence of religion in the personal lives of most Americans.

Alan Petigny, the son of West Indian immigrants, is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Florida. He graduated with honors from the University of South Florida and received his master's and doctorate degrees from Brown University. Before becoming an academic, Petigny worked as a policy analyst for the U.S. Congress's Joint Economic Committee. He was also an award-winning reporter for a public radio station based in Tampa, Florida, contributing material to both Florida Public Radio and National Public Radio.

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“In the past few years, historians have begun to disassemble the stereotypes of the 1950s, rejecting the descriptions of a uniformly rigid, conservative, and dour society. With Alan Petigny’s astute and surprising book, this demolition project hits with full force. Focusing on liberal religion and the widespread popularity of psychology, counseling, and the ideals of identity-fulfillment, the author describes a very different society in the making, in which permissive behavior rejected the strident calls for Cold War conformism. Contrarian in the very best sense of the term, this remarkable book transforms what we thought we knew about the postwar world, restoring balance, common sense, and dispassionate perspective to the history of the period.”

– James Gilbert, University of Maryland

“In *The Permissive Society*, Petigny finds new indicators of behavioral change in sources neglected by cultural historians. His documentation of a permissive turn in the 1940s and 1950s provides a marvelous antidote to the naïve narratives of social change that clutter the canon of post-World War II cultural history. Both conservatives and progressives will benefit from careful study of this fascinating lesson in how cultural norms changed in response to new social realities.”

– James Reed, Rutgers University

“With *The Permissive Society*, Alan Petigny gives revisionist history a good name. With freshness of perspective, deftness of design, and ingenuity of research, he proposes to find in the 1950s the seeds of the democratic change associated with the 1960s – and thus makes both decades more intriguing. *The Permissive Society* is a work that social and cultural historians of the postwar era will have to reckon with, and that anyone interested in a cogent scholarly argument is bound to enjoy.”

– Stephen J. Whitfield, Brandeis University

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of my father,  
Rene Petigny.*

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Alan Petigny

March 2008

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