Lecture II

The Domestic Cold War: 1946 to 1954

The Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine were noble responses to the threat posed by Soviet predation. But there was a home front in the Cold War, too. Here the issues were not addressed with bipartisan equanimity. At home things got ugly. From 1946 through 1954, the United States tore at its innards as scoundrels discovered the political payoff from maligning foes as disloyal, as treasonous, as traitors.

John A. Farrell, *Richard Nixon: The Life*

Truman was fortunate to have had so many highly able and patriotic Americans to assist him in countering the Soviet threat – Marshall, Acheson, Vandenberg, even Taft – brought unusual and selfless talents to bear in dealing with this threat. But, unfortunately, he was also to discover that politics did not stop "at the water's edge," as Vandenberg had declared. Conservatives hatred of the New Deal and their conspiratorial mind set (ironically, a characteristic of communism itself), combined to create a "Red Scare" of daunting proportions in the immediate post-war years.

Already in the 1930's, various congressional committees had been established to investigate the role of communist and (to a lesser extent) fascist individuals and organizations in American life and particularly in the federal government. Roosevelt's New Deal attracted many leftists to government service, some of whom were full-blown communists, but most of whom adhered to traditional American progressive beliefs. As early as 1933, Congressman Hamilton Fish of New York, an old-style rock-ribbed Republican, sought to root out what he claimed were "Reds" in the government bureaucracy. Finally, the House Committee on Un-American Activities was established in 1938 with Congressman Martin Dies, a conservative Democrat from Beaumont, Texas, as chairman. This committee purportedly aimed to ferret out subversives of all sorts, but predictably focused almost exclusively on "Reds." and spent little time investigating groups like the German-American Bund, much less the America First movement, both of which sought to prevent American involvement in the war against Hitler.

In a sort of preemptive move, President Roosevelt signed the Smith Act in 1940, a measure sponsored by conservative Democratic congressman Howard W. Smith of Virginia, which, together with the Subversive Activities Control Act of 1938, required individuals with leadership roles in the communist and neo-Nazi parties to register with the government as "agents of a foreign power." After the war,

Richard Nixon and Republican Senator Carl Mundt of South Dakota, pushed the enactment of a similar "subversive agents" act, which President Truman reluctantly signed in 1947. Truman had already set up "loyalty boards" in 1947 to vet persons suspected of communist sympathies in order to remove them from government service altogether or at least to prevent them from obtaining "security clearances." The Department of State soon became the major focus of "Red Hunters," with anyone suspected of homosexual activity a primary cause for concern, since it was assumed they could be easily blackmailed. Or, at least that was the rationale for many of the firings of Foreign Service and other State Department personnel. In many cases, as will become apparent in the ensuing years, the main objective actually was to promote the political fortunes of politicians who saw in "Red baiting" a sure-fire way to gain positive media coverage.

The "security clearance" system began in 1940, with the Army and Navy Departments seeking to weed out of the military any personnel deemed unreliable. By 1946, the system had been extended to the State Department and other foreign affairs agencies, as well as the Treasury Department. Investigations were sparked by FBI reports or other information about individuals who might have cause to betray national security secrets, at first to our Axis powers enemies and then, to communist spies. The Attorney General developed a list of subversive or "front" organizations that eventually numbered into the hundreds. Any government employee who belonged, or had belonged, to one of these groups became a prime target for investigators. Hundreds of investigations across the government resulted in a mere handful of dismissals and resignations. But this did little to lessen the desire of watchdog groups, like the House Un-American Affairs Committee, to ferret out any semblance of disloyalty or subversive activity. Congressman Martin Dies, a conservative Texas Democrat, and his successor chairs of the committee started to look far afield for domestic subversives, soon investigating the movie industry and the labor movement.

The labor movement did, indeed, have a considerable number of communist party member leaders, especially the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which organized the sit-down strikes in the late 1930's and led the unionization of the auto and other heavy industry workers. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), on the other hand, became almost rabidly anti-communist, both because it disliked the organization of "industrial (as opposed to "craft") unions" by the CIO, and as a means of insulating itself from right-wing charges that it sympathized with the communist ideology. In 1947, traditional liberals, many of whom had served in FDR's New Deal administration, formed the Americans for Democratic Action

(ADA) largely to defend the liberals against pro-Soviet radicals like Henry Wallace, who purported to represent the ethos of the New Deal, but was, in reality, a somewhat unwitting tool of Moscow-directed CPUSA operatives.
Truman also sought to insulate his administration and himself personally against GOP charges of being "soft on communism" by instituting "loyalty boards" to vet complaints from right-wing scare mongers about government bureaucrats. As noted, only a few cases actually amounted to anything, but hundreds of civil servants (and, eventually) people in private life, found themselves unfairly pilloried by investigators and the media; lives and careers were wrecked only to feed the political ambitions of politicians and self-appointed guardians of Americanism.

As will prove to be the case with the foreign communist threat, the domestic threat was vastly overstated. In 1946 and 1947, almost 70 per cent of a polling sample thought anyone belonging to the CPUSA should be denied a government job; another poll showed 61 per cent would outlaw communist party membership; and a poll in May 1948 showed 77 per cent would require CPUSA members to register with the government. Just as NSC-68 had described a Soviet communist threat of immense proportions, so communist hunters at home conjured up a dire peril from domestic subversion. The FBI's J. Edgar Hoover spent more time pursuing "subversives" in the U.S. than he did tracking down organized crime figures, this even though he had been directed to discontinue compiling lists of suspected communists or fellow-travelers by both FDR and Truman. Hoover's black list eventually would be shared with Senator Joseph McCarthy and other "Red Hunters," but only secretly.

The FBI, together with a young code breaker who would go on to work for the National Security Agency, did uncover a network of Soviet espionage agents headquartered in New York. This investigation led to the British scientist Klaus Fuchs, who had provided classified information to these agents on the Manhattan Project and Fuchs' and the Rosenberg's eventual conviction of espionage. Other leads from FBI investigations were less fruitful, although the HUAC interrogation of one FBI source, Elizabeth Bentley, did lead to Whitaker Chambers and, ultimately, to Alger Hiss. All of this investigative material, much of it based on hearsay and illegal wire taps, was fed to staff members at HUAC and was used in the Committee's hearings.

Hoover had a life-long fear of communist infiltration of the government and American life generally, but he aroused the suspicions of the Truman White House due to his well-known sympathies for right-wing Republicans, most of whom

shared his near pathological obsession with the domestic communist menace. Hoover also sought in 1946 and 1947 to make the FBI the nation's central clearinghouse for all intelligence, foreign and domestic, bearing on the communist threat. Thus, when the Truman administration decided to place the responsibility for foreign intelligence gathering in the new CIA (created in the National Security Act of 1947), Hoover ceased feeding his findings to Truman's inner circle and passed the information instead to friendly members and staff of HUAC. This will eventually include reports of communist influence in academia, the media, and Hollywood. Thousands of dossiers were created on every conceivable person and kept hidden in something called "the June files," which Hoover passed to HUAC and Senate Internal Security Committee members who used it to question witnesses subpoenaed to testify at committee hearings. Congressman and, after 1950, Senator Richard Nixon, and Senator Joseph McCarthy were two of the recipients of these FBI reports.

The most important figure caught in the anti-communist web was Alger Hiss, a veteran State Department figure with close ties to a number of prominent Democrats, including Secretary of State Dean Acheson. Hiss was accused by former communist party member Whittaker Chambers of passing highly classified material to the Soviets through Chambers himself in the 1930s. Once Chambers had renounced his old communist ties, he turned into a star witness for right-wing Republicans who hoped to use the charges against Hiss as a way of attacking the Truman Administration as a whole, and, in particular, Dean Acheson. There was a large element of anti-elitism in the Republican attacks. The party that had traditionally been associated with upper class conservatives adopted a populist tactic in the post-war years, and mocked and ridiculed the effete Ivy League snobs who they claimed looked down upon the common people from the heartland. Two Republican figures, in particular, sought to ride the anti-communist fervor of the late 1940s and early 1950s to fame and political power: Joseph McCarthy (elected to the Senate from Wisconsin in 1946) and Richard Nixon (elected to the House in 1946 and 1948 and the Senate in 1950).

We know today that there was never a credible threat of a successful communist movement in the United States. Former Soviet ambassador to the U.S, Anatoly Dobrynin, speaking after the fall of the USSR in 1991, noted that "The American Communist Party was never taken seriously in Moscow. No one in the Soviet leadership . . . ever talked seriously about any concrete prospects for communism in the United States." This is not to say that during the war, and especially while the Manhattan Plan scientists were developing the atomic bomb, communist spies did not steal and send to Moscow reports of highly classified matters, often with

the help of supposedly loyal Americans. The myth of Soviet communist success as a social and economic system persisted among American leftists throughout the depression years of the 1930s and during the war. After Hitler launched his invasion of the USSR in June 1941, Hollywood and the media often portrayed our Russian allies as heroic defenders of democratic values. Of course, this myth was quickly dispelled by Stalin's aggressive moves in eastern Europe as the war ended, and by the end of 1948, most Americans, even those who had believed previously in the chances for a Russian-American amity in the post-war period, had become decidedly anti-communist and anti-Soviet.

Upon his election to Congress in 1946, Nixon asked for and received assignment to the House Committee on Un-American Affairs. He saw this as a good platform from which to launch a crusade against the ideological enemy and thereby to win public recognition for himself. As his biographer John A. Farrell pointed out: "Richard Nixon, in his time on the House Committee on Un-American Affairs, was a precursor, a John the Baptist, a kind of prophet who showed others the way. And for breaking the trail that led to McCarthyism, he too was tainted. . . ."

Nixon "struck oil" during his interrogation of Chambers at August 3, 1948 session of the Committee. Chambers contended that he had told State Department official Adolf Berle in 1939 that Hiss, among others, was passing secrets to the Soviets, but that no action had been taken on his report. From this point on Nixon could see a great political benefit in showing that the New Deal leadership had been "soft on communism" all along, and that Hiss himself would be a perfect target as a foe: an effete, Harvard-educated lawyer who secretly was working for the enemy. In another hearing two days later, Hiss defended himself against Chambers' allegations and challenged him to repeat them outside the hearing room. When he did so, Hiss sued Chambers for libel. The matter dragged on, in and out of court, until Hiss was finally charged with perjury and found guilty at a trial in 1950. By that time, Nixon's name had become well known in Washington and throughout the country as a resolute anti-communist and pursuer of spies. Hiss could not be tried for espionage since the statute of limitations had expired for crimes committed as far back as 1939. In the 1950 Senate election in California Nixon accused his Democratic opponent, Helen Gahagan Douglas, of being "soft on communism" and went on to win the election which eventually set him up as Dwight Eisenhower's running-mate in the 1952 presidential election. One tactic used by Nixon was to compare Douglas's voting record in the House with the body's sole communist representative, Vito Marcantonio of New York City. He relied heavily on advisors who were anti-communist zealots who saw "reds" everywhere, or cynical practitioners of the dark arts of character assassination, like

Murray Chotiner. These tactics were a sure-fire winner in any race where other issues did not overshadow the prevalent "anti-communism" approach.

Of course the most famous practitioner of anti-communist politics was Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. Elected in 1946, when the Republicans took control of both houses of Congress for the first time since 1932, McCarthy eventually discovered the power of the communist conspiracy smear. He finally made a name for himself in 1950, when he went before a gathering of club women in Wheeling, West Virginia and made the ridiculous claim that he had a list of over two hundred suspected communist sympathizers working at the State Department. He never showed anyone such a list (it didn't actually exist), but the press picked up the story and McCarthy became, in short order, well known as a pursuer of subversives in the government.

McCarthy's "reign of terror" continued until 1954, when he was finally brought down after impugning the patriotism and competence of decorated World War II generals and other Army personnel, accusing them of shielding communist sympathizers in the ranks. Nixon tried to rein in McCarthy before he went too far, but to no avail. HUAC and the other investigative committees of Congress continued their hunt for spies and subversives, but by the mid-1950s they had lost much of their punch and gradually lost all credibility. Ironically, long-time chairman of HUAC, Congressman H. Parnell Thomas of New Jersey, ended up serving time in a federal penitentiary after being convicted of accepting bribes and actually met there some of the men who had been convicted of violating anti-subversive laws.

For the Truman Administration, the nadir of the "domestic cold war" came during the Korean War, when Republicans sought to tar Truman and Acheson with the blame for the North Korean communist's onslaught on the south. Much of the indictment actually stemmed from the communist victory over the Chinese Nationalists consummated in October 1949 when the latter evacuated to the island of Formosa (the Japanese name for Taiwan, which was used almost exclusively during this period). Despite the fact that the U.S. under Roosevelt and Truman had vouchsafed Chiang Kai Shek and his forces billions of dollars in aid, much of it under the Lend-Lease Program, the Republicans in Congress, especially those in the so-called "China Lobby," persisted in accusing the Democrats of starving the Nationalists of support, which allowed Mao's communists to win the civil war there. Furthermore, Nixon and McCarthy sought to prove that American diplomats, and a rather unimportant scholar named Owen Lattimore, had undermined U.S. support for Chiang and favored the communist takeover during

World War II and then when the Chinese civil war reignited after the Japanese defeat.

When the Chinese intervened in Korea in late 1950 with hundreds of thousands of "volunteers," the call went up from MacArthur and his supporters in Congress to "unleash" the Nationalists on Formosa to launch an invasion of China across the Straits of Formosa as a way of countering the Chinese attack in Korea. MacArthur and his China Lobby allies in the U.S. (almost exclusively in the GOP) also thought the U.S. should transport thousands of Chiang's troops to Korea to counter the Chinese offensive. Truman rejected this idea, fearing a wider war, and was told by his military advisors in Washington that, in any case, the Nationalist troops were quite worthless as a fighting force.

Secretary of State Acheson was a particular focus of right-wing attacks, both in the press and in Congress. His demeanor, of course, aroused Republican ire, but it was his refusal "to turn his back" on Alger Hiss – with whom he had a long-standing professional relationship – that particularly enraged the Republicans and led to calls for his impeachment. Acheson was also held responsible, in part, for Kim Il Sung's decision to launch the invasion of the South because he had publicly excluded the Korean peninsula from the American "defense perimeter" in Asia following the communist takeover in China. Acheson's faux pas came in a presentation at the National Press Club in January 1950, and merely made public a defense policy supported by all the U.S. military's top brass. And no one seemed to notice that MacArthur himself was on the record as saying Korea was not a place that the U.S. would defend, at least, that is, until it was actually attacked in June 1950. Post-Soviet scholars and Chinese experts have since said that Mao and Stalin actually did not take into account Acheson's "defense perimeter" presentation when making the decision to support the launching of the North's invasion.

The other key element in the right's condemnation of the Truman Administration was the charge that it had failed to protect American atomic secrets and had allowed them to be conveyed to the Soviet's by spies working in the Manhattan Project, most notably Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The Project's director, Prof. Robert Oppenheimer, also became a target for the "Red hunters," and had eventually in the 1950s to resign his position as head of the hydrogen bomb research and development operation under fire. Oppenheimer had, many years previously, been indirectly associated with leftists when a professor at Berkeley, but had never been a communist party member, and certainly never allowed his political views to interfere with his leadership of scientific research.

The domestic war against communism, like its foreign counterpart, suffered from an excess of partisanship after the military reverses in Korea and allowed Republicans to pose as the answer to the nation's challenges from Moscow, and from leftists in the unions, the media, and academia throughout the United States. On the foreign affairs front, shadow Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, with whom Truman had an uneasy relationship (but tried to woo by sending him to Korea to "consult" with MacArthur and other players on the scene, and report his findings to the White House) quickly gravitated to a highly critical position once he had been chosen by Ike as his top diplomat. Dulles embraced the notion of "rolling back" communism in Eastern Europe by supporting, at least rhetorically, those who sought to overthrow Soviet-backed regimes. This was the GOP's answer to the Democrat's policy of "containment," which Republican critics berated as wishy-washy and nearly treasonous. Eisenhower and Dulles also embraced the shibboleth of "massive retaliation." Should the Soviets (or the Chinese communists) try to impose communist regimes by force on their neighbors, the U.S. would respond with (at least) a threat of nuclear war. Of course, now that the Russians had nuclear weapons too, this threat amounted to accepting the possibility of "mutual assured destruction" (MAD). The Republicans liked the idea of relying on our nuclear deterrent to keep the peace, especially because it was much cheaper than a large build-up of conventional forces, which the Democrats had embraced in NSC-68. Eventually, of course, the U.S. paid for an immense nuclear arsenal *and* a huge army, navy and air force, thereby having the best (or worst) of both worlds.

Truman's approval rating dropped to 24 per cent at the end of his presidency, according to Gallup pollsters. His unpopularity was attributed largely to the stalemate in Korea, which dragged on until July 1953. Eisenhower said he would "go to Korea" if elected, which he did, in December 1952, even while Truman was still president. There is no evidence that Ike's trip to the front lines had anything to do with the eventual armistice, but it did placate domestic opinion somewhat. Perhaps more important for bringing about a truce was the death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953, an event which opened a window of opportunity for communist leaders in Moscow to pressure their Chinese communist allies to relent and accept a cease fire that left the situation in Korea essentially unchanged from before the war. Both Democrats and Republicans then supported (for the next twenty years) a non-recognition policy toward communist China and continued to avow support for Chiang Kai Shek's Chinese Nationalists.

In April 2025 we can look back at the beginning, and the end, of the Cold War with calm detachment. But, for many years, America stood on the brink of armed

conflict with the Soviet Union and the threat of nuclear annihilation seemed very real. From the fall of communism and the break-up of the Soviet Union into numerous separate states in the early 1990's until the September 11th attacks, the United States, and the West generally, enjoyed a period of relative peace, except for the intervention in Iraq. With the outbreak of Islamic terrorism, the United States became again the leader of a coalition determined to counter a common threat, a coalition that even included Putin's Russia. Today, however, we see a renewed American desire for isolation from international entanglements, one that carries us back to the 1920s and 1930s. With the Trump Administration, neither containment nor "roll-back" are on the agenda; rather the United States seems poised to appease, if not downright join, the revanchist former communist powers – Russia and China – in asserting a sort of "spheres of influence" foreign policy, in which neither Europe nor Asia would any longer be under the umbrella of American defense, and, instead, we would assert our supremacy in the Western Hemisphere, perhaps with like-minded regimes in Brazil and Argentina. How this will all end is anybody's guess.

We can be quite sure, however, that the foreign pretensions of the current U.S. government will have a domestic counterpart, which is the suppression of dissent and the persecution of opponents. Censorship, misinformation, and intimidation were all part of the American anti-communist movement's playbook in the late 1940's and early 1950's. An aggressive and intimidating foreign policy inevitably arouses domestic dissent and the Trump Administration will surely use any weapons it can lay its hands on to suppress and discredit opponents. This new domestic cold war bodes well to make earlier such crusades (after WW I and WW II) seem like child's play.