

Harvey Klehr Talks in Raleigh

Was Joe McCarthy Right?

I am tempted to start my talk by saying: "I have here in my hands a list of names." That, of course, was the phrase made famous by Senator Joseph McCarthy, who built his political career in the early 1950s, the history books tell us, on exaggerating the extent of Communist subversion of American life. He also gave his name to a phenomenon that has become a term of opprobrium in American political life. To accuse someone of McCarthyism or to label a person a McCarthyite is not to issue a compliment. The implication is that a person so named has made scurrilous and unwarranted accusations and is engaged in unethical and sleazy maneuvers. The late Senator from Wisconsin even gave his name to the period. The McCarthy era is commonly depicted as one where America, consumed by a paranoid and irrational fear of domestic communism, went on a witch-hunt. In fact, the one work of literature that virtually every very high school student in American will read is Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*, an account of the Salem witch trials, in which the main character is pushed and pressed to name his fellow citizens as witches. John Proctor's refusal to falsely implicate innocent people leads to his own condemnation and execution. Miller wrote his play during the heyday of McCarthyism and consistently maintained that it should be read as a parable of what happens when a community begins searching for and persecuting heretics.

Since, like witches, Communist spies were largely regarded as figments of the imagination, it is little wonder that the first version of the National History Standards for High School, released several years ago, devoted an inordinate amount of time to McCarthyism as the most frightening and detestable era in modern American history. For much of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990, there was a steady outpouring of books and articles arguing that the Communist Party of the United States was a small, inoffensive group of idealists committed to democracy, civil rights and labor organizing that was demonized and persecuted by an American inquisition, headed not only by McCarthy, but also by J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, and Richard Nixon, persecutor of Alger Hiss. During the 1970s revelations of FBI excesses and breaches of the law led to denunciations of Hoover, who was also smeared in an expose as someone blackmailed by organized crime because they had pictures of him dressed as a woman. (That, incidentally, is a charge we now know to have been fabricated by the Soviet KGB and disseminated by a gullible press.) And, of course, Watergate led to Nixon's disgrace and resignation from the presidency.

Among historians, there was widespread support for the idea that that American government had vastly overestimated the threat of Soviet espionage. The convictions of Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs were widely regarded as miscarriages of justice. The charges by Elizabeth Bentley that dozens of government employees had given her secret data to turn over to the Russians were derided as the unsupported ravings of a deluded alcoholic. President Truman's imposition of a federal loyalty-security program was attacked as an unjustified intrusion on civil liberties. Fears of reds hiding under beds unleashed by liberals like Harry Truman, it was alleged, had contributed mightily to Senator McCarthy's ability to demagogue the Communist issue.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, this simplistic version of an American history in which national security fears were merely the pretext for an attack on civil rights and liberties began to lose ground. With the collapse of

the Soviet Union, previously closed Russian archives began to open to scholars. I was the first American to gain access to the previously closed files of the Communist International and the CPUSA itself, located in Moscow, in the summer of 1992. Although I was originally far more interested in issues of the CP's political activities in America, I unexpectedly began to come across documents marked top secret being sent by a man named Pavel Fitin that contained the names of employees of the United States government who had been accused of being Soviet spies by Elizabeth Bentley, a defector from Soviet intelligence back in the late 1940s. It was interesting enough that these documents were labeled top secret; what was even more fascinating was that Fitin was head of the KGB's foreign intelligence branch and that his memos were dated from 1943 and 1944 — long before Bentley went to the FBI. That meant they were not reports on her testimony. Because the archivists had not realized that this material was in the files or its significance, I was able to take the microfilm copies out of the country. In *The Secret World of American Communism*, John Haynes and I reprinted nearly one hundred Russian KGB documents establishing that Soviet intelligence had recruited American communists to spy on its behalf. We also showed that from its inception in 1919, the CPUSA had been generously funded by the Soviet Union, with subsidies that reached \$3,000,000 a year by the mid-1980s, and that the Party leadership had worked closely with Soviet intelligence to ferret out American secrets. And we found snippets of information about a very hush-hush American project, code-named Venona, that had worked to decipher coded Soviet messages.

After our book appeared in 1995 we were asked to testify before a commission chaired by former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan on government secrecy. We pointed out the oddity of finding information about Venona in an open Russian archive while all information about it in America remained closed. Moynihan then pressed the director of the CIA, John Deutch, a committee member, to consider declassifying the Venona material. Later that year it was released — some 2900 messages between KGB and GRU (Soviet military intelligence) headquarters and their stations in New York, Washington, San Francisco and points outside the United States. The KGB communicated by sending cables via Western Union. They were both encoded and enciphered and were believed to be unbreakable because the Soviets used what was known as a one-time pad.

A KGB officer in the New York consulate, after receiving a report and a document from one of the spies he supervised would send the document to Moscow by diplomatic pouch. But, particularly during World War II, that pouch could take a week or so to make its way to Russia. So, he would write a report to be cabled to headquarters, summarizing the information or including material that was time-sensitive, in plain Russian text. He would then go to a codebook where there were four-digit numerical codes for thousands of words and encode his report. A cipher clerk would then take a one-time pad, a sheet of papers with sixty, four digit random number groups. The first number on the page would serve as the first number of his message — thus alerting the code clerk in Moscow as to what page of the one-time pad was used for the enciphering. Then he would take the second group of random numbers and add them to the first word of his coded message. If the sum of the two numbers was more than 9, he would not carry the tens — thus 6 plus 6 would be written down as 2. The resulting string of numbers would then be changed from four digit groups to five digit groups, transformed into letters (1=A, 2=B, etc) and transmitted to Moscow. (Western Union charged less to send letters). If the one-time pads were used only once, this system was, theoretically, unbreakable since each message was in a unique code, accessible only to the person who sent it and the person who possessed a duplicate of the one-time pad.

During WWII, however, the Soviet Union could not produce enough one-time pads with their random numbers to keep up with the enormous demand (there were no computers and the random numbers had to be produced by human beings rolling dice or otherwise manually generating random four-digit numbers.) So, they used a number of the one-time pads twice, thinking it would not compromise their system.

American counter-intelligence during WWII collected all incoming and outgoing international cables. Beginning in 1946, it began an intensive effort to break into the Soviet messages with the cooperation of the British and by dint of incredible perseverance, brilliant insights and the Soviet error of using some one-time pads as two-time pads, was able, over the next 25 years, to break some 2900 messages, containing 5000 pages of the hundreds of thousands of messages that been sent between 1941 and 1946 (when the Soviets switched to a different system). So, we were not reading these messages in real time, but years after they had been sent. And we were only able to read a small fraction of what was sent.

As a result of the material that has emerged from Russian archives and the release of the Venona files, we now know a great deal about the extent of Soviet espionage from the 1930s through the 1940s. There is no longer any question about the fact that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were Soviet spies (although Ethel played a very minor role). Julius is identifiable in Venona under the code-name Liberal. By the way, the use of code names shows that the KGB had a macabre sense of humor. The code name for their bitter enemies, the Trotskyists, was Polecats, Zionists were Rats, San Francisco was Babylon and Washington DC was Carthage.

There is no doubt that Alger Hiss was a Soviet spy and continued to provide information through the Yalta Conference which he attended as an advisor to FDR. The Soviets thoroughly infiltrated the Manhattan Project and were able to build an atomic bomb several years before they otherwise would have because of such spies as Klaus Fuchs, a German-born British scientist, convicted of espionage in the late 1940s and Theodore Hall, a young American physicist who died in Britain in 1999, who had never been publicly named as a spy until the Venona material was released. Hall had graduated from Harvard at 19 and was immediately recruited and sent to Los Alamos. A dedicated communist, he got in contact with the KGB after learning what he was working on. Although the FBI questioned him after Venona decryptions revealed his treachery, there was no legally admissible evidence against him (the government had made a decision not to use Venona material in court; in fact, it was doubtful that it would be legally admissible). Since he denied everything and there were no cooperating witnesses, it was not possible to prosecute him. At least two other important atomic spies turned over top secret information to the KGB but American counter-intelligence was never able to link the cover names in the messages — Quantum and Fogel — to real people.

All told, some 350 Americans turn out to have worked for Soviet intelligence during World War II — a time when we were allies. American counter-intelligence eventually identified more than 125 of these agents — but were never able to nail down who the other 200 plus were. Virtually every one of the people accused of being a Soviet agent by Elizabeth Bentley and Whittaker Chambers — both reviled and denounced for making false charges not only by political partisans in the 1940s but by historians ever since — turns out to have been a Soviet spy.

No Federal agency was immune to Soviet penetration. There were at least 16 Soviet agents in the OSS, predecessor to the CIA, including Duncan Lee, chief counsel to General William Donovan. The Office of War Information, the Board of Economic Warfare, United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, War Production Board, War Department, Signal Corps, Censorship office, the Justice Department were all penetrated. In the State Department Alger Hiss was not the only Soviet spy. Larry Duggan, in charge of Latin American affairs, was an agent. Lauchlin Currie, one of six presidential assistants, provided information. The most highly placed spy was Harry Dexter White, the number two man in the Treasury Department and one of the architects of the post-war international financial order — he

designed the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Bretton Woods agreement. The KGB so valued White's information — including meetings at the founding UN conference where he revealed the American negotiating strategy — that when he hinted at leaving government service because of financial pressures, the KGB offered to pay his daughter's college tuition.

There were even Soviet sources with access to the Venona project. One of the Russian-language specialists working on the project was William Weisband, who was exposed by a decrypted message as a long-time KGB asset. In 1950 the new liaison from British intelligence to Venona was Kim Philby, one of the most prominent Soviet moles within the British intelligence service. The Soviets thus learned about Venona very early, tracked its progress and were able to warn vulnerable agents. By the time American counter-intelligence began to follow and surveil those who had served as Soviet spies, they had ceased their activities and disposed of incriminating evidence. About all the FBI was able to do was, through interrogation, let these former spies know they were under suspicion, force them out of government service, and by leaking their names to congressional committees, ensure that they were called to testify before such bodies as the House Committee on Un-American Activities, where most took the Fifth Amendment, refusing to answer questions based on the possibility of self-incrimination. That tactic provided legal protection but also branded them in the public eye as security risks.

And that brings us back to Senator McCarthy. Does Venona and everything that has come out of Russian archives in the past decade demonstrate that he was correct in arguing that communist conspirators had infiltrated the American government and that Democratic administrations had not only turned a blind eye to treasonous activity but actively aided and abetted it? Does he deserve credit for exposing Communist spies who had betrayed their nation to serve a foreign power?

There are several things about which Senator McCarthy was right — although he was by no means the first or only person to note them. There was a very significant issue of national security presented by communist spying and subversion. No government can turn a blind eye to spying as extensive as that directed against the United States by the Soviet Union. Secondly, the American Communist Party was serving as an agent of a foreign power. Venona makes crystal clear that the leadership of the CPUSA was not only aware of Soviet intelligence networks in the government, but also actively assisted the KGB in recruiting American communists to spy. The CPUSA even had several liaisons who worked with KGB spymasters. The KGB code word for members of the CPUSA was "Fellow Countrymen." Nearly every American who worked for the KGB or GRU was a member of the CPUSA. That does not mean, of course, that all communists were Soviet spies, but most assuredly, most spies were communists.

Thirdly, McCarthy was partially correct that the Roosevelt and Truman administrations had been slow to respond to the issue of Soviet espionage. Whittaker Chambers had first gone to Adolph Berle with information about Alger Hiss, Harry White, Lauchlin Currie and others right after the Nazi-Soviet Pact and nothing had been done. It was not just that many liberals refused to believe that people like Hiss could not be spies. Even J. Edgar Hoover's FBI did not make Soviet espionage a major priority until 1943 and their early investigations, while filled with promising leads, did not go very far. To a large degree this was a consequence of the war — German and Japanese espionage was a much larger priority. Once the FBI began to make progress in unearthing Soviet espionage, the initial reaction of the Truman Administration was to worry that it could be embarrassed by the revelations of so many spies in so many important jobs. Not until 1948 did the administration launch an assault on Soviet espionage — convicting communist leaders under the Smith Act, prosecuting Hiss and the Rosenbergs and instituting a loyalty-security program to weed

communists out of the government. But espionage prosecutions were extremely hard to mount. For all her revelations, Elizabeth Bentley provided no usable documentation to take to court. If the government had tried those she accurately accused, it would have come down to her word against theirs because the Venona cables were off limits to prosecutors.

Fourthly, despite the decision of Soviet intelligence to close down most of its operations in the United States by the time McCarthy first made his charges, American intelligence had no knowledge of that fact. And, irrespective of whether Soviet intelligence networks were or were not functioning when he made his charges, the fact remained that some 200+ people who had served as Soviet spies were still unidentified. Was “Donald,” identified in Venona as a captain in the Navy in 1944, still there in the 1950s? Had he been promoted to Admiral? Had Muse, an employee of the OSS, transferred into the CIA? Was Dodger, a State Department official with some expertise in Soviet affairs, helping to make policy on the USSR? And was Quantum, the unidentified scientist who had turned over atomic data to the KGB, now working on the hydrogen bomb?

But if McCarthy was right about some of the large issues, he was wildly wrong on virtually all of the details. There is no indication that he had even a hint of the Venona decrypts, so he did not base his accusations on the information in them. Indeed, virtually none of the people that McCarthy claimed or alleged were Soviet agents turned up in Venona. He did identify a few small fry who we now know were spies but only a few. And there is little evidence that those he fingered were among the unidentified spies of Venona. Many of his claims were wildly inaccurate; his charges filled with errors of fact, misjudgments of organizations and innuendoes disguised as evidence. He failed to recognize or understand the differences among genuine liberals, fellow-traveling liberals, Communist dupes, Communists and spies — distinctions that were important to make. The new information from Russian and American archives does not vindicate McCarthy. He remains a demagogue, whose wild charges actually made the fight against Communist subversion more difficult. Like Gresham’s Law, McCarthy’s allegations marginalized the accurate claims. Because his facts were so often wrong, real spies were able to hide behind the cover of being one of his victims and even persuade well-meaning but naïve people that the whole anti-communist cause was based on inaccuracies and hysteria.

But if McCarthy was wrong on the details — and what is history but details — many historians today are both wrong on the details about McCarthyism and morally obtuse about the nature of communism. Far too many American historians believe that anti-communism or the search for Soviet spies was baseless paranoia. They recoil so strongly from McCarthy that they are unable to recognize that just because an objectionable politician cynically employed anti-communism does not mean that anti-communism was objectionable. The CPUSA was a haven for spies and Soviet subversion presented a genuine security threat to the United States. But, for Ellen Schrecker, former editor of *Academe*, journal of the American Association of University Professors, all varieties of anti-communism are species of McCarthyism. Opposition to communism, she has written, “tapped into something dark and nasty in the human soul.” Blanche Wiesen Cook of CUNY lamented that “everything fine and creative in American thought has been splattered and smeared” by hostility to communism.

One of the oddest phenomena in the academic world is the nostalgia so many professors display for communism. The human costs of that ideology, we now know, run upwards of 100 million dead in the former Soviet Union, China, Cambodia, eastern Europe and North Korea. In light of archival evidence that during the Great Purges of the 1930s, the USSR was executing almost 1000 political prisoners a day,

Robert Thurston of Miami University recently denied that there was “extensive fear” in the USSR. The collapse of the Soviet Union dismayed a number of historians who have lamented the sense of “triumphalism” among those who applaud its end. One diplomatic historian, Scott Lucas of Birmingham University in England, complained that revelations of Soviet spying were “part of the continued effort to win the history of the Cold War,” as if there is any doubt how that contest ended.

Most disturbing has been the willingness of many historians to blind themselves to historical evidence. As the new material has emerged from Russian archives and the declassified Venona documents, far too many historians have allowed their political and ideological biases to distort their historical judgment. Some have refused to accept the evidence, insisting, with not a shred of proof, that the Venona documents are all forgeries or simply ignoring them. One professor at Rutgers University wrote the entry on Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for the prestigious American National Biography, a standard reference source. He painted them as victims of an American political framework and did not mention the overwhelming evidence of their guilt — including the admission by their own Soviet KGB controller. It is probably not coincidental that this professor, Norman Markowitz, is an open member of the CPUSA.

Confronted by explicit evidence that such people as Lauchlin Currie or Harry Dexter White were spies, their defenders have invented scenarios so implausible that I am tempted to say that only an academic could credit them. For example, one Venona document records White telling a KGB officer — who sent the memo about the meeting to Moscow — that he had no suitable office or house to meet him; White “proposes infrequent conversations lasting up to half an hour while driving his automobile.” To James Boughton, the official historian of the IMF, this discussion was nothing more than “a means of keeping an ally informed of pertinent developments,” as if it was normal practice for high government officials to discuss confidential business with a KGB agent while driving around Washington, DC.

And then there are those historians who have, sometimes reluctantly, looked this new material in the face, admitted its validity, and provided retroactive support for one of McCarthy’s charges — that one segment of American opinion supported communism and the Soviet Union against their own country. These historians have concluded that the weight of the evidence of Soviet espionage is so overwhelming that it can no longer be denied. Instead, they have decided to justify it. Athan Theoharis of Marquette University argued that most of the information turned over by Soviet spies was frivolous and besides, by giving the USSR information that emphasized America’s industrial and military might, the spies were actually serving America’s interest, since their material might have deterred the USSR from acting rashly. Victor Navasky of the Nation magazine has insisted that most of what people are calling spying was actually simply “exchanges of information among people of good will.” And Ellen Schrecker, after admitting the extent of Soviet espionage, asked, “Were these activities so awful?” and reminded her readers that “as Communists these people did not subscribe to traditional forms of patriotism; they were internationalists whose political allegiances transcended national boundaries. They thought they were building a better world for the masses, not betraying their country.”

If espionage on behalf of Joseph Stalin’s Russia is simply an untraditional form of patriotism, then words like loyalty and patriotism have lost any meaning. It is only a short step to proclaiming that Joseph McCarthy’s disregard for due process and reckless smearing of innocent people is a non-traditional way of affirming basic American values. Which is exactly the argument that Ann Coulter makes in her unfortunate recent book, *Treason*, which seeks to rehabilitate Senator McCarthy as a great truth-teller. Her only excuse is that she is not a historian but a pundit and therefore can claim indifference to factual evidence.

Facts do matter. And it should be a matter of concern to all of us when historians distort facts. Just as the views of Holocaust deniers cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged because falsehoods about the past distort not only our sense of history but our view of the present and future, so too the falsehoods of Senator McCarthy and the falsehoods about the widespread Soviet espionage directed against the United States must be answered. The debates about the McCarthy era force us to reflect about why a substantial number of American public servants gave their allegiance to a totalitarian regime that murdered millions of people and the difficulties and dilemmas of how a democratic society responded to that threat.

Concluding our most recent book, *In Denial*, John Haynes and I were reminded about the Lost Cause myth of the south that held sway among many southerners in the first part of the 20 th century. The myth of a genteel, magnolia-scented Southern paradise was used to buttress legal segregation and racism. The Lost Cause, however, was not primarily about states' rights or agrarian populism or resistance to Northern capitalism, although these may have been elements, but about slavery. In the same way, American communism was based, not on fighting for civil rights or civil liberties, but on support for the political regime created and ruled by Joseph Stalin. The United States vanquished two totalitarian foes in the 20 th century. Any academic who defended Nazism would rightly be regarded with loathing. Those who defend communism and those who served it deserve no better — and no less. That so many American historians, including past presidents of the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association, remain willing in the 21 st century to apologize for or ignore the evils of communism and that pointing this out is controversial is, alas, another one of the legacies of Senator Joseph McCarthy.