

THE COLD WAR

Cours HD

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3. THE TRUMAN PRESIDENCY

2) The postwar strike wave

[...] Nearly 5 million workers walked off their jobs, demanding wage increases. Even Hollywood studios shut down because of strikes of actors and employees of the movie industry. President Truman was afraid the strikes would undermine the economy and prepared a threatening against workers. A court ordered requested strikers to go back to work, which they did. To resolve other strikes, Truman appointed federal « fact-finding boards » which generally recommended wage increases, although not enough to restore workers' purchasing power to wartime levels.

3) Civil rights after WWII

After the war, a new militancy was born among African - Americans who supported President Truman. This led many whites to reject American racial practices that seemed too close to Hitler's theory of a master race. Immediately after the war, black Americans enjoyed a prominence in national affairs for the first time since Reconstruction. Between 1945 and 1951, eleven states, from New York to New Mexico, created fair employment practices commissions and many cities passed laws against discrimination in access to jobs and public accommodations. Many blacks joined the NAACP during the war and the latter launched a voter registration campaign in the South. The number of black people having registered to vote reached 20% by 1952, nearly a sevenfold increase since 1940- the states that benefitted from this surge were in the Upper South but in Alabama and Mississippi, the heartland of white supremacy, the figures remained the same. Lynching began to be taken seriously by law enforcement agencies and in 1952, for the first time, no lynchings took place in the US. Another more favourable indicator was that the Brooklyn Dodgers, in 1947, challenged the long-standing exclusion of black players from major league baseball by adding Jackie Robinson to their team. Robinson was met with constant verbal abuse but always remained dignified which won him nationwide respect. He was awarded the Rookie of the Year award for the quality of his playing. His success led to other blacks being taken on in baseball teams and to the demise of the Negro Leagues.

But what was done *to secure these rights*?

In October 1947, P. Truman appointed a Commission on Civil Rights issued "To Secure These Rights", one of the most devastating accusations ever published of racial inequality in America. It urged the government to abolish segregation and ensure equal treatment in housing, employment, education and the criminal justice system. Truman approved of the report as "an American charter of human freedom." He believed that if the US were to offer the "peoples of the world" a "choice of freedom or enslavement," it must "correct the remaining imperfections in our practice of democracy."

In February 1948, Truman presented an ambitious civil rights program to Congress. He wanted the US to create a permanent federal civil rights commission, national laws against lynching and the poll tax, and action to make sure all Americans got equal access to jobs and education. But Congress did not follow through. So, in July 1948, Truman issued an executive order that desegregated the armed forces, the army thus became the first great American institution to promote racial integration and try to root out long-standing racial practices. Truman could not stand racial discrimination. But his aim was also political: by focusing on civil rights, he hoped to win reelection by expanding the political coalition Roosevelt had created. The Democratic platform of 1948 was the most liberal in the party's history with calls for federal health insurance and aid to public education, for instance.

4) Dixiecrat and Wallace revolt

At the Democratic national convention, Hubert Humphrey, the young mayor of Minneapolis, declared: "I say the time has come to walk out of the shadow of states' rights and into the sunlight of human rights." Many numerous southern delegates -dubbed Dixiecrats by the press- left the gathering. They decided to form the States' Rights Democratic Party. They nominated at their head, Governor Strom Thurmond of South Carolina whose platform

called for the “complete segregation of the races.” He got support from those who were alarmed by Truman’s Civil rights initiatives and contended that “Truman’s plans for extending federal power into the South to enforce civil rights would “convert America into a Hitler state. “

That same year, a group of left-wing critics of Truman’s foreign policy created the Progressive Party and nominated Henry A. Wallace –a former vice president- for president. Wallace wanted an expansion of social welfare programs and denounced racial segregation more vehemently than Truman but differed from him on the way to carry out the Cold War. Wallace advocated international control of nuclear weapons and a renewed effort to develop a different relationship with the Soviet Union. Instead of military confrontation Wallace wanted a relationship with the Soviet Union based on economic cooperation. He said he was willing to accept support from all Americans who agreed with him, including socialists and communists. But the influence of the Communist Party, although small, in his campaign, led to the departure of New Deal liberals and severe attacks on his candidacy. Truman declared that a vote for Wallace was a vote for Stalin. Truman was eventually reelected. For the first time since 1868, blacks in the North- where they enjoyed the right to vote-played a decisive role in Truman’s success.

4. THE CRUSADE AGAINST COMMUNISM

Because of the Cold War, the US kept a large and active federal government and spent great amounts of money on weapons and overseas bases. National Security became an incentive to develop projects like helping higher education and building new highways to be able to evacuate major cities in case of nuclear war. The Cold War also led to a culture of secrecy and dishonesty. During the 1950s and 1960s, both the Soviets and the Americans conducted experiments, exposing soldiers to chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, and civilians to nuclear tests on Pacific islands and Nevada which caused cancer and birth defects. The whole thing was only revealed to the public decades later.

Spending on the military during the Cold War, enabled to fuel economic growth and support scientific research, and led to the improvement of aircraft, computers, medicines and other products with a large impact on civilian life. It also helped to develop American higher education further. The Cold War also reshaped immigration policy. Refugees from communism were allowed to enter the country regardless of national-origin quotas. The embarrassment caused by America’s racial policies also led to the dismantling of segregation. But the Cold War like other wars divided the country between Americans deemed patriotic and those deemed disloyal.

1) Loyalty versus disloyalty

The Cold War divided the world into two notions: “liberty” and “slavery”. Those who could be linked to communism became enemies of freedom. As early as 1947, P Truman implemented a loyalty review system in which government employees were asked to show their patriotism without being allowed to meet accusers or, in some cases, to know the charges against them. This failed to uncover cases of spying, but it led to the dismissal of several hundred people from their jobs, and thousands resigned rather than accept to be submitted to investigation. In 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) launched a series of hearings in Hollywood about communist influence. The HUAC got a lot of publicity from calling famous screenwriters, directors and actors before the committee. Walt Disney, Gary Cooper and Ronald Reagan testified that there were numerous communists in the movie industry. But ten “unfriendly witnesses” refused to speak about their political beliefs and to “name names” (identify individual communists) on the grounds that it violated the First Amendment’s guarantees of freedom of speech and political association. The Hollywood Ten eventually served jail terms of six months to a year. They were blacklisted from Hollywood studios as were 200 others who were accused of communist sympathies or refused to give names.

2) The Rosenbergs’ trial

This was followed by a series of very much publicized legal cases which were fueled by the growing anticommunist hysteria. The most famous trial of the time was that of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a working class Jewish communist couple from New York City. In 1951, they were convicted of conspiracy to pass secrets concerning the atomic bomb to Soviet agents during WWII (when the Soviets were American allies). Their main accuser was David Greenglass, Ethel’s brother, who had worked at the Los Alamos nuclear research centre. The accusation against Julius Rosenberg rested on highly secret documents that could not be revealed in court, but the government had almost no evidence

against Ethel Rosenberg, and Greenglass admitted lying about her later in his testimony. Prosecutors seem to have used her hoping to pressurize Julius into confessing and implicating others. But considering the current hysteria their conviction was unavoidable. Despite an international outcry they were executed in 1953. Whether the Rosenbergs were guilty or not remains controversial and nobody in the US defends their execution today.

3) MacCarthyism

In this context, a little-known senator from Wisconsin suddenly emerged as the main national pursuer of subversives and gave a new name to the crusade against communism. Joseph R. Mac Carthy became senator of Wisconsin in 1946. In February 1950, at a speech in West Virginia, he announced that he owned a list of 205 communists working for the State Department. Although, the numbers changed constantly and Mac Carthy never identified a single person guilty of disloyalty, he used the Senate subcommittee he chaired to hold hearings and produce high charges against many individuals as well as the Defense Department, the Voice of America, and other government agencies. Many Republicans first supported Mac Carthy as a weapon against Truman but when Dwight D. Eisenhower (a Republican) became president in 1952, they started to find him embarrassing especially as he questioned Eisenhower's anticommunism. In 1954, the tide changed when Mac Carthy's nationally televised Army hearings revealed he was a bully who browbeat (= intimidé) witnesses and made sweeping (= à l'emporte-pièce/tout azimuts) accusations with no basis. Once the hearings were over, the Republican-controlled Senate voted to "condemn" Mac Carthy for his behavior. He died three years later. But the word "McCarthyism entered the political language as a byword for the practice of making unfair allegations and abuse of power in the name of anticommunism.

4) A culture of fear

By the early 1950s, anticommunism had led to a culture of fear, both at the local and national level. Some states created their own committees modelled on the HUAC, loyalty oaths were requested from teachers, pharmacists and members of other professions, and communists were banned from fishing and holding a driver's licence, for instance. The name of nearly 2 million alleged subversives in southern California were collected by the Better American League of the region. In the 1940s and 1950s it was not rare to lose one's job if one could not testify about one's past and present political beliefs, and to inform (=renseigner) on possible communists.

Local public libraries were forced by local anticommunist groups to remove « un American books » like the Tales of Robin Hood (who took from the rich to give to the poor). Left-wing speakers were banned from appearing on campus and teachers who refused to sign loyalty oaths or to testify against others were fired. The courts did nothing to stop the repression just as they had done during WWI. This showed that what James Madison had said about adding a Bill of Rights to the Constitution that would not prevent people's rights to be baffled and freedom to be infringed in case of popular hysteria proved right. The American Civil Liberties Union condemned Mac Carthy but refused to defend the accused Communist Party leaders.

3) How anticommunism was used

No doubt there were Soviet spies in the US but the very small Communist Party in no way threatened American security. Anticommunism was multi-faceted and had various aims. It grew quite strong among ethnic groups like Polish Americans because eastern Europe was dominated by the Soviet Union, and American Catholics because of communism and hostility to religion. Some government agencies like the FBI (= Federal Bureau of Investigation) used anticommunism to increase their power. With Edgar J Hoover at its head, the FBI developed files on thousands of American citizens including political dissenters, homosexuals, and others- most of whom had no connection to communism. It seems that Mac Carthy and his followers did not target Stalin so much as the legacy of Roosevelt and the New Deal. For Democrats anticommunism became a way to defend oneself against Republican charges and fight for the party's future. To historian Henry Steele Commager, anticommunism changed the definition of loyalty into a new one that of conformity. To him, anything other than « uncritical and unquestioning acceptance of America as it is » could now be labelled unpatriotic. As far as business was concerned, anticommunism became part of a campaign to identify government intervention in the economy with

socialism. White supremacists used anticommunism against black civil rights, business used it against unions and upholders of sexual morality and traditional gender roles linked it to subversion.

4) Politics of anticommunism

Anticommunism strongly structured American politics and culture from the 1940s to 1960. After the Republicans' unexpected defeat in Congress in 1948, anticommunism grew to block Truman's political program. Truman vetoed the Mac Carran Internal Security Bill of 1950 -which required « subversive » groups to register with the government, enabled to deny passports to its members and allowed their deportation or detention on presidential order. But Congress gave it the two-thirds majority it needed to pass it into law. Thus the Mc Carran Walter Act of 1952-the first major piece of immigration legislation since 1924- passed over the president's veto. *Whom Shall We Welcome ?* was a report from the Commission on Immigration that had been appointed by Truman which advocated to replace the quotas based on national origins with something more flexible like taking into account family reunion, labor needs, and political asylum. But the McCarran Walter Act kept the quotas unchanged. It allowed the deportation of immigrants identified as communists even they had become American citizens. But fears of aliens went further than chasing communists. In 1954, the federal government launched *Operation Wetback* to deport Mexicans from neighbourhoods where many of them lived illegally. This was done with the help of the military and led to the deportation of 1 million Mexicans.

In 1950, Truman secured the passage of a law that added self-employed and domestic workers -who had previously been excluded- to Social Security. But apart from that, the idea of expanding the New Deal welfare state faded. It was increasingly replaced by private welfare arrangements. The labor contracts of unionized workers now included health insurance plans, automatic cost of living wage increases, paid holidays, and pensions plans that supplemented Social Security. Whereas Western European governments provided these benefits to all citizens, in the US, only union members in major industries enjoyed them while the nonunionized majority of the population did not. This created a gap between American workers and a lot of inequality.

Organized labour supported the foreign policy of the Cold War and anticommunism led to the purging of some of the most militant union leaders, often the ones most committed to advancing equal rights to women and racial minorities in the workplace.

5) Cold War and civil rights

The civil rights movement too was met with transformation. Anticommunist investigators often mentioned attendance at interracial gatherings as evidence of disloyalty. Only very few prominent black people -like W.E.B. Du Bois-became outspoken critics of the Cold War. The NAACP purged communists from its local branches. The Cold War changed the way of thinking and the tactics of civil rights groups. They embraced the language of the Cold War and used it for their own purposes, insisting that by damaging the American image abroad, racial inequality played into the Russians' hands. So, they helped to cement Cold War ideology as the foundation of the political culture and complicated the idea of American freedom.

President Truman was in favour of greater attention to civil rights in part because he wanted to better the American image abroad. But after 1948, Truman's administration's efforts to promote civil rights did not deliver much. The enforcement of laws banning discrimination in employment and housing remained low. In 1952, the nomination for president of Adlai Stevenson-who had little interest in civil rights- and Southern segregationist, John Sparkman as his running mate, showed that the Democrats were already moving away from that issue.

In fact, the civil rights movement only temporarily waned away but it came at a crucial time, in the 1940s and 1950s, when the US was undergoing the greatest economic boom in its history. The « affluent society » that was born then opened new opportunities for tens of millions of white Americans in rapidly expanding suburbs while it left blacks trapped in the declining rural areas of the South and urban ghettos of the North. The contrast between the two would soon lead to a civil rights revolution and a redefinition of freedom.

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