The radical social activist Michael Harrington once commented that “1948 was the last year of the thirties.” He meant specifically that labor unrest and class-consciousness abated amid rising prosperity after 1948. So did chances for substantial extension of the New Deal. The political Left, already weak, reeled under sustained assaults. In place of reform activity, Cold War fears rose to the center of American society, politics, and foreign policy in 1949 and early 1950, generating a Red Scare that soured a little the otherwise optimistic, “can-do” mood of American life until 1954.

TRUMAN DID NOT KNOW how strong the Red Scare was to be when he returned seriously to the political fray in January 1949. Buoyed by the election, he hoped that the new Democratic Congress—54 to 42 in the Senate and 263 to 171 in the House—would support a wide range of domestic programs that he christened as the Fair Deal in his State of the Union address. Two weeks later he was inaugurated on a brilliantly clear day that seemed dazzling with promise. The first full-scale inaugural since the war, it was also the first to be seen on television. An estimated 10 million people as far west as St. Louis—where the television coaxial cable then terminated—watched the ceremonies. Millions more heard them on radio. At age sixty-four Truman seemed to brim with vitality and optimism.1

From the beginning, however, the President had troubles with Congress. The Fair Deal was a long and liberal laundry list repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act, a more progressive tax system, a seventy-five-cent minimum wage (it was then forty cents), agricultural reform, resource development and public power, broadening of Social Security, national medical insurance, federal aid to education, civil rights, and expansion of federal housing programs.” By the end of the 1949–50 congressional sessions Truman partially achieved three of these goals: public housing, a hike in the minimum wage, and expansion of Social Security. Otherwise the coalition of Republicans and conservative Democrats continued to dominate. At the start of the session, the Senate stymied liberal efforts to make cloture (cutting off of debate) possible by a simple majority instead of two-thirds. Congress’s action killed chances for civil rights legislation, which barely simmered on congressional back burners until the late 1950s. Special interest groups helped defeat the other programs. Congress refused to repeal Taft-Hartley, to pass a farm reform program, or to approve federal aid to education. National health insurance continued to be strongly opposed by the American Medical Association and failed to pass; that, too, faded as a visible legislative issue until the late 1950s.

The fate of efforts for agricultural reform illustrated the constellation of forces, especially well-organized interest groups, that stymied much of the President’s Fair Deal. The reform took the name of the Brannan Plan, named after Truman’s liberal Agriculture Secretary, Charles Brannan. He sought to scrap the costly system of production controls, government price supports, and benefit payments that had been enacted during the 1930s. In its stead, Brannan proposed, farmers raising perishable crops would be encouraged to produce as much as the market would bear—an effort that was expected to increase supply and drive down prices for consumers. In return, the government would compensate these farmers with direct income payments, up to maximums per producer. With these maximums he expected to limit the amount of benefits that would go to big producers and to attract the support of smaller “family farmers.” Brannan’s larger goal was political: to cement the Democratic alliance between small farmers, urban workers, and consumers that had appeared to be developing in the 1948 election.

A determined coalition of interests, however, opposed the plan. It included the majority of Republicans, who resisted Brannan’s ill-conceived political objectives; the Farm Bureau Federation, which represented the large growers; and many farmers, food processors, and middlemen, who feared the imposition of new and possibly complicated controls and who predicted that the costs of the plan would bankrupt the government. Some urban Democrats, too, were cool to a program that proposed to direct federal money at rural areas. A number of southern Democrats, worried that the plan would end up reducing government subsidies for cotton, also joined the anti-Brannan coalition. All these opponents defeated the plan in the House in 1949. While it appeared to have some chance in the Senate, the outbreak of the Korean War shunted it aside in 1950. It then died, leaving the old system in place. Thereafter, as in the past, powerful interests remained firmly in control of America’s agricultural system.

Truman fared a little better in his quest for anti-Communist foreign policies. In July 1949 the Senate overwhelmingly (82 to 13) ratified American participation in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The pact committed the twelve signatories to treat an attack on one as an attack upon all. This was a historic commitment for the United States, which since 1778 had refused to join military alliances in time of peace. When Cold War tensions increased in 1950, Truman sought to develop the military potential of the pact. After a “great debate” in early 1951, American troops were assigned in April to NATO forces in Europe, where they remained for decades.

Truman’s foreign and military policies otherwise ran up against formidable pressures. One such policy was Point Four, so named because it was the fourth point in his 1949 inaugural address. It called on Congress to appropriate funds for American technical assistance to so-called underdeveloped nations. Truman occasionally entertained vast, idealistic notions of transforming the Euphrates, Yangtze, and Danube valleys into models of the American TVA. But he added Point Four at the last minute and had done little to explain his goals to the State Department. Dean

5. Aside from the United States, these were Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, and Portugal.
Rusk, charged with helping to coordinate the program, later complained that “we in the State Department had to scurry around and find out what the dickens he was talking about and then put arms and legs on his ideas.”7 This was hard to do, in part because many conservatives and business leaders were cool to Point Four. Such a program would spend taxpayers’ money; technical aid might assist potential competitors. Finally approved in May 1950, Point Four was poorly funded and spattered along as a small and insignificant addition to overseas lending oriented mainly to Cold War concerns.8

Truman’s military programs in 1949–50 provoked further controversy, most of it within his administration. When Forrestal was forced to step down as head of Defense in early 1949, Truman replaced him with Louis Johnson, a loyal fund-raiser during the whistle-stop campaigning in 1948. Johnson was blunt, blustery, and highly ambitious, and he aroused a storm when he canceled the “supercarrier” that the navy was counting on as its key weapon of the future. Top naval officers dared insubordination by openly resisting Johnson and by opposing air force development of the B-36 bomber. The interservice brawling became ugly. General Omar Bradley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, sided with the air force and called navy leaders “fancy dans” who refused to play on a team “unless they can call the signals.” A compromise was finally reached in 1950, but the fighting exposed the divisions that still plagued the military establishment and revealed the inability of the Defense Secretary to discipline the Pentagon.9

The fire and smoke emanating from these battles partially obscured a continuing reality: American military defense remained unbalanced. Under General Curtis LeMay, a tough, hard-driving Cold Warrior who took over the Strategic Air Command in late 1948, America’s long-range bombing potential gradually acquired some efficiency. Nuclear tests in 1948–49 also encouraged planners: for the first time they could look ahead to quantity production of nuclear bombs that could be handled safely. But even that was a few years ahead.10 And fiscal considerations helped keep overall military expenditures in check. The defense budget in 1949–50 was around $13 billion, less than half the amount requested by the services. Low appropriations especially demoralized the army, whose strength had sunk to a low of 591,000 men by the time the Korean War broke out in June 1950. Given America’s grand expectations of leading the so-called Free World, the modest size of its military establishment was ironic. Acheson had earlier put his finger on these contradictions when he said that postwar American foreign policy could be summed up in three sentences: “1. Bring the boys home; 2. Don’t be Santa Claus; 3. Don’t be pushed around.”11

As in 1947, when the British decided they could no longer assure the security of Greece or Turkey, two events abroad in late summer and early fall of 1949 had momentous effects in the United States. These were the intelligence in late August that the Soviets had successfully exploded an atomic bomb, and the collapse of the Nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek that culminated on October 1 in the creation of the Communionists People’s Republic of China. These developments drove many people in the administration to reconsider their reliance on economic aid and to think about substantially greater militarization of the Cold War. The events also unleashed a gathering spate of criticism from anti-Communist groups in the United States who blamed Truman for having done too little too late. Some saw spies under the tables of state. A Red Scare, already an undertow in American life, rose ominously in 1949–50, ultimately diverting national politics—and much else— throughout the next four years.

If top administration leaders had spoken more frankly about what they knew about Soviet science, the explosion in the USSR would not have come as a big surprise. They recognized that the Russians understood the basic science involved, and military leaders were aware that Stalin had given nuclear development very high priority. Moreover, the Soviet achievement did not change very much in the short run. The Pentagon recognized that the USSR still lacked the long-rangebombers necessary to wage an air attack on the United States and that Soviet air defenses—to say nothing of the Soviet economy—were weak. Still, when Truman informed the American people in September, many were deeply alarmed. The cover of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, which until then had displayed a clock with the minute hand pointing to eight minutes before twelve, the hour of doom, now moved the hand to 11:57.12 Many other

7. Dean Rusk, as told to Richard Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York, 1990), 141.
10. Ibid, 44–54.
Americans simply refused to believe that the Communists—whose system was surely technologically inferior—could have managed the feat by themselves: spies must have done it for them.

Within the administration the news reinforced the hand of advocates who were demanding the strengthening of American armed forces. After all, Stalin still seemed tyrannical and unyielding. He had promoted the coup in Czechoslovakia and threatened West Berlin. Who could tell what he would do when he had the planes to deliver the Bomb? Kennan, who then headed the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, had been opposing major militarization of containment and had been calling on the administration to step up negotiations with the Soviets. He also recommended thinking about the reunification and demilitarization of Germany, as a way of reducing a major source of Cold War tensions in central Europe. News of the Soviet bomb destroyed his hopes, and he resigned, discouraged and defeated, at the end of the year. Henceforth America’s European policy moved rapidly toward the militarization of NATO, the rearming of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), which joined NATO in 1955, and American acceptance of the apparently permanent division of Germany and Europe.

The victory of Mao Tse-tung in China should have been even less surprising. Since the end of World War II his Communist forces had steadily beaten back the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek, who ultimately fled to the island of Taiwan, where he imposed a harsh rule on the natives. Well before 1949 many Americans close to the scene had been disgusted by Chiang, a corrupt and increasingly unpopular leader with his own people. General Joseph “Vinegar Joe” Stilwell, America’s chief military adviser in China during World War II, had complained at the time that the Nationalists were more interested in battling the Communists than the Japanese. In coded messages he had referred contemptuously to Chiang as “the Peanut.” In 1945–46 Truman had hoped that America could help end the civil war and sent Marshall to China as an emissary. There was no stopping the fighting, however, and Truman lost all faith in Chiang. They were “all thieves, every last one of them,” he said privately of the Nationalists in 1948.

By then Truman recognized that the hatreds dividing Chiang and Mao were implacable and that the United States could not save the venal Nationalist regime. Acheson, who replaced Marshall as Secretary of State in Truman’s second term, issued a government White Paper in August 1949 that asserted this pessimistic perspective in no uncertain terms. “The unfortunate but inescapable fact,” the paper said, “is that the ominous result of the civil war in China was beyond the control of the government of the United States. Nothing that this country did or could have done within reasonable limits of its capabilities could have changed the result. . . . It was the product of internal Chinese forces, forces which this government tried to influence but could not.”

This assessment was in some ways disingenuous. Most of Truman’s top people were committed Anglophiles and Europe-firsters. They consistently focused on aiding western Europe, where United States interests were paramount, not on helping Chiang. Still, Acheson’s paper was accurate in most respects. The Truman administration had tried to help Chiang’s regime, to the tune of nearly $3 billion in aid since the war, only to watch the aid wasted by the corrupt and uninspiring Nationalist leadership. The President and Acheson were correct in saying that Chiang was his own worst enemy and that the United States did not have the economic or military capacity to save him.

Unfortunately for Acheson and Truman, Americans were in no mood to accept the White Paper’s version of history. Alarmed by the rise of Communism, they had also been developing high expectations about the capacity of the country to have its way in the world. Henry Luce of Life and Time, raised in China as the son of Presbyterian missionaries, had demanded greater American commitment to Chiang, and with others in a loosely organized but well-financed “China lobby” he led rising criticism of the administration’s Asia policies after Chiang’s defeat. Conservative Republicans, including Congressman Walter Judd of Minnesota, a former medical missionary in China, joined him. Many of these Republicans had been Asia-oriented since the days of President McKinley. Democratic Congressman John F. Kennedy, a Catholic anti-communist, also assailed the President. He explained to an audience in Boston that “pinks” had betrayed American policy in China. “This is the

tragic story of China, whose freedom we once fought to preserve. What our young men had saved, our diplomats and our Presidents have frittered away.”

These critics had varied motivations. Some were highly partisan Republicans. Shocked and embittered by Truman’s unexpected victory in 1948, they were eager to tar the administration however they could. More generally, Americans were frustrated. Why couldn’t the United States, the most powerful and wealthy nation in the world, prevent bad things from happening? As one observer put it, people had an “illusion of American omnipotence.” When setbacks occurred—the Bomb in the USSR, “losing” China—the United States must have done something wrong. From this simplistic starting point it was an easy next step to lash out at scapegoats, including spies, “pinks,” and “Commie sympathizers” in the government.

In dealing with frustrations such as these, high-level administration officials tried to muddle through. Acheson, while an ardent foe of the Soviet Union, not only defended the White Paper bit it also considered recommending that the United States eventually recognize, as many Western allies did, Mao’s regime. Such a move, he hoped, might encourage Mao to act as a sort of “Asian Tito” and drive a wedge into international Communism. In January 1950 Acheson made a widely noted speech in which he excluded Taiwan (and South Korea) from the “defense perimeter” that he said the United States ought to protect.

The United States, however, did not recognize Red China. Mao, a revolutionary, acted hostilely toward the United States. Most Americans, moreover, believed in the existence of a worldwide Communist conspiracy, in which Mao and Stalin were twin demons. “Credibility” demanded that the United States stand firm against such a threat. For all these reasons the People’s Republic continued to be treated as a major enemy. The United States turned a blind eye to Chiang’s despotism in Taiwan and refused to support the admission of the People’s Republic to the United Nations, whereupon the Soviet Union walked out of the Security Council in January 1950. Fear of China also caused the Truman administration to stiffen its posture against Communist activity in neighboring Indochina, then under the uneasy rule of the French. In May 1950 the United States began sending military aid to Bao Dai, the puppet anti-Communist head of Vietnam. Although the aid at first was small—it was hardly noted at the time—it marked a further militarization and globalization of American foreign policy, and it quietly set in motion an ever-greater American commitment against Communist influence in Southeast Asia.

These commitments paled before the two most important and long-range policy consequences of the events of 1949: the Truman administration’s decision to go ahead with development of the hydrogen bomb, or “Super,” in January 1950, and the consensus of top military and foreign policy planners behind one of the key documents of the Cold War, National Security Council Document 68, in April.

Unlike the A-bomb, which almost everyone in the know had favored developing in the early 1940s, the idea of producing a hydrogen bomb evoked passionate arguments in late 1949 and early 1950. Scientists expected that the Super, a fission or “thermonuclear” weapon, would be an awesomely destructive horror that could unleash the equivalent of several million tons of TNT. This was hundreds of times more powerful than atomic bombs. A few well-placed hydrogen bombs could kill millions of people.

Among the foes of development were famous scientists who had supported atomic development during World War II. One was Albert Einstein, who took to the radio to say that “general annihilation beckons.” Another was James Conant, the president of Harvard, who served on a general advisory committee of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). He opposed developing the Super on moral grounds, arguing that “there are grades of morality.” He also believed that the H-bomb was unnecessary because the United States already had enough atomic power to deter all aggressors. Also influential in the fight against the super was J. Robert Oppenheimer, who was widely known for his scientific expertise, his literary talents (he had learned seven languages, including Sanskrit, as a prodigy at Harvard), and his managerial skills as the director of atomic bomb manufacture at Los Alamos during the “war.” Oppie,” as he was known, to his friends, had many left-wing associates. His brother and his wife had been Communists in the 1930s. But his opposition to develop-

20. Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 68–70; McMahon, “Cold War in Asia.”
22. McCullough, Truman, 761.
ment of the Super was not politically inspired. It rested, like Conant's, on a combination of moral revulsion and practical policy considerations. Their arguments carried the day in the advisory committee, which recommended against development.23

Leading government officials, too, had doubts about the hydrogen bomb. Among them was Kennan, who wrote a seventy-nine-page memorandum opposing the Super before he left the government in January 1950. Kennan believed in what was later called “minimum deterrence,” which he thought possible with a decent arsenal of atomic bombs. He urged the United States to say that it stood for “no first use” of nuclear weapons. David Lilienthal, who headed the AEC, agreed with Kennan. He favored negotiating with the Soviet Union in the hope that both countries would agree not to develop the new weapons.24

Other government officials, however, strongly urged development. Eleanor Roosevelt, whom Truman had named to America’s UN delegation, came out for it in January. Lewis Strauss, a dissenter from the AEC report, considered it “unwise to renounce unilaterally any weapon which an enemy can reasonably be expected to possess.” The Joint Chiefs maintained that the bomb would be a deterrent as well as “an offensive weapon of the greatest known power possibilities.” Senator Brien McMahon, chairman of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, expressed a common viewpoint on Capitol Hill when he wrote Truman, “Any idea that American renunciation of the super would inspire hope in the world or that ‘disarmament by example’ would earn us respect is so suggestive of an appeasement psychology and so at variance with the bitter lessons learned before, during and after two recent world wars that I will comment no further.” No statement more clearly revealed the fear of “appeasement,” rooted in the “lessons of history,” that lay behind a host of Cold War decisions by American officials in the postwar era.25

On January 31, 1950, Truman decided in favor of development. He was influenced in part by the position of the Joint Chiefs, particularly by General Bradley, whom Truman admired greatly. He was also keenly aware, as was Dean Acheson, of the criticism he would get from conservatives and other anti-Communists if he opposed the H-bomb. Most important, no one could be sure that the Soviets would not go ahead on their own. “Can the Russians do it?” he asked his final advisory committee of Acheson, Lilienthal, and Defense Secretary Johnson. All nodded yes. “In that case,” Truman replied, “we have no choice. We’ll go ahead.” Truman later explained to his staff, “[W]e had to do it—make the bomb—though no one wants to use it. But... we have got to have it if only for bargaining purposes with the Russians.”26

When Truman announced his decision, many liberals were appalled. Max Lerner wrote, “One of the great moral battles of our time has been lost. To move toward the ultimate weapon could mean only an ever-escalating arms race, the possible decay of democracy in a garrison atmosphere... and the possibilities of unimaginable horror.” Other liberals, however, backed the President. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., replied to critics like Lerner by asking, “Does morality ever require a society to expose itself to the threat of absolute destruction?”27 Schlesinger’s answer, of course, was no, as was Truman’s. Given the frigid Cold War atmosphere of early 1950, the decision to go ahead with the hydrogen bomb seems to have been virtually unavoidable.

Development, as it turned out, proved complicated, in part because of formidable mathematical problems involved. But scientists and mathematicians, including the strongly anti-Communist Hungarian refugees Edward Teller and John von Neumann, persisted. With the help of more powerful computers, which were becoming vitally important in the high-tech world of American weaponry, they moved rapidly ahead. The world’s first thermonuclear explosion took place on November 1, 1952, at Eniwetok Atoll in the Marshall Islands of the Pacific.

The explosion exceeded all expectations, throwing off a fireball five miles high and four miles wide and a mushroom cloud twenty-five miles high and 1,200 miles wide. Eniwetok disappeared, replaced by a hole in the Pacific floor that was a mile long and 175 feet deep. Scientists figured that if the blast had been detonated over land, it would have vaporized cities the size of Washington and leveled all of New York City from Central Park to Washington Square.

Eight months later, on August 12, 1953, the Soviets followed suit, setting off a blast in Siberia. Premier Georgi Malenkov announced, “the United States no longer has a monopoly on the hydrogen bomb.” His boast was somewhat misleading, for the Soviets (like the Americans) did not yet have the capacity to make a “bomb” light enough to be delivered on a target. Still, development raced ahead in the next few years, not only

25. Ibid., 81.
26. Halberstam, Fifties, 46; Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 82.
27. Hamby, Beyond the New Deal, 374.
in the United States and the Soviet Union but also in other nations. The age of nuclear proliferation and of maximum possible destruction was near at hand.28

The Super represented one half of the plans in 1950 for America's future military posture. National Security Council Document 68 (NSC-68), which called for vast increases in defense spending, was the other. It, too, had its roots in late January. Truman then authorized a study of defense policy and named Paul Nitze, who had succeeded Kennan as head of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, to head the effort. Nitze, a close associate of Acheson, was yet another Establishmentarian—private school and Harvard graduate, Wall Street investment banker, official since 1940 in the Navy and the State departments, and vice-chairman of the postwar Strategic Bombing Survey that had explored the impact of air raids during World War II. Another key adviser in the process that led to NSC-68 in April was Robert Lovett, who later that year left his own investment banking business to return to government as the Deputy Secretary of Defense.

Nitze, Lovett, and the others who worked on NSC-68 in early 1950 were virtually fixated on the Soviet atomic explosion, and they adopted a worst-case scenario for the world. Asserting that the USSR would have the capacity to deliver 100 atomic weapons on the United States by 1954, they rejected arguments that a moderate mix of economic, military, political, and psychological measures would be sufficient to contain the Soviet Union and keep major areas of industrial-military value—mostly in western Europe—out of hostile hands.29 They insisted instead that the Soviet Union was an aggressive, implacable, and dangerous foe that either directly or indirectly (by infiltration and intimidation) sought domination of the world. As Lovett put it in an apocalyptic memo:

We must realize that we are now in a mortal conflict; that we are now in a war worse than any we have experienced. Just because there is not much shooting as yet does not mean that we are in a cold war. It is not a cold war; it is a hot war. The only difference between this and previous wars is that death comes more slowly and in a different fashion.30

The obvious conclusion was that the United States and its allies must build up not only their nuclear power but also their more conventional forces "to a point at which the combined strength will be superior . . . to the forces that can be brought to bear by the Soviet Union and its satellites." This amounted to what was later called a policy of "flexible response." Although the committee did not include cost estimates for this policy, advocates understood that military spending would have to quadruple to around $50 billion a year, which would "provide an adequate defense against air attack on the United States and Canada and an adequate defense against air and surface attack on the United Kingdom and Western Europe, Alaska, the Western Pacific, Africa, and the Near and Middle East, and on long lines of communication to those areas."31

This was a breathtaking and revolutionary document, full of emotional language contrasting the "slave society" of Communists to the blessings of the "Free World." The USSR, "unlike previous aspirants to hegemony, is animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world." Soviet fanaticism necessitated globalistic responses: "The assault on free institutions is world-wide now, and in the context of the present polarization of power a defeat of free institutions anywhere is a defeat everywhere."

The conclusions of NSC-68 rested on one key assumption, which reflected the grand expectations that pervaded America in the postwar era: economic growth in the United States made such a huge expansion of defense spending easy to manage, and without major sacrifices at home. One of Lovett's memos strongly made this case: "There was practically nothing the country could not do if it wanted to do it."32 While drafting the document, Nitze communicated regularly with Leon Keyserling, chairman of Truman's Council of Economic Advisers. Keyserling had great faith in the ability of government spending to stimulate the economy. Then, as throughout in the postwar era, grand expectations about American economic and industrial growth promoted globalistic foreign and military policies.

NSC-68 was seriously flawed in many respects. As Kennan complained at the time, it assumed the worst of Soviet foreign policy, which for the most part remained cautious, concentrating on tightening control of eastern Europe and other sensitive regions close to Soviet boundaries. NSC-68 also defined United States defense policies in terms of hypotheti-

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29 The British conducted a successful atomic test off the coast of Australia in October 1952; the French followed in February 1960, with tests in the Sahara. China became the fifth nuclear power in 1964. See chapter 10 for discussion of testing of H-"bombs" in the mid-1950s.
32 Ibid., 93-94. The emphasis is mine.
cal Soviet moves rather than in terms of carefully defined American
interests. This approach required the United States to be prepared to put
out fires all over the globe.33

The report’s assumptions about the relationships between Soviet and
American power were especially questionable. In 1949 the American
GNP was roughly four times as great as that of the Soviet Union, which
remained an inefficient and relatively unproductive society. Although the
Soviets were devoting perhaps twice as much of their GNP to military
spending, this was being done at terrific costs at home and could not make
them serious economic rivals of the United States in the foreseeable
future. The Soviets maintained a much bigger army, but they had used it
to stamp out dissent in their spheres of interest, not to invade new territo-
ries. There was no clear indication in 1950 that this largely defensive
posture would change. America had much the greater arsenal of nuclear
weapons, by far the superior navy, much stronger allies, and incompara-
ably greater economic health. As it turned out, moreover, the Soviets did
not make a big effort to improve their long-range bombing forces until the
mid-1950s; NSC’s worries about nuclear attack as early as 1954 were way
off the mark.34

When Truman received the report in early April, he neither endorsed
nor rejected it. Instead, he passed it along for economic analysis. If the
Korean War had not broken out two months later, it might not have been
acted on; Truman still hoped to curb defense spending. Still, NSC-68
commanded the support of virtually all high-ranking American officials
(Defense Secretary Johnson excepted) at the time it was delivered. It was
music to the ears of the armed services. The Korean War then cinched the
case for defense spending along the lines urged by the report. By fiscal
1952 the United States was paying $44 billion for national defense; by
1953, $50.4 billion, roughly the amount privately anticipated by advoca-
ces of NSC-68. Spending declined a little when the Korean War ended
but still ranged between $40 and $53.5 billion every year between 1954
and 1964. Along with the decision for the Super, the logic of NSC-68
reflected the rapid militarization in American foreign policies following
the Soviet atomic explosion and the “fall” of China.

The toughening of American attitudes toward the Soviets in
early 1950 did not exist in a cultural or political vacuum. On the contrary,
events heated up already flammable anti-Communist emotions and igni-
ted a Red Scare of considerable fire and fury. On January 21, ten days
before Truman decided for the Super, a federal jury brought thirteen
months of hotly contested litigation to a close by finding Alger Hiss,
accused of having been a spy for the Soviets in the 1930s, guilty of
perjury. Hiss, a middle-rank Establishment figure in foreign policy coun-
cils during the mid-1940s, was sentenced to five years in prison. On
January 27 Klaus Fuchs, a German-born English atomic scientist who
had worked on the A-bomb, was arrested for turning over secrets to the
Soviets during and after the war. He was later tried in England, convicted,
and imprisoned. On February 9 Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin
alleged that Communists infested the American State Department. His
accusations, offered to the Ohio County Women’s Republican Club of
Wheeling, West Virginia, increased pressure on the Truman administra-
tion to get tough with the Soviets. The Red Scare of “McCarthyism”
helped to besmirch American politics and culture for much of the next
five years.

These dramatic events, while of great significance in fanning the flames
of anti-Communism in the United States, have to be seen in a longer
historical context. McCarthy was in fact a Joe-Come-Lately to the Red
Scare, whose roots require a quasi-archaeological probe into the Ameri-
can past. Americans have periodically lashed out at radicals, alleged sub-
versives, aliens, immigrants, blacks, Catholics, Jews, and other vul-
nerable groups who could be blamed for complex problems. The Red
Scare in America following the Bolshevik Revolution was only the most
flagrant of many outbursts, driven both by the government and by popular
vigilantism, against left-wing activists. These outbursts revealed the vol-
itility of popular opinion, the growing capacity of the State to repress
dissent, and the frailty of civil libertarian thought and action in the United
States.

The turbulent years of the 1930s and especially of World War II did
much to lay the foundation for the Red Scare of the 1940s and 1950s.
From the mid-1930s on, right-wing politicians and intellectuals readily
associated the New Deal with socialism and Communism. The House
Committee on Un-American Activities investigated left-wingers following
its establishment in 1938.35 In 1940 Congress approved the Smith Act,
which made it a criminal offense for anyone to “teach, advocate, or

33. Ibid., 100–101; Wells, “Sounding the Tocsin.”
34. Wells, “Sounding the Tocsin.”
35. Walter Goodman, The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Com-
encourage the overthrow or destruction of . . . government by force or violence." People accused under the act did not have to be shown to have acted in any way, only to have advocated action. The Smith Act was used by the Roosevelt administration against alleged Nazis as well as against American Trotskyists—prosecutions that Communists applauded.

At the same time, Roosevelt unleashed FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to check into potentially subversive people and groups. In 1941 Congress authorized the army and navy summarily to dismiss any federal employee considered to be acting contrary to the national interest. This was the start of governmental “security risk” programs, which cost employees their jobs in 1942. The Justice Department began developing in 1942 the “Attorney General’s list” of groups considered disloyal. By the middle of the year the FBI had helped the AG to name such groups. Even the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which had been formed following World War I to protect dissenters, joined in the patriotic efforts of the war years. As early as 1941 it had excluded Communists from membership. From 1942 on Morris Ernst, its head, corresponded with Hoover on a “Dear Edgar” basis, in which he passed on information about alleged Communists in the ACLU.

Wartime patriotism spurred other, much more flagrant violations of civil liberties, notably the incarceration of Japanese-Americans in “relocation” camps during most of the war. Less obvious but of long-run significance was the hyper-patriotism that developed among many American people. For some this patriotism arose during military service. For others it followed years of work in defense plants. Either way, large numbers of people, including many European-Americans, came to feel a larger sense of belonging to the United States. The patriotic wartime injunction “Be American” competed with earlier ethnic or class identifications.

When the Cold War arose after 1945, Americans were often quick to join the “get-tough” chorus. The atheistic dogmas of orthodox Marxism repelled Catholics and other religious believers. The subjection of the “old countries” offended many others. More generally, Americans who were trying to get ahead—going to college, raising families, moving to suburbia, acquiring consumer goods—were all the more ready to believe fervently that the United States was a free and mobile society and that Communism, which took away private property, was not only totalitarian but also a threat to their social and economic futures. In this way the hopes for social mobility that pervaded the postwar years stimulated both grand expectations and nervous feelings about Reds. The quests for personal security and domestic security became inextricably interrelated.

World War II had lasting effects in one other, less definable way: like most armed conflicts it toughened popular feelings. The fighting, people concluded, had been necessary. Sacrifice was noble. “Appeasers” were “soft.” Long after the war many Americans tended to glorify the the “manly” virtues of toughness. Those who were “soft” ran the risk of being defined as deviant. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.’s widely admired liberal manifesto The Vital Center (1949) made this clear. Liberals, he said, showed “virility... leftists and rightists “political sterility.” Communism was “something secret, sweaty, and furtive like nothing so much, in the phrase of one wise observer of modern Russia, as homosexuals in a boys’ school.” The homophobia that pervaded American culture had many sources, but some of it rested on the view that homosexuals were not only perverted but also subject to blackmail. In the early 1950s they were specifically included among the categories of people who could be fired from sensitive positions as “security risks.”

Many postwar forces abetted these wartime developments. One was disturbing evidence of Communist espionage. In June 1945 the FBI arrested several employees of Amerasia, a left-wing magazine close to the American Communist party, as well as John Stewart Service, a China expert in the State Department. The magazine’s offices contained 600 secret and top-secret documents, some of which contained information concerning American plans for bombing in Japan. When it became known that federal agents had illegally entered the magazine’s offices, the case against the editors fell apart. Evidence concerning Service was too skimpy, and he was released. The result was small fines for three Amerasia staff members for illegal possession of government documents.

In part because the Justice Department was embarrassed about its own illegal activities in the case, the Amerasia matter did not get widespread

publicity at the time. But it was a worrisome affair for government officials. When Igor Gouzenko, a file clerk in the Soviet Embassy in Toronto, defected in early 1946, their worries intensified. Gouzenko produced evidence that the Soviets had spied on atomic energy research in Canada and elsewhere during the war. Neither the Amerasia nor the Gouzenko affair proved that any Americans—let alone government officials—were guilty of espionage. Indeed, no American public officials were convicted of spying at any time during the postwar Red Scare. But Gouzenko’s revelations did show that the Soviets had spied on America during and after World War II. Evidence such as this later played into the hands of Red Scare activists.

The heat of partisan politics further intensified the postwar Red Scare. Running for the presidency in 1944, Dewey had linked Communism, FDR, and the New Deal. The Democrats had fired back by associating the GOP with fascism and “fifth column” activities. Red-baiting in the 1946 campaign smeared many candidates, including Congressman Jerry Voorhis, Richard Nixon’s opponent in southern California. Voorhis denied Nixon’s unfounded accusations, but to no avail. His defeat, like that of others attacked by anti-Communists in 1946, provided an obvious object lesson: Red-baiting could pay off at the polls.

Ardent foes of Communism often enjoyed substantial support from conservative interest groups, many of which worked closely with Hoover. The American Legion was one, the United States Chamber of Commerce another. Right-wing publishers such as Colonel Robert McCormick of the Chicago Tribune and aging, melancholic William Randolph Hearst, who ran a nationwide chain of papers, regularly (and sometimes hysterically) raised the alarm against subversives at home and Communists abroad. Patriotic organizations such as the Daughters of the American Revolution chimed in. Leading prelates of the Catholic Church as well as the Knights of Columbus were especially outraged by the atheism of Communism. Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York was a sort of chaplain of the Cold War and actively assisted the FBI to root out Reds from American institutions.

By mid-1946 a number of anti-communist liberals and leftists joined in this chorus against Communism at home and abroad. They included union leaders, intellectuals, and others who joined the ADA and who worried about Communist influence in the labor movement and other high places. These liberals opposed the extreme and sometimes irrational fulminations about Communism that emanated from the Far Right. They detested Red-baiters like Nixon. Unlike many conservatives, they did not worry much that Communism threatened private property in the United States. But, having tried to work with Communists in progressive causes, they were certain that American Communists got their marching orders from Moscow. Irving Howe, a democratic socialist, explained, “Those who supported Stalinism and its pitiful enterprises either here or abroad, helped befoul the cultural atmosphere, helped bring totalitarian methods into trade unions, helped perpetrate one of the great lies of the twentieth century, helped destroy whatever possibilities there might have been for a resurgence of a serious radicalism in America.”

Whether the American Communist party was as alien an organization as Howe and others maintained still divides historians. Some point out accurately that the party, after reaching a peak in membership in 1945, declined in the late 1940s. Although influential among certain unions until 1949, it was hardly a potent force in American politics, and its leaders did not receive a great deal of aid from Moscow. Many American Communists in union locals, moreover, were honest, effective, and popular with the rank-and-file. Still, Howe and others were on target in lamenting the lockstep consistency with which leading party officials—as opposed to many lesser party members—followed the Moscow line on all major questions, including the coup in Czechoslovakia and the Berlin Airlift.

Some of the leaders had indeed surrendered their intellectual independence—and their patriotism—to the Kremlin. And Howe was surely correct in bewailing the baneful effect of such a rigid and uncompromising party on the chances for revival of an independent Left in the United States.

Another issue dividing historians concerns the degree to which the “public at large” promoted a Red Scare. Should one emphasize the role of elites—partisan Republicans, interest group leaders, anti-Communist

42. Fried, Nightmare in Red, 57–67.
43. Ibid., 85, 97; Whitfield, Culture of the Cold War, 92–94.
45. As an example, Schlesinger, Vital Center, 102–50.
46. Whitfield, Culture of the Cold War, 114.
There is no sure answer to this question, in part because polls of public opinion on the subject offer conflicting evidence. Analysts who focus on elites, however, probably have the better case, for the majority of Americans in the late 1940s and early 1950s only slowly grew worried about subversion. As William Levitt remarked of his suburbanites, people were too busy getting ahead to fret a great deal about Communists, let alone to lead crusades against Reds. A survey at a height of the Red Scare in 1954 found that only 3 percent of Americans had even known a Communist; only 10 percent said they had known people they even suspected of being a Communist. The same survey concluded, “The internal communist threat, perhaps like the threat of crime, is not directly felt as personal. It is something one reads about and talks about and even sometimes gets angry about. But a picture of the average American as a person with the jitters, trembling lest he find a Red under the bed, is clearly nonsense.”48

Still, anti-Communism cut fairly deeply in some ways. As early as 1946 polls showed that 67 percent of Americans opposed letting Communists hold government jobs. A poll in 1947 revealed that 61 percent of respondents favored outlawing the Communist party.49 Political leaders and anti-Communist pressure groups had helped to rouse such popular feelings; they did not spring up on their own. But there was a good deal of evidence to suggest that ardently patriotic and anti-Communist emotions were not hard to whip up once Cold War fears mounted. When the Truman administration sent the so-called Freedom Train around the country in 1947–48, it was greeted by enthusiastic crowds, brass bands, and patriotic speeches. An estimated 4 million people turned out to look at the train’s exhibits, which included the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Truman Doctrine.50

It is especially clear that most American people continued to care little for civil liberties in the immediate postwar years. Americans in the 1940s and early 1950s may not have worried deeply that there were a lot of Communists hiding under the bed, but they were often ready to believe that party members and sympathizers were dangerous to the Republic. Acting on such beliefs, liberal organizations moved summarily to purge Communists in these years. By 1949 labor unions, the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Congress of Racial Equality had largely succeeded in doing so, and in 1950 the NAACP decided to expel Communist-dominated chapters.51

Civil liberties also came under siege in the world of education. Those who knew much about the history of education in the United States were not surprised by this development, for taxpayers long had demanded that schools and colleges promote national values. Patriotism, as taught in the schools from the salute to the flag and the Pledge of Allegiance, was where young people learned the American way. In 1940 twenty-one states required loyalty oaths of teachers. There was therefore little reason to suppose that school boards, principals, or college administrators would behave much differently from other American officials caught up in the Red Scare.

What began happening in the late 1940s was nonetheless unsettling to beleaguered civil libertarians in the academic world. In 1948 the University of Washington fired three teachers—two of them with tenure—when they refused to answer questions about whether they belonged to the Communist party. The teachers never found another academic job. Later in the same year the American Federation of Teachers, a leading union, voted against allowing Communists to teach, and the Board of Regents of the University of California system required its faculty to take a non-Communist oath. Faculty members who refused to sign got caught up in a long and internecine controversy. A total of thirty-one, including some with tenure, were ultimately fired.52

Although legislators and other outsiders led these anti-Communist crusades, they found prominent educators ready to go along with much of their agenda. Charles Seymour, president of Yale, announced, “There will be no witch hunt at Yale, because there will be no witches. We do not intend to hire Communists.” Presidents Conant of Harvard and Eisenhower of Columbia headed a blue-ribbon panel which concluded in 1949 that Communists were “unfit” to teach. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) opposed loyalty oaths and the firing of teachers, a leading union, voted against allowing Communists to teach, and the Board of Regents of the University of California system required its faculty to take a non-Communist oath. Faculty members who refused to sign got caught up in a long and internecine controversy. A total of thirty-one, including some with tenure, were ultimately fired.52

49. Fried, Nightmare in Red, 59–60
their politics. Moving with excruciating slowness, the AAUP did not censure universities that violated civil liberties until 1956.\(^{53}\)

All who took stern positions essentially endorsed the view that Communists, as minions of Moscow, had surrendered their independence of thought. Sidney Hook, a well-known philosopher, defended the autonomy of educational institutions, but he said that university administrators could and should police their campuses against such influences. Hook reiterated that Communists were not free to think for themselves: the right of the Communist to teach should be denied because he has given away his freedom in the quest for truth. ... He who today persists in Communist allegiance is either too foolish or too disloyal to democratic ideals to be allowed to teach in our schools.”\(^{55}\)

It is an exaggeration to conclude that the Red Scare terrorized American academe in general.\(^{55}\) Most universities—and many individual faculty members—defended academic freedoms.\(^{57}\) Still, the Red Scare in education was a demoralizing episode, especially at the not-so-ivy towers of universities where academic freedom had been supposed to be safe. Schools and colleges feared to keep on their faculties anyone who had refused to deny that he or she was a Communist. When confronted with such issues, a number of administrators and non-Communist faculty members were quick to assume that all Communists were the same, without asking if Communist teachers made any effort to indoctrinate students and without distinguishing between those faculty who were good scholars and teachers and those who were not. Teachers grew cautious, and some suffered greatly.\(^{58}\) Though estimates vary, it is thought that 600 or so public school teachers and professors in these years lost their jobs because they were smeared by accusations that they were Communists or Communist sympathizers. Blacklists often ensured that they would not be hired elsewhere.\(^{59}\)

**Much of the impetus for McCarthyism in the early 1950s developed between 1947 and 1949 and arose from the activities of government. Some of these activities, such as the efforts of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), came from right-wing zealots and political opportunists in Congress.**\(^{60}\) Others came from the Justice Department (including the FBI) of the Truman administration. We will before McCarthy took his place on the national stage, ever more energetic governmental scene-setters had rung up the curtain on a Red Scare drama that appeared to play popularly at the polls.\(^{61}\)

By all odds the most durable villain of the drama was Hoover, who had begun his hunt for subversives when Woodrow Wilson’s Red-hunting Attorney General, A. Mitchell Palmer, placed him in charge of the Justice Department’s newly created General Intelligence Division in 1919. Hoover was then 24.\(^{62}\) He moved quickly to set up special files on virtually all radicals known to the country and did the legwork that much facilitated the Red Scare of 1919. By 1924 he was head of the FBI, a post he retained for forty-eight years until his death in office in 1972. Hoover was vain, surrounded by sycophants, obsessed with order and routine. People who met him in his later days at the FBI were led through his many “trophy rooms” to his office, which glowed with a purplish insect-repelling light that Hoover, a hypochondriac, had installed to “electrocute” bad germs.\(^{63}\) Hoover sat regally behind a desk on a six-inch-high dais and looked down on his visitors. Throughout his career he employed very few blacks or other minorities. Those who did get hired spent much of their time driving his limousine, handing him towels, or swatting flies.

Hoover worked harder at rooting out subversion than at any other activity. In doing so he used a vast and intricate network of informers,  

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54. Ravitch, Troubled Crusade, 96.
55. Ibid., 97–98.
60. This was of course an inaccurate acronym.
some of them undercover agents, others—like Cardinal Spellman—well-known public figures anxious to cooperate in the anti-Communist crusade. In return he gave them information about subversives in their midst. No rumor, it seemed, was too trivial for Hoover to follow up, especially if it involved sexual activities. Much of the information—fact, hearsay, trivia—went into his secret files.

These many flaws were well known to critics in the Truman years. Bernard De Voto lashed out in 1949 against Hoover’s use of “gossip, rumor, slander, backbiting, malice and drunken invention, which, when it makes the headlines, shatters the reputations of innocent and harmless people. . . . We are scared. Sometimes we are sickened. We know that the thing stinks to heaven, that it is an avalanching danger to our society.”64 Truman complained privately, “We want no Gestapo or Secret Police. FBI is tending in that direction. They are dabbling in sex life scandals and plain blackmail. . . . This must stop.”65 But Truman made no effort to fire him. He refrained from criticizing Hoover openly, even when he realized that the director was feeding information about alleged subversives to enemies of his administration. Truman even depended on the FBI to check the loyalty of federal employees and to help prosecute Communist leaders.66 When Truman left office at the peak of the Red Scare, Hoover and the FBI were stronger than they had been in 1945.

The reasons for Hoover’s success were not hard to discover. One was his carefully cultivated reputation as a crime-fighter. Another was his apparently large pile of dirt about people high in public places. Hoover was also a consummate bureaucrat. More than most high officials in the 1920s and 1930s, he had then mastered the art of public relations. When FBI agents killed John Dillinger, “Public Enemy Number One,” Hoover took personal credit. Equally important, Hoover was hardly a rogue elephant. He ordinarily made sure that authority for aggressive activities such as bugging and wiretapping came from above. Again and again he got such assurances from Presidents and Attorneys General who recognized that Hoover commanded information they needed—or thought they needed—to have.

A co-villain in the Red Scare drama was HUAC, which had attracted some of the most reactionary and bigoted men in public life.67 A senior Democrat, John Rankin of Mississippi, was an especially rabid anti-Semitic and racist. Denouncing civil rights activity in 1950, Rankin exclaimed, “This is a part of the communist program, laid down by Stalin approximately thirty years ago. Remember communism is Yiddish. I understand that every member of the Politburo around Stalin is either Yiddish or married to one, and that includes Stalin himself.”68 Another HUAC power, Republican J. Parnell Thomas of New Jersey, was later convicted of illegally padding his payroll. A third member thereafter was Nixon, who did more than anyone else after 1946 to make HUAC an aggressive agent of anti-Communism. His persistent labors gave him a national reputation.

In 1947 HUAC concentrated on probing into left-wing activity in Hollywood. Announcement of the committee’s intention inspired protests among American entertainment figures. “Before every free conscience in America is subpoenaed,” Judy Garland cried, “please speak up! Say your piece. Write your Congressman a letter! Airmail special.” Frank Sinatra asked, “Once they get the movies throttled, how long will it be before we’re told what we can say and cannot say into a radio microphone? If you make a pitch on a nationwide radio network for a square deal for the underdog, will they call you a Commie? . . . Are they going to scare us into silence?” Fredric March demanded, “Who’s next? Is it your minister who will be told what he can say in his pulpit? Is it your children’s school teacher who will be told what he can say in his classroom? . . . Who are they after? They’re after more than Hollywood. This reaches into every American city and town.”69

The hearings that opened in October began relatively quietly with the testimony of “friendly witnesses” who cooperated with the committee. The actor Gary Cooper, terse as ever, said that he opposed Communism “because it isn’t on the level.” Walt Disney contended that the Screen Cartoonists Guild was Communist-dominated and had earlier tried to take over his studio and make Mickey Mouse toe the party line. Ronald Reagan, head of the Screen Actors Guild, tried to straddle the fence. He criticized the deviousness of Communists but added that he hoped never to see Americans “by either fear or resentment. . . . compromise with

64. Jezер, Dark Ages, 84.
66. Fried, Nightmare in Red, 83–84; Halberstam, Fifties, 335–42.
any of our democratic principles.”70 In the next few years Reagan turned more decisively to the right, enthusiastically enforcing a blacklist on actors accused of being Communists and identifying to the FBI actors and actresses who “follow the communist party line.”71 His cooperation withHUAC and Hoover was a milestone on his road from New Deal liberalism to the Republican Right.

Donnybrooks broke out when unfriendly witnesses confronted HUAC. Some cited the Fifth Amendment, which protected them against possible self-incrimination. Ten others took the much riskier path of claiming the right of freedom of speech under the First Amendment. They refused to give straight answers to a range of committee questions about whether they were Communists. The “Hollywood Ten,” as they became known, included talents such as the screenwriters Alvah Bessie, Dalton Trumbo, and Ring Lardner, Jr. Some of them rudely insulted HUAC members. The screenwriter Albert Maltz likened Rankin and Thomas to Goebbels and Hitler.72

The stand of the Ten evoked admiration among left-liberal colleagues in the entertainment industry, including such stars as Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Katharine Hepburn, and Danny Kaye, who formed the Committee for the First Amendment. But public opinion seemed hostile, and the studio heads, who feared for the image of the industry, closed ranks against them. The Ten, along with 240 or so others, were blacklisted by the industry, many of them for years. HUAC cited the Ten for contempt. When they lost their appeals in 1950, they went to prison for terms ranging between six months and a year.

If Hoover and HUAC were the villains of the anti-Communist drama, Truman and his advisers clumsily—and sometimes recklessly—acted as spear-carriers. Even as the Red-hunters looked for subsversives in 1947 the administration was scouting out the “loyalty” of federal employees. Their efforts rested on Executive Order No. 9835 issued on March 22, 1947, nine days after announcement of the Truman Doctrine. The order set up “loyalty boards” in government agencies that employed some 2.5 million people. It seemed reasonable on the surface. Employees (and potential new hires) who were called before the boards had the right to a hearing and to counsel. They were to be informed of the specific charges against them and had the right to appeal to a Loyalty Review Board under the auspices of the Civil Service Commission. They could be fired if the boards found “reasonable grounds... for belief that the person in-
of employees, of whom around 1,250 were dismissed and another 6,000 resigned rather than undergo the indignities and potential publicity of the whole process. None of them was proved to be a spy or a saboteur. The program reflected badly on the administration’s awareness of civil liberties and encouraged subsequent apocalyptic thinking about subservion. It was ironic indeed that Truman’s partisan opponents scored political points by charging him with being “soft” on Communism.

A year later, during the 1948 campaign, the Truman administration went still further to demonstrate its Americanism, by prosecuting top leaders of the American Communist party. This effort led to drawn-out litigation that culminated in review by the Supreme Court in June 1951. At every level of the court system the eleven defendants lost their case. In New York the judge ruled that the leaders had violated the Smith Act by urging overthrow of the government “as speedily as circumstances permit” and therefore represented a “clear and present danger” to American society. Judge Learned Hand of the appeals court agreed and cited events of the Cold War as evidence of the Communist threat. When the Supreme Court upheld the convictions in the case of Dennis v. U.S., the leaders were fined $10,000 each and sentenced to prison terms of five years.

Almost no one in those troubled times was eager to stand up and defend these leaders of the American Communist party. That was understandable, not only because of Cold War tensions but also because the party itself had never cared for civil liberties. Americans thought the Communists had it coming. But the prosecutions were otherwise unfortunate, for two reasons. First, they engaged the government in further attacks on civil liberties. Second, they drove the remaining leaders underground, where it proved harder to keep track of their activities. Indeed, the prosecutions represented a remarkable overreaction. They revealed, as did the broader McCarthyism that complemented them after 1950, the growing force of the Red Scare in America, a force that owed some of its strength to activities of the administration of Harry S. Truman.

All these actors in the drama against subversion—Hoover and the FBI, HUAC, administration loyalty boards and prosecutors—gained the attention of an increasingly alarmed American audience between 1947 and early 1950. The most compelling actors, however, were the protagonists in a prolonged and bitter legal fight that episodically grabbed center stage between the summer of 1948 and January 1950: the tribulations of Alger Hiss. Many decades later this fight stands out as among the most dramatic in the history of the Red Scare.

HUAC opened the action in August 1948 when it brought a number of confessed ex-Communists before it to testify. One of these was Whittaker Chambers, who said he had spied for the Soviets in the 1930s. Rejecting the party in 1938, Chambers embraced Christianity and emerged as a knight-errant against atheistic, brutal Communism. A facile writer, he worked for nine years at Time magazine before resigning as a senior editor in 1948. Chambers was pudgy, rumpled, disheveled, sad-faced, and emotionally unstable to the point of frequently considering suicide. In sensa-

77. 341 U.S. 494.
78. Fried, Nightmare in Red, 114; Whitfield, Culture of the Cold War, 45–51; Schrecker, No Ivory Tower, 6.
79. Whitfield, Culture of the Cold War, 45–51.
80. Ibid., 50.
tional testimony he identified for HUAC a number of people as fellow Communists in the 1930s.81

One of those named was Alger Hiss, then the much-respected head of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Hiss was the antithesis of Chambers. He had been educated at Johns Hopkins University and the Harvard Law School. A protégé of Harvard professor Felix Frankfurter, he became a clerk for Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. During the 1930s he worked in a number of New Deal departments, including State after 1936. Although not quite a top-ranking official, he attended a number of international conferences, including Yalta, and was a promising member of the State Department when he left to direct the Carnegie Endowment in 1947.

Hiss was an Establishmentarian. Among his friends were Acheson and others in the elite of foreign policy-makers in the Roosevelt-Truman years. Associates marveled especially at his poise. He had handsome, well-defined features and the facility in speech of a well-trained attorney. Murray Kempton, a respected liberal columnist, said that Hiss “gave you a sense of absolute command and absolute grace.” Alistair Cooke, a friendly journalist, observed that Hiss “had one of those bodies that without being at all imposing or foppish seem to illustrate the finesse of the human mechanism.”82 Much of the drama that followed Chambers’s testimony stemmed from the apparently impeccable credentials of Alger Hiss. If such a man had been a Communist, then nothing the government did was safe.83

When Hiss heard of Chambers’s accusations, he insisted on responding. Under oath he denied all before HUAC, whose members he openly disdained, and challenged Chambers to repeat his charges without benefit of congressional immunity. When Chambers did so, Hiss sued him for libel. Hiss’s many friends were outraged at Chambers’s accusations; Truman himself denounced HUAC’s fishing as a “red herring.” But Nixon was suspicious of Hiss, regarding him as the epitome of the liberal eastern Establishment, and he pressed the case against him. The FBI worked closely with Nixon, apparently feeding him sensitive material—and denying it to Hiss—whenever it was needed.

Chambers then fought back. In November 1948 he said that Hiss had not only been a Communist but had committed espionage by turning over confidential government documents to the Soviets in the late 1930s. In one of the most theatrical moments of the controversy Chambers brought reporters to a field on his Maryland farm and showed them microfilmed documents that he had hidden in a hollowed-out pumpkin. These, he said, were copies of State Department documents that Hiss had turned over to him in 1937 and 1938. The “Pumpkin Papers,” as they were called, made for sensational newspaper coverage.

Hiss was now on the defensive. The same grand jury that heard evidence concerning the top Communist leaders weighed Chambers’s accusations in December 1948 and decided to press ahead with his case. The statute of limitations had lapsed for charges of espionage, but the jury indicted Hiss on two counts of perjury: for denying that he had ever given Chambers any government documents, and for claiming that he had never seen Chambers after January 1, 1937. The trial in June 1949 ended in a hung jury, but when he was tried again he was convicted on January 21, 1950. Hiss later served three years of his five-year sentence and spent more than forty years thereafter stoutly asserting his innocence.

Whether Hiss was innocent in fact remained a much-disputed matter years later. The political legacy of the case, however, was clear. The prolonged and often sensational struggle refurbished the facade of HUAC, which grew bolder in its anti-Communist probes. It advanced Nixon, whose instincts about Hiss seemed justified by the results. It established that Chambers and others had indeed been engaged in espionage for the USSR in the 1930s. When Klaus Fuchs was arrested on charges of atomic espionage six days after Hiss’s conviction in 1950, it was easy for people to imagine the existence of a vast and subterranean conspiracy that had to be exposed.

The Hiss trials had still wider symbolic value for many conservatives and anti-Communists in the United States.84 To them Hiss’s conviction seemed long-overdue validation of all that they had been saying about rich, elitist, well-educated, eastern, Establishmentarian New Dealish government officials. “For eighteen years,” HUAC Republican Karl Mundt of South Dakota exploded, the United States “had been run by New Dealers, Fair Dealers, Misdealers and Hiss dealers who have shuttled back and forth between Freedom and Red Fascism like a pendulum.”85

82. Goulden, Best Years, 324.
83. Pells, Liberal Mind, 271.
84. Siegel, Troubled Journey, 74.
85. Fried, Nightmare in Red, 22.
WITH A STAGE SO WELL SET in February 1950, it was hardly surprising that one of these angry partisans in Congress should have marched to the center and stolen the scene. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin wasted no time doing so when he spoke to the Republican women in Wheeling on February 9. There he waved around papers that he said documented the existence of widespread subversion in government. His exact words on that occasion are disputed, but he appears to have said, “I have here in my hand a list of 205—a list of names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department.”

These were sensational charges. McCarthy, after all, was a United States senator, and he claimed to have hard evidence. Intrigued, reporters asked for more information. Doubters denounced him and demanded to see the list. McCarthy brushed them off and never produced one. His information, indeed, was at best unreliable, probably based on FBI investigations of State Department employees, most of whom were no longer in the government. In subsequent speeches—he was on a “Lincoln Birthday” tour—McCarthy changed the figure from 205 to fifty-seven. When he spoke on the subject in the Senate on February 20, he rambled for six hours and bragged that he had broken “Truman’s iron curtain of secrecy.” The numbers changed again—to eighty-one “loyalty risks” in the State Department—but McCarthy remained aggressively confident. “McCarthyism” was on its way.

People who knew Joe, as he liked to be called, were hardly surprised by the brazenness of his behavior. A lawyer and controversial circuit court judge before the war, McCarthy had served in the marines during World War II. In 1946, still only thirty-seven, he beat Robert La Follette, Jr., the incumbent, in a Republican primary that featured lies about La Follette’s campaign finances. McCarthy then swept to victory in the anti-Truman backlash of that year. His campaign relied heavily on lies about his war record as a marine officer in the Pacific. Advertising himself as “Tail Gunner Joe,” he falsely maintained that he had flown up to thirty combat missions when in fact he had gone on none. Later he often walked with a limp that he said had been caused by “ten pounds of shrapnel” that had earned him a Purple Heart. In fact he had hurt his foot by falling down the stairs at a party. He had seen very little combat action and had never been wounded. This did not faze him: in the Senate, he used his political influence to get an Air Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross.

McCarthy was in fact a pathological liar throughout his public life. Colleagues also knew that McCarthy was crude and boorish. Thickset, broad-shouldered, and saturnine, he was often unshaven and rumpled in appearance. He spent more time playing poker and accepting favors from lobbyists than he did on Senate business. A heavy drinker, he regularly carried a bottle of whiskey in the dirty briefcase that he said was full of “documents.” He bragged about putting away a fifth of whiskey a day. McCarthy liked above all to be thought of as a man’s man. Many of the subversives, he said, were “homos” and “pretty boys.” When attractive women appeared before his committees, he leered at them and jokingly told aides to find out their telephone numbers. Being a man’s man, he seemed to believe, meant being rough and profane: he thought nothing about using obscenities or belching in public.

McCarthy was no stranger to Red-baiting, having resorted to it himself in 1946. But he was intellectually lazy and had never bothered to learn much about Stalin or the American Communist Party. Above all, he was unscrupulous and ambitious. With re-election facing him in 1952, he cast about for an issue that would fortify his otherwise weak record. For a while he seems to have thought crime would be the issue, but Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee preempted that possibility by staging highly publicized hearings on organized crime. Dining with friends in January 1950, McCarthy was advised to go after subversives. “That’s it,” he said, his face lighting up. “The government is full of Communists. We can hammer away at them.”

He kept up the hammering, rarely relenting for long, for more than four years. He was remarkably inventive and imaginative in doing so. As before he did not worry about lying. Again and again he would stand up, pulling a bunch of documents from his briefcase, and improvise while he went along. As his audience grew, he became more and more animated and skillful at spinning stories. When opponents demanded to see documents, he refused on the ground that they were secret. When caught in an outright lie, he attacked his accuser or moved on to other lines of investigation. Few politicians have been more adept in their use of rhetoric that

makes good headlines. Repeatedly he blasted “left-wing bleeding hearts,” “egg-sucking phony liberals,” and “communists and queers.”

McCarthy did not much care who he attacked. Once he referred to Ralph Flanders, a liberal Republican colleague from Vermont, as “sénile—I think they should get a man with a net and take him to a good quiet place.” Robert Hendrickson, a Republican from New Jersey, was “a living miracle in that he is without question the only man who has lived so long with neither brains nor guts.” During McCarthy’s four-year tear through American institutions he also assailed the army, the Protestant clergy, and the civil service. He reveled in super-masculine imagery of fighting and bloodshed, bragging that he went “for the groin” and that he would “kick the brains out” of opponents.

The senator from Wisconsin saved most of his hard knocks, however, for the Democrats. Acheson, a special target, was the “Red Dean,” a “pompous diplomat with his striped pants and phony British accent.” Marshall, who had “lost” China, was part of a “conspiracy so immense and an infamy so black as to dwarf any such previous venture in the history of man.” The “Democratic label,” he said, “is now the property of men and women . . . who have bent to the whispered pleas from the lips of traitors.” The Democratic years were “twenty years of treason.” When Truman fired General Douglas MacArthur from his Asian command in 1951, McCarthy said of the President, “The son of a bitch ought to be impeached.”

If there was a core of consistency to McCarthy, it was an emotional one of class and regional resentments. A Roman Catholic and a midwesterner, he seems genuinely to have detested the well-educated, wealthy, and mainly Protestant eastern Establishment. This is why Acheson and other “striped-pants” Anglophiles who dominated the State Department were such inviting targets. McCarthy underscored his feelings at Wheeling: “It is not the less fortunate members of minority groups who have been selling their nation out, but rather those who have had all the benefits the wealthiest nation on earth has had to offer . . . . This is glaringly true of the State Department. There the bright young men who are born with silver spoons in their mouths are the ones who have been worst.”

90. Oakley, God’s Country, 61.
92. Rovere, Senator Joe McCarthy, 49; Siegel, Troubled Journey, 77.
93. Rovere, Senator Joe McCarthy, 11; Oakley, God’s Country, 61.
94. Godfrey Hodgson, America in Our Time (Garden City, N.Y., 1976), 42–43.

But McCarthy was not an ideologue. He was above all a demagogue seeking attention, re-election, and—maybe in the future—the presidency. A loose cannon, he had no organization to speak of, and he rarely followed up on any of his charges. Challenged to name a true subversive, he announced in March 1950 that he would “stand or fall” by his accusation that Owen Lattimore was the “top Russian agent” in the United States. This was a bizarre and unfounded accusation. Lattimore was a little-known scholar of Asia who had been uncritical in some of his writings about Stalin and Mao Tse-tung. But McCarthy could produce no documentary evidence that the professor had ever been a Communist. Thereafter McCarthy made no serious effort to name people who were supposedly ruining the United States, and he never identified a single subversive. It was simpler to scatter his shot around the landscape.

The scattering made him the most controversial public figure in the country by the spring of 1950. Both Time and Newsweek, while critical of him, put him on their covers. A Gallup poll in May reported that 84 percent of respondents had heard of his charges and that 39 percent thought they were good for the country. This was a remarkably high level of public recognition, and it placed the Truman administration on the defensive. Was there a way to counter McCarthy’s reckless accusations?

Some people thought so. Given the attention McCarthy was receiving, they said, Truman and others should immediately have recognized the danger and appointed an impartial blue-ribbon investigating committee to weigh his charges. But that would probably have required giving such a committee access to sensitive personnel files. To the President, this was unthinkable. Democrats instead tried to refute McCarthy. In February Truman retorted that there was “not a word of truth” to McCarthy’s accusations. In late March he said McCarthyites were the “greatest asset the Kremlin had.” Senator Democrats set up a committee headed by Millard Tydings of Maryland to investigate the charges. Testimony before the Tydings Committee exposed many of McCarthy’s lies and exaggerations, which the majority report later concluded were a “fraud and a hoax perpetrated on the Senate of the United States and the American people.”

96. Oakley, God’s Country, 58.
98. Hamby, Beyond the New Deal, 396–97.
McCarthy and his allies, however, brushed aside the Tydings Committee by charging that it was a partisan cover-up. Senator William Jenner of Indiana, a fervently anti-Communist Republican, accused Tydings of heading the “most scandalous and brazen whitewash of treasonable conspiracy in our history.” McCarthy branded the committee report as a “green light to the Red fifth column in the United States” and a “sign to the traitorous Communists and fellow travelers in our Government that they need have no fear of exposure.” Reactions such as these showed why it was so difficult to discredit McCarthy and his allies. So long as the President refused to turn over personnel files, McCarthy could savage whatever committee tried to refute his allegations.

Others who lament McCarthy’s climb to fame have blamed the press. Reporters, they say, should more insistently have demanded that he produce evidence. Some newspaper editors were indeed appalled by his behavior. But McCarthy generally did well at manipulating the press. Many publishers were deeply conservative and believed in what McCarthy was saying. Moreover, reporters were not editorialists, and they felt obliged to record what a United States senator, who was “news,” had to say. Again and again his charges got headlines that proclaimed the rise of a Red menace in the United States.

Rigorous investigative journalism of the sort that arose in the 1960s and 1970s would probably have weakened McCarthy. But it is ahistorical to expect such journalism to have existed in the 1950s. Reporters were ill paid in those days and lacked the resources in staff or money to dig deeply into McCarthy’s charges. The Washington press corps was small. It was not until later, amid growing anger about a “cover-up” during the Vietnam War, that significant numbers of reporters became obstreperous in challenging “official” sources. Only in the 1970s, in the aftermath of Watergate, did this attitude become widespread among political journalists in the United States.

Others analysts of McCarthyism in retrospect have concluded pessimistically that it demonstrated the susceptibility of the American people to demagogic appeals. There is evidence for such gloomy indictments of democracy, but it is limited. McCarthy’s attacks on the eastern Establishment indeed set off responsive echoes, especially among conservative Republicans. Like McCarthy, some of these Republicans literally loathed Acheson. “I look at that fellow,” Republican Senator Hugh Butler of Nebraska said. “I watch his smart aleck manner and his British clothes and that New Dealism, everlasting New Dealism in everything he says and does, and I want to shout, Get Out! Get Out! You stand for everything that has been wrong in the United States for years.” The managing editor of McCarthy’s hometown Appleton newspaper explained, “We don’t want a group of New Yorkers and Easterners to tell us whom we are going to send to the Senate. That is our business, and it is none of theirs.” The anger that underlay such comments suggested that regional resentments still burned strongly indeed in the United States.

McCarthy’s rampage also appealed to people who nursed hostility toward elites, especially in government. This feeling reflected enduring class, ethnic, and religious tensions, which periodically broke into the open amid more superficial manifestations of popular consensus in the United States. Working-class people who had struggled to get ahead after the war resented it when “educated” liberals appeared to look down on their accomplishments and their styles of life. A number of east-European-Americans, moreover, responded warmly to McCarthy’s rhetoric of plebian contempt for things effete and “hurried the movement of the Right toward a conservatism conspicuously more majoritarian than previously.”

The phenomenon of McCarthyism, however, should not be seen as a broadly popular movement or as one that was essentially working-class, Catholic, or ethnic in membership. Millions of such people, after all, still tended to vote Democratic and to reject McCarthyite visions of the world. Rather, three things may be said about McCarthyism. First, it derived much of its staying power from the frightened and calculated behavior of political elites and of allied interest groups, not from the
people at large. Second, many partisan Republicans took the lead in backing their reckless colleague. Third, McCarthyism rode on anti-Communist fears—again, strongest among elites—that were already cresting in early 1950.\footnote{Griffith, Politics of Fear, 101–14.}

The role of political leaders was indeed important. Those who had to run for office were often very cautious. Most of them did not like McCarthy personally and were appalled by his behavior. But the ferocity of his attacks—and his apparent invulnerability to criticism—shook many of them. They were reluctant to stand up and be counted against him, especially in an election year. Some of the most fearful office-holders came from working-class and Catholic districts. Representative John F. Kennedy, whose father was a friend and a patron of McCarthy, was among them. “McCarthy may have something,” Jack said. Neither as a representative nor (after 1952) as a senator did Kennedy speak out against McCarthy.

Many Republican senators eagerly supported their colleague. For some this was only natural: they had been making similar charges for some time. On the same day that McCarthy spoke in Wheeling, Homer Capehart of Indiana rose in the Senate to ask, “How much more are we going to have to take? Fuchs and Acheson and Hiss and hydrogen bombs threatening outside and New Dealism eating away at the vitals of the nation! In the name of Heaven, is this the best America can do?”\footnote{Hodgson, America in Our Time, 34.} Then and later Capehart, Jenner, and other conservatives gladly reinforced their Wisconsin colleague. When Truman nominated Marshall to be his Secretary of Defense following the outbreak of war in Korea, Jenner denounced the former Secretary of State as a “living lie” and as a “front man for traitors.”\footnote{Griffith, Politics of Fear, 115.}

Had these Republicans been the only ones to stand up for McCarthy, he might have had a more difficult time of it in the Senate—with and the press and the American people. But McCarthy also got the backing of Robert Taft, “Mr. Republican,” the most influential GOP politician on Capitol Hill. Taft was not close to McCarthy—or to zealots like Jenner—and he did not think that subversion threatened the nation. But Taft, like most of his Republican colleagues on the Hill, strongly opposed the drift of American foreign and domestic policies since the New Deal. He very much disliked Acheson, one of McCarthy’s favorite targets. Shocked by the unexpected victory of the Democrats in 1948, Taft longed to embar-

rass and defeat them. He also hoped to win the GOP presidential nomination in 1952. And he knew that anti-Communism was politically popular. For all these reasons Taft refused to denounce his colleague. McCarthy, he said, should “keep talking and if one case doesn’t work out, he should proceed with another one.” This was an irresponsible position that reflected the especially harsh partisan atmosphere of the times.\footnote{James Patterson, Mr. Republican: A Biography of Robert A. Taft (Boston, 1972), 455–59.}

Taft, although influential among his Republican colleagues, could not silence all senatorial opposition to McCarthy. In June 1950, seven liberal Republican senators led by Margaret Chase Smith of Maine issued a “Declaration of Conscience” that complained about the Senate being used as a “publicity platform for irresponsible sensationalism.” Moreover, it is doubtful that Taft—or anyone else—could have silenced McCarthy, who reveled in the attention that he aroused. Still, the support of McCarthy by the GOP, especially in the Senate, did much to lend a veneer of political respectability to McCarthyism from 1950 through 1954.

To highlight the role of elites in the support of McCarthy is to challenge the notion that he aroused great popular support. Polls, indeed, showed that he did not; only once, in 1954, did more than 50 percent of Americans say that they backed him. Still, office-holders knew that it paid off politically to be loudly and insistently against Communism, especially following the alarms that rang through American society in late 1949 and early 1950; the Soviets had the Bomb, the Reds had China, Hiss had lied, Fuchs was a spy. These were widely known, profoundly alarming events that were already promoting Red Scares—in unions, in schools and universities, in Hollywood, within the Truman administration itself—well before McCarthy made his headlines. It was in this highly charged Cold War atmosphere of fear and suspicion that McCarthy and his well-placed allies were able to run amok.
GRAND EXPECTATIONS

American system of government and in traditional American outlooks that I had had, despite all the discouragements of official life, before that time.¹⁰⁰

Other observers have been a little less pessimistic than Kennan, who had always doubted the capacity of democracy to cope with crisis. Indeed, McCarthy ultimately overreached himself and crashed into popular disfavor in 1954.¹¹⁰ Thereafter the Red Scares that had sullied American politics and society abated. Still, Kennan had good cause for pessimism, for McCarthy’s fall occurred more than four years after he started his rampage at Wheeling, more than five years after anti-Communists moved to cleanse the unions, schools, and colleges, more than six after government started using the Smith Act to put Communist leaders in jail, and more than seven after Truman tightened loyalty programs and HUAC assailed Hollywood. During these eight years it is estimated that a few thousand people lost their jobs, a few hundred were jailed, more than 150 were deported, and two, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (Communists who were arrested in 1950 following further revelations about the Fuchs case) were executed in June 1953 on charges of conspiracy to commit espionage.¹¹¹

Kennan, moreover, was correct in lamenting two broader results of the postwar Red Scare. First, it constricted public life and speech. Before the Red Scare peaked, many public figures had been both liberal and anti-communist, without worrying much about being labeled as a “pink” or being accused of “disloyalty.” During the Red Scare, however, liberal politicians and intellectuals became vulnerable to the charge of being “soft” on Communism—or worse. Some muted their liberalism, especially in the 1950s. As Diana Trilling said many years later, “McCarthy not only deformed our political thinking, he . . . polluted our political rhetoric. [He] had a lasting effect in polarizing the intellectuals of this country and in entrenching anti-anti-communism as the position of choice among people of good will.”¹¹²

Second, McCarthyism helped to tie a straitjacket of sorts on America’s foreign and defense policies. How much the coat confined remains disputed. Some of the major policy initiatives of 1949–50—militarization of NATO, non-recognition of the People’s Republic, development of the Super, support for NSC-68—would have occurred anyway, as alarmed reactions of government officials confronted with a foe like Stalin, especially after the Soviets got the Bomb in 1949. The straitjacket was nonetheless tight. The Red Scare helped to turn understandable concerns about Communist intentions into demands for the toughest kinds of responses. Could the arms race, both nuclear and otherwise, have been less dangerous than it became after 1950? Could the United States have cautiously built bridges to the People’s Republic, thereby driving a wedge between the Soviet Union and China? These and other options would have been politically perilous after the Cold War hardened in 1946, but the Red Scare made certain that they were not seriously explored. Especially after 1949, politicians, scholars, and writers who dared suggest initiatives that seemed “naive” or “soft” on Communism were even more than before at risk of losing office or reputation.

The Red Scare, finally, dampened a little the otherwise upbeat, can-do mood of American life at the time. “A little” is the way to put it, for postwar prosperity increased even more rapidly from 1950 through 1954 than it had between 1945 and 1948. The rising personal expectations of millions of Americans—most of them unaffected by the Red Scare—grew ever more grand. From this perspective the Red Scare may be seen as a shameful saga of overreaction and intolerance; it left scars. Still, in the longer run it did not stop the majority of Americans from their expectant pursuit of the Good Life.

¹¹⁰. See chapter 9.
¹¹¹. Caute, Great Fear, 62-68; Ronald Radish and Joyce Milton, The Rosenberg File: A Search for the Truth (New York, 1983). The Rosenbergs were the first American civilians to suffer the death penalty in an espionage trial.