

## A BRIEF SURVEY OF AMERICAN POLITICAL EXTREMISM FROM POST WORLD WAR I TO 1960

John H. George

Department of Government, Central State College, Edmond, Oklahoma 73034

Contrary to widespread belief, the decade of the sixties was not one of unprecedented extremist activity. During the 20th Century there were three periods prior to 1960 in which extremists of the left and right were both numerous and active. Too easily forgotten or overlooked, it seems, are the post World War I "Red Scare" period, the overt fascism of the 1930's, the large size of the Communist Party USA in the thirties and forties, and the McCarthy era of the early fifties. The principal reason that the sixties appeared to be overburdened with extremism is directly related to advancements in the communications media.

Many Americans believe that the period of the 1960's represents an era of unprecedented extremist activity. The early part of the decade saw a revival of the extreme right sparked by the appearance of the John Birch Society (which was founded in December 1958, but did not achieve national notoriety until 1960), and by the middle of the decade over 1,000 far right groups were in operation. The middle and late '60's saw, in addition to the continuing actions of the far right, the greatest amount of extreme left activity since the 1940's. This was due largely to the increase in radical left activity among college students and other young people. Many of these persons started as non-violent reformers, but when the majority of the nation did not follow their lead, a significant number became violent revolutionaries. A good example of this phenomena is illustrated by the way in which many Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) members throughout the United States changed from noncommunist reformers influenced by C. Wright Mills, Paul Goodman, and Albert Camus, to neo-Stalinist revolutionaries influenced by Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Che. Currently, SDS is split into three warring factions, each claiming to be "more Mao than thou." At any rate, radical left youth movements gave renewed vitality to some segments of the "old left" and Americans are witnessing frenzied performances by political deviates at both ends of the spectrum.

The principal aim of this paper is to show that such activity is not unique in the history of U.S. politics.

### 20th CENTURY EXTREMISM PRIOR TO 1960

During the 20th century, prior to 1960, there have been in the United States three periods which were high points of the extreme right and three which were high points of the extreme left.

#### Periods of extreme rightist activity

1. Post World War I to the early 20's: Red Scare period, Palmer Raids, and strong resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan.
2. Mid-1930's to early 40's, period of overt fascism: German-American Bund, Silver Shirts, Father Coughlin, Gerald L. K. Smith.
3. Early 1950's: McCarthy Era.

#### Periods of left extremism

1. Post World War I to early 20's: Founding of the U.S. Communist Party: violence by anarchists; radical left aligned with and to some extent influential in labor movement.
2. Mid-1930's: Many intellectuals and writers joined the Communist Party U.S.A. or became fellow travelers during the depression years.
3. Mid-1940's: Communist Party more respectable because of wartime alliance with Soviet Union; some influence in labor unions until late 1940's.

Note that the first two periods of the right and the left overlapped, while the third periods occurred during different decades.

The period immediately following World War I was one in which the social climate was conducive to the rise and spread of extremist thought and action. With the end of the war, Americans looked forward to resuming the old pattern of life, but there was little idea or agreement upon just what this "old pattern" was. This factor gave

rise to alienation of many individuals, for "nostalgia had glorified peacetime living until it appeared much more attractive than it really had been" (1, p. 3). During the war there had been strong social pressures favoring unquestioning loyalty; two independent agencies and one government sponsored group had aided in changing a great number of fairly reasonable persons into "super-patriots and self-styled spy-chasers by spreading rapid propaganda which maximized the dangers of wartime sabotage and sedition" (1, p. 12). The two independent organizations were the National Security League and the American Defense Society. The government sponsored group was the American Protective League. By the end "of the war they . . . had become a repository of elements which were much more interested in strengthening a sympathy for economic and political conservatism than in underwriting a healthy patriotism" (1, p. 12). A mistrust and hatred of foreigners already existed, and a large number of leftists were foreign born.

Under conditions such as these, there was not a great deal of tolerance for such people as Communists, Anarchists, IWW members, or even socialists, and all were looked upon as potential "bomb-throwers." Indeed, some were, but they comprised a minority of the members of a group which was already a small minority. This "bomb-throwing" group was responsible for bringing down even more wrath upon the left-wing radicals than they would have received under the prevailing conditions. The bombs were not always thrown. In several of the more spectacular instances they were sent through the mail. A total of 36 bombs were sent, but only 2 reached their destinations. The other 34 were discovered by postal authorities. Among the intended victims were Oliver W. Holmes, Jr., Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, the Postmaster General, the Secretary of Labor, two United States Senators, John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan. No bomb killed its intended victim, although one seriously burned an ex-senator's wife and caused her maid to lose both hands.

Newspaper headlines played up the idea of a Red plot, while radical left publications

spoke of a "frame-up" which was perpetrated in order to have an excuse to "get" radicals and labor leaders.

During this time Ralph Easley, a well-known super-patriot, "persistently invented fantastic conspiracies and imminent bloody revolutions . . . In the late spring of 1919, Easley ran a series of startling exposes on communism in the schools, press, churches, universities, and organized labor, and he subsequently led a movement to scrutinize textbooks . . . for breaches of loyalty" (1, p. 87). These same measures are attempted today by right extremist groups.

The American Legion was founded in May of 1919 and had among its goals "to foster and perpetuate a one hundred per cent Americanism" (1, p. 88). While the Legion could be called an extremist group during that period, it has evolved into a responsible, conservative organization today, although in some of its Posts extremists are in control.

The modern version of the Ku Klux Klan was established in 1916 and grew to very large size by 1920. Then, as now, it perpetrated a hatred of Negroes, Catholics, Jews, and foreigners. According to several reliable sources, including a congressional investigating committee, the Klan had about four million members in the early 1920's.

During late 1919, several hundred persons were deported because of their radical activities, and in early 1920 raids were carried out in which several thousand leftists and suspected leftists were arrested. These arrests were made without the use of warrants; prisoners were held incommunicado and denied the right to legal counsel. Such was the temper of the time.

In the 1930's, the depression, coupled with what some called "the success of the Russian experiment," caused a fair number of writers and intellectuals, along with a few working-class people, to become disillusioned with the American system of government and sympathetic toward Communism. In fact, it was during this period that someone coined the phrase "Marxism, the opiate of the intellectuals." This, of course, was a "take off" on Marx's statement "Religion, the opiate of the masses." Such well-

known writers as Richard Wright, Edmund Wilson, John Dos Passos, Howard Fast, and others were either Communists or fellow-travelers.

At this same time, overt fascism existed. Many groups and individuals had great admiration for Hitler and Mussolini. Anti-Jewish attitudes were prevalent, and there was talk of building a "fascist America." Several books were written on the subject, the most prominent of which was *The Coming American Fascism* by Lawrence Dennis, one of the few intellectuals among American fascists.

It was during the 1930's that the activities of several of the nation's more active right extremists came into public view. Among these were the following:

**COURT ASHER** — A defendant at the Mass Sedition Trials of the 1940's and one of the most blatant anti-Semites this nation had seen. He was author of the poem (?) "The Jew-Nited Nations Red Rag." Asher claimed to have been a very close friend of the Chicago gangster, Roger Tuhey in the 1920's. He further maintained that he was then known as "the fastest gun slinger in Chicago" and that he once "beat Legs (Diamond) half to death in Cicero . . ." Asher died in late 1967. One of his last statements was that the Mayo Clinic is "now Jew dominated." During his last year he strongly believed that the Jews were trying to obtain his collection of back copies of his crude hate sheet, *The X-Ray* (2).

**FATHER CHARLES COUGHLIN** — The radio priest who was quite prominent throughout the thirties. Though still living, Father Coughlin no longer broadcasts diatribes against Jews.

**ELIZABETH DILLING** — A leader of the "Mother's Movements" to prevent war with fascist nations. A Seditions Trials defendant, Mrs. Dilling believed the YMCA to be Communist controlled.

**MERWIN K. HART** — A John Birch Society chapter leader in New York until his death in 1963, Hart was described by the Late Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson as "pro-fascist" (3, p. 459). Hart was once quoted as saying, ". . . while Communism infests the country, fascism is almost nowhere to be found. Nobody heard of it until Communism came along" (3, p. 459).

**JOSEPH KAMP** — An associate of the fascist intellectual, Lawrence Dennis (3, pp. 468-70), Kamp was a prolific pamphleteer who once "urged patriots to withhold information regarding Communist activities from J. Edgar Hoover's FBI and submit it instead, either to Martin Dies or to him" (3, pp. 470-71).

**WILLIAM DUDLEY PELLEY** — A Sedition Trials defendant who headed the Nazi organization known as the Silver Shirts.

**GERALD L. K. SMITH** — A close associate of Huey Long, Smith was also a member of the Silver Shirts (3, p. 319). Still quite active, Mr. Smith is perhaps, monetarily speaking, the most successful Jew and Negro baiter in this nation's history.

**HAROLD LORD VARNEY** — An early associate of Lawrence Dennis, Merwin Hart, and Joseph Kamp (3, pp. 467-69). Varney has written for the John Birch magazine *American Opinion* for several years.

**GERALD B. WINROD** — Known as the "Jayhawk Nazi", Reverend Winrod was a defendant in the Sedition Trials of the 1940's. His son, Gordon, carries on in the tradition of his deceased father by serving as chaplain of the quasi-fascist National States Rights Party.

**ALLEN ZOLL** — An old line anti-Semite, whose now defunct American Patriots Inc. was designated by the U. S. Attorney General as a "Fascist Organization" (4, p. 236).

This period is especially interesting because some factions of the extreme left today are still fighting the same ideological battles (Trotskyists vs. Stalinists, etc.) and using slogans of the 1930's. The extreme right of today, while claiming to be anti-fascist to some extent, is still using the writings and services of some of the pro-fascists of yesteryear. For example, Joseph Kamp's writings were distributed at the New England Rally for God, Family, and Country held in Boston in July of 1966 (5). This rally is a "front" of the John Birch Society. At the 1967 edition of the same Rally, Allen Zoll managed an exhibit and made a speech in which he extolled the virtues of some deceased extremists of years past, including Elizabeth Dilling and Joseph Kamp (6).

While World War II was in progress, the extreme right was relatively quiet except that several rightist leaders were tried for sedition (7). The extreme left, however, reached what was perhaps its greatest prominence during the middle 1940's. FBI estimates put Communist Party membership at about 80,000 during this period, and at the end of the war about one-fifth of the CIO membership "was in unions controlled by Communists or pro-Communists" (8, p. 45). In addition, the Communist Party U.S.A. started planning the Progressive Party in 1945 (8, pp. 113-114) and supported Henry Wallace's candidacy in every possible way during the 1948 campaign. Starting in 1946, the Communist Party made

some bad tactical moves which, in effect, began its isolation from the general American public. First, they maintained strict adherence to the Soviet Union's line on foreign policy. Second, they did not maintain frequent contact with non-Communists after the war, and, third, while the thinking of the general public shifted to the right ideologically, the Communist line shifted further to the left (8, p. 35). Moreover, dire Communist predictions, such as an impending depression, did not come true; people were caught spying for the Soviet Union; the United States economy was sound. Thus, Communism's appeal has declined in the United States since the 1940's.

The period from 1950-54, commonly called the "McCarthy Era," is well known to Americans who are politically aware. The term "McCarthyism" has virtually become a synonym for smear tactics. Just what did the senator do to merit this? Briefly, he made a large issue of the idea that Communists had infiltrated high positions in government, principally the Department of State. In fact, after 1950, he seldom spoke of anything else and claimed to have a list of these persons. The number of names varied from 57 to 205 according to McCarthy, but the list itself was never produced. However, persons singled out for attack by the senator included General George Marshall, Senator Millard Tydings, Professor Phillip Jessup, and Anna Rosenberg, whom McCarthy was attempting to stop from being confirmed as Assistant Secretary of Defense. In the last case, the senator was so clearly proven wrong that he eventually voted for her confirmation. The actual Communist, it seems, was another woman of the same name who lived on the West Coast.

Several persons who have written on the McCarthy phenomenon indicate that his followers differed to some extent from those who compose the extreme right of today (9, 10). It should be noted that virtually all right extremists of the 1960's look back on

McCarthy as a martyred hero. The difference is that, during his heyday, the senator had at least the acquiescence of millions of persons who were not right extremists. As late as mid-1954, 34% of a national sample expressed at least mild or qualified approval of him (11, p. 42). His popularity declined greatly after he was censured by his fellow senators in late 1954.

In conclusion, it should be made clear that the decade of the 1960's is not unique with respect to extremist activity. I believe many persons regard it as such because of advancements in the media of communication, especially television.

#### REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. R. K. MURRAY, *Red Scare*, Univ. Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1955.
2. Information gained through written and telephone communications with Mr. Asher.
3. J. R. CARLSON, *Undercover*, Dutton, New York, 1943.
4. *Guide to Subversive Organizations and Publications*, U.S. Govt. Printing Office, Washington, D.C.
5. Personal observation.
6. Personal communication with a Rally observer. Also see July-August, 1967 issue of *Homefront* and a news release of July 20, 1967, both published by the Institute for American Democracy, 1330 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C.
7. In addition to Asher, Dilling, Pelley, and Winrod, about 30 more persons were tried. A hung jury and the death of the judge characterized two of the trials. Although most defendants were eventually acquitted, Pelley was among those who served time in prison.
8. D. SHANNON, *The Decline of American Communism*, Stevens, London, 1959. Shannon states (p. 217) that by the "spring of 1950 . . . Communist influence in the CIO was all but completely eliminated."
9. D. BELL (ed.), *The Radical Right*, Doubleday Anchor Bks., New York, 1964. See the essays on McCarthyism.
10. N. POLSBY (ed.), *Politics and Social Life*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1963. See the article entitled "Toward an Explanation of McCarthyism."
11. S. A. STROUFER, *Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties*, Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1955.