

New York University, Center for the United States and the Cold War
Alger Hiss and History, Inaugural Conference, April 5, 2007
Landon Storrs, (University of Texas)

LANDON STORRS: I do not work on the Hiss Case per se. I study the federal employee loyalty program, and I've been working for several years in newly-accessible government sources to take the first fresh look at that program since about the 1950's. Rather than talk about the Hiss Case, I'm going to talk about how it and the other big espionage cases affected the broader program to eradicate subversives from government employment.

The most obvious way in which the Hiss Case affected other investigations is that any federal employee who had known Hiss had to answer a lot of questions. (This was also true if someone had known Bill Remington, Harry Dexter White, Judith Coplon, and so on.) Some examples. Tex Goldschmidt, a public power expert, in the Interior Department, later at the U.N., had to explain that although he had lived down the street from the Hisses, he had only been in their house once and it was only as far as the front hall while he was trick or treating with his children (more pumpkin imagery!). Mordecai Ezekiel, a New Deal agricultural expert who worked for a U.N. agency in the 1950's, was questioned after a babysitter reported that Ezekiel's son had said Hiss was not guilty. Leon Keyserling, the Chair of Truman's Council of Economic Advisors, was asked whether he had contributed to the Hiss Defense Fund. Job recommendations from Hiss's office, as you might imagine, were a big red flag to investigators. Both Mordecai Ezekiel and Edwin Witte, the Wisconsin Social Security expert, faced repeated loyalty difficulties because Hiss's office at the State Department had included them in lists of recommended candidates for U.N. jobs.

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Whether or not a federal employee had been associated with Hiss, his or her investigation could be affected by the Hiss Case if someone drew analogies to it. When defendants questioned the veracity or sanity of an ex-Communist witness, investigators believed that the strategy was copied cynically from the Hiss defense in an effort to “make a Chambers” out of the witness. Defendants in turn accused informants of “trying to make a Hiss” out of them. The ex-HUAC staffer J.B. Matthews was still angry in the late 1950’s that Leon Keyserling had not been tried for perjury. Of a 1951 hearing, Matthews wrote, “In a manner reminiscent of Alger Hiss circling around Whittaker Chambers, examining his teeth, Keyserling refused to swear that he had never met with Crouch or Parks [two ex-communists].” The Hiss Case cast a long shadow, embittering those on both sides and coloring how they conducted and characterized other investigations.

There was another way, less obvious, but I think more significant, in which the big espionage cases affected investigations of civil servants against whom the allegations were less serious. The witnesses who named suspected spies also made lesser allegations against dozens of other government employees. For investigators, proving the allegations against those other people became imperative to maintaining the credibility of that witness and thus to winning the highly-publicized big cases. Sometimes the FBI knew that a witness was making allegations against a certain employee that were dubious, but the FBI refused to admit that because doing so would have jeopardized some other “big” case. In other words, some employees were sacrificed

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in order to strengthen the cases against suspected spies. This indicates that the flaws of the loyalty program were deeper than some certain scholarship would suggest.

I've reconstructed roughly fifty cases involving mid- and high-level government employees, and folks that I'm looking at were not CP members, much less spies. But they had been Socialists or at the very least on the left-most edge of the New Deal. Many of these officials -- typically economists, social workers, lawyers -- had associated with Communist Party members during the Popular Front period. Left and liberal circles were overlapping and very fluid, especially before the August, 1939 Stalin-Hitler pact. On top of that, you had the oft-noted mobility of civil servants from one New Deal agency or one War agency to another. This density and fluidity of left-liberal networks in Washington in the thirties and early forties, combined with the fact that concealed Communists were known to deny that they were Communists, made the job of the FBI and agency loyalty officials extremely difficult. On the grounds that the Communist Party advocated overthrowing the U.S. government, the loyalty program sought to identify secret Communists and get them out of government jobs. That was hard enough, but investigators also tried to identify Communist sympathizers, as well as people who were loyal in their own views but whose associations with a Communist (often a spouse or other relative) made them security risks.

Reading through these case files, it is possible to sympathize with the investigator's dilemma. Let me use one case to illustrate. Leon Keyserling's wife, Mary Dublin, was the

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sister-in-law of George Marshall (not the General George Marshall), but the wealthy leftist who funded Communist-led groups such as the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties (NFCL). In 1946, the House Un-American Activities Committee cited George Marshall for contempt for refusing to turn over membership records of the NFCL. After unsuccessful appeals, Marshall served time in jail. Mary Dublin herself had joined or sponsored various groups that were later labeled Communist fronts. Mary, a government economist in her own right, explained these associations to investigators several times between 1942 and 1948; each time she was rated eligible on loyalty. Leon was investigated, too, because he was married to Mary but also because of a few associations of his own. He, too, was cleared in 1948.

But, in early 1951, an ex-Communist named Paul Crouch made explosive new allegations to congressional investigators and the FBI about both Mary and Leon. This touched off a flurry of FBI investigations and closed hearings. Crouch claimed he had gone to communist cell meetings in New York in 1929 “with a girl whose name he recollected as Mary,” and whose father was a vice-president of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (which Mary Dublin’s father was). Crouch claimed he introduced this Mary to a Communist Party official who needed a “respectable girl” for secret work. Crouch told a separate story about Leon Keyserling: supposedly Crouch had been introduced to Keyserling in the late thirties by a Communist named Gilbert Parks, and Crouch said that Leon Keyserling had expressed sympathy for some aspects of the Communist Party program.

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The FBI took these allegations very seriously. I have thousands of pages of documents describing how the FBI followed every possible lead: obtaining passport records, interviewing hundreds of witnesses all over the country and in Europe, covertly obtaining photographs from inside the house where Crouch claimed to have met Leon, and so on. Some of Paul Crouch's facts were correct, and Mary and Leon's files both contained enough other scraps of "derogatory" evidence to make the FBI think they might have a big one on the hook. Leon was, after all, the Chair of the Council of Economic Advisors. Mary worked in the Commerce Department where William Remington, Michael Lee, Edward Condon, and various others were under suspicion.

The Keyserlings said Crouch's story about Mary was actually about her sister, and even then it wasn't accurate, and that the story about Leon was false but not damaging even if true. The investigations were supposed to be confidential but at strategic moments word of them was leaked to selected journalists: during a debate over Truman's seizure of the steel plants, a policy backed by Leon in 1952, and then later in 1952, right on the eve of the election. The Keyserlings and their high-powered lawyer, Abe Fortas, cried foul, alleging a partisan conspiracy to discredit the Truman administration. I conclude they were correct. It turns out that congressional conservatives and their staff members on both SSI and HUAC cooperated with a disaffected member of the Commerce Loyalty Board, and some of them leaked information to Senator McCarthy and sympathetic journalists.

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But, there was more wrong in the Keyserling case than its exploitation by opportunistic politicians. After the Keyserlings claimed Crouch was lying, J. Edgar Hoover told his agents to find support for Crouch's stories -- because Crouch is the key witness. Not only in this case, Hoover emphasized, but also in several others. Crouch was a key witness in the Remington Smith Act trials. He was about to become a key witness in the Oppenheimer case. To make a long story short, the FBI found suspicious weaknesses in Paul Crouch's stories about the Keyserlings, but it did not disseminate those findings outside the bureau. Instead, Hoover told the Commerce Loyalty Board that the FBI had found Crouch to be credible. The Loyalty Board ruled unanimously against Mary, and she was suspended, just before the election. An appeals board later cleared her, but by then the Republicans were taking office, and both Keyserlings resigned.

Crouch went on. Over his career, he testified in about sixty hearings. By late 1952, Crouch, the FBI had its doubts about Paul Crouch, but it did not publicize them in order not to jeopardize past and pending cases. In 1953 and 1954, the debate about Crouch's veracity went public, but both sides presented partisan and partial accounts that changed no one's mind.

To complicate matters, the Keyserlings were not fully honest either. Both of them had been further to the left in the 1930's than they admitted, and investigators knew it. This disingenuity does not make the Keyserlings attractive victims of Red Scare politics, but of

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course, without the Red Scare, they would not have had to hide their leftism in order to salvage their careers and protect their agencies.

People who were honest about their socialism, even their former socialism, could not keep influential positions, certainly not after about 1947. Paul R. Porter, a top administrator for the Marshall Plan, learned this the hard way. Using information supplied by Paul Crouch, congressional conservatives attacked Porter and demanded his recall. He had always admitted that he had been a Socialist Party leader, and that even after he left the Socialist Party in 1941, he remained a small `s' socialist thereafter. He tried explaining this again, but he was forced to resign in 1953. Like the Keyserlings, when Porter deposited his papers in the Archives years later, he withheld all reference to his loyalty investigation and the activities that triggered them. These silences have distorted historians' understanding of the period. Non-Communist leftists were forced out, whether they tried to hide their views or not. Most did try to hide them. When loyalty defendants and investigators each knew that the other side was not being fully honest, each side nursed grudges that lasted for decades. Some of those grudges are finding a new incarnation in the revived scholarly debate about whether to emphasize the Red Scare or the Red Menace.

I began this project just as the new findings from the Venona project and Soviet archives were escalating the disagreement between two groups of scholars: those who focus on the American Communist Party's role in Soviet espionage, and those who focus on the negative

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consequences of the red scare, or on more admirable aspects of American communism. As many of you know, no love is lost between the two camps. I have tried to learn from both sides.

I agree with the espionage historians that 1) Soviet espionage was a genuine threat—even after 1947 when most of those named by Bentley and Chambers had left government; 2) identifying and prosecuting spies was difficult, and the small number of espionage convictions does not prove there was little espionage; and 3) scholars should consider the possibility that a loyalty defendant actually was or had been a Communist Party member or even a Soviet agent.

However, my research suggests that the espionage historians underestimate the repression that occurred and offer an insufficient analysis of the repression they acknowledge. For example, John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr acknowledge that the loyalty program was flawed, but they attribute its problems to partisan politics (which they incorrectly portray as ideologically neutral). In short, they regret the behavior of the opportunistic bad anticommunists like McCarthy, but they defend the integrity of the good anticommunists, such as the FBI.

(Ironically, this mirrors their complaints about the other side of the scholarly debate, whom they accuse of wanting to believe that the CPUSA was really two parties, the grassroots, multicultural egalitarians (good CP), and the small, isolated cadre of Soviet-oriented dogmatists (bad CP).)

My reading of the newly opened loyalty case files reminds us, yet again, that the opportunistic anticommunists wouldn't have gotten far without the tacit cooperation of the so-called “responsible ones.” Just as it was hard for investigators to draw a sharp line between subversives

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and dissenters, it is hard for scholars to draw a sharp line between legitimate spyhunters and those who colluded in political repression.

Espionage was real, but so was repression in the name of counterespionage. Is it so hard to hold the two realities -- of espionage and repression -- in our minds at once?

YOUNG: Our next very disciplined speaker will be Corey Robin.

COREY ROBIN: Thanks. Well, that provides a good segue, not the part about me being disciplined, but what Landon was just saying. So there was a security threat from the Soviet Union, from the Communist Party, from espionage and much else. There was also political repression of Communists and leftists, of trade unionists and Civil Rights activists, of liberal ideas and radical movements. In the longrunning debate about the domestic Cold War, it turns out that both sides were right: There was a security threat, there was political repression. The question I'd like to ask today is, how does one translate into the other? How and why does this threat to the nation's security produce political repression?

Now I suspect that for many historians and scholars, whether on the left or the right, this is a question that answers itself. For conservatives, political repression in wartime is a sensible prudent response to real danger. For liberals, political repression in wartime is an unfortunate though entirely predictable overreaction to danger, and for leftists political repression in wartime is an elite manipulation of popular fear in response to fabricated or overhyped threats. Buried beneath these arguments lies an assumption, that when people are afraid for their lives, they will

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do anything to protect themselves and their families, and by analogy, when the safety of the nation is threatened, perceived to be threatened or constructed as threatened, it, too, will do whatever it takes to defend itself. Repression is the least of it.

There are two problems with this way of thinking, one is the War of 1812 problem, which suggests that political repression is not the natural or inevitable response to security threats. The other is the Lavender Scare problem, which suggests that the political repression that does arise in response to a security threat cannot ultimately be explained by that threat. Let me talk a little bit about each of these problems, which is going to take us a little bit way out of the Hiss Case, way out of the Twentieth Century.

During the War of 1812, the American state faced the greatest challenge to its existential survival that it had ever and arguably would ever face from abroad. As of September 1814, the British had taken control of Washington, DC, burned the Capitol and the White House to the ground, and sent the federal government into exile. They had also amassed a terrifying army on Lake Champlain, blocked ports up and down the North Atlantic seaboard, seized a good chunk of Maine, and seemed ready for an invasion of Boston. Desertions from the U.S. military were spreading, and many states were left to defend themselves. At that very moment, leading citizens in New England proposed to meet in Hartford, Connecticut, to discuss measures the region might take to extricate itself from the war. That Fall, anti-war candidates were elected to Congress. Secession was favored by at least half the population of Massachusetts, and

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influential newspapers throughout New England argued for nonpayment of federal taxes, declarations of regional neutrality, and refusals to cooperate with any federal conscription bill should one be passed.

The Governor of Massachusetts even sent an emissary to the British to secretly negotiate a separate peace in which the British were promised to help the New Englanders defend themselves against any federal effort to suppress the rebellion. One of the leaders of these efforts was John Lowell, scion of the illustrious Massachusetts family that would one day include McGeorge Bundy. Another was Harrison Gray Otis who declared at the outbreak of the war, “The most intelligent and respectable men in this country tremble for the prosperity and fate of Britain and consider her as the bulwark of the liberties of this country and mankind.” And what did Lowell and Otis get for their disloyalty and subversion, which far surpassed that of most communists during the 1940’s? Honorary degrees from Harvard, in 1814, right in the middle of the war. One need only compare how Harvard treated Lowell and Otis during the War of 1812 with how Harvard and McGeorge Bundy in particular treated communists at Harvard in the Cold War to see that political repression is not a natural or inevitable response to danger, even danger of the gravest and most imminent kind.

Some other factor, in the case of the War of 1812, the high standing and power of the leaders of the opposition to the war, must intervene.

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Now let's turn to the Lavender Scare. In 1950, the Soviet Union had just exploded the atomic bomb, China had just gone communist, the Korean War began, the Rosenbergs were arrested, and Alger Hiss was convicted of perjury. And what were Americans inside and outside of government most worried about? According to three of Truman's top advisors -- this is a memo they sent to him -- "the country is more concerned about the charges of homosexuals in the government than about communists."

One quarter of Joe McCarthy's fan mail referred to the communist issue. The remaining three-quarters focused exclusively on what one newspaper called, "sex depravity."

The Lavender Scare was more than popular anxiety and it was more than a side show, the Cold War. For a time, it was high politics and government policy. In 1950, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, declared that, quote, The sexual perverts who have infiltrated our government in recent years were, quote, perhaps as dangerous as actual communists, end-quote. The Republican leadership in the Senate consistently tried to push McCarthy to focus less on communism in government and more on homosexuality in government. In 1950, the State Department fired gays and lesbians -- well, mostly gays -- at the rate of one per day, more than twice the rate of suspected communists, and charges of homosexuality would ultimately account for one-quarter to one-half of all the dismissals in the State and Commerce Departments and in the CIA.

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For those who assume that political repression can be explained by an analogy to how an individual or group responds to real or perceived danger, imagine a family of four -- a father, a mother, a son, and a daughter -- surrounded by armed thugs, demanding their money, and their daughter, too? Now imagine the parents deciding that that would be the perfect time to launch an investigation of their son's sexuality. With an eye toward purging him from the family and thereby depleting their resources for self-defense. Then imagine the daughter questioning her parents' timing, only to be told that her survival actually depends upon them finding out whether or not her brother is gay.

So, we have the War of 1812 in which a grave and imminent threat to the nation produces very little in the way of repression, and we have the Cold War, in which a less grave and less imminent threat to the nation produces a great deal of repression, some of which -- perhaps, a lot of which -- can in no way help the nation meet that threat. What I take away from these and other episodes that Ellen Schrecker and I have been examining for the book that we are writing on repression is that if we hope to understand the relationship between political repression and national security, we need to take a harder and closer look at this thing we call security, and particularly at the gap between the rhetoric and reality of security. On the one hand, we seem to believe that national security is an item that transcends or at least should transcend conventional politics. Politics, we say, stops at the water's edge.

And that's so for two reasons. First, we believe that we need to be united in order to confront and fend off external danger. Second, security is an interest, we believe, that is both universal and neutral. Everyone needs security and everyone needs it, we think, in the same way and to the same degree. And our need for security and our definition of security is not supposed to be dependent upon our own beliefs, or our own interests, and nor is it supposed to favor one set of beliefs or one set of interests. It is, as I said, both universal and neutral. On the other hand, we have the reality which leading international relations scholars have been pointing out for years that national security is an inherently, an irreducibly contested category, as political as Social Security.

Decades ago, Arnold Wolfers who was by no means a radical, he's one of the Twentieth Century's leading analysts and scholars of international relations, said that security was, "An ambiguous symbol which may have not any precise meaning at all." Because of that ambiguity, people can import all sorts of beliefs and interests into their definitions of security, and suddenly, what's happening on the Korean peninsula in 1951, can be traced back with whom you shared a bed with in 1945. And because people had different and conflicting beliefs and interests, it's inevitable that their definitions of security will clash. This is true not only of ordinary citizens but also of elites, as the University of Texas political scientist Peter Trubowitz has shown in his exhaustive study, "Defining the National Interests," all Americans -- elites and citizens -- have always been divided about their definition of security, and even when they have seemed to be

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most united about their definitions and the ends of security, they've been bitterly divided about means.

Even when it comes to threats to the existential survival of the state, where one would think that we would have the most unity of all, diverse constituencies have responded in diverse ways. It seems like more than an accident and something that I don't think anybody has fully ever analyzed or examined, that the two moments of greatest threat to the United States, the War of 1812, which I spoke about, and also the Civil War, were also the moments of greatest internal division and disunity in the nation's history. It's this combination of a rhetoric that is universal and neutral and a reality that is conflict-ridden and divisive that explains I think why threats to security can give rise to repression. Why security provides an ideal language like no other I know for justifying repression, and why certain groups will be targeted for repression while others will not.

I don't have time, and in fact, I have only two minutes left, to get into this, so I'm just going to close with a quick story from another era, World War One, which I think gives us a sense of how this can work, this process that I'm talking about.

From the minute the war was declared in 1917, there was a bitter argument over how to finance it. Progressives initially persuaded President Wilson to tax the wealthy, but their efforts were ultimately thwarted by industrialists, which led California Senator Hiram Johnson to complain, "Our endeavors to impose heavy war profit taxes have brought into sharp relief the

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skin-deep dollar patriotism of some of those who have been loudest in declamations on war and in their demands for blood.”

Wilson was forced to fall back on war bonds and tried to use Liberty Loan drives to rally the country to fight a genuine people’s war, but these drives were met with so much lethargy and opposition in the population that the Treasury Secretary declared, “A man who can’t lend his government \$1.25 per week at the rate of four-percent interest is not entitled to be an American citizen.” Congress finally decided to take action. It inserted a provision in the Sedition Act of 1918 that made it illegal to, “say or do anything” to impede the sale of war bonds. The target here was the Socialists and activists who were agitating against the war, but there was a loophole in the legislation -- deliberately inserted, I should say. The Sedition Act exempted from prosecution any investment advisor who was counseling his client not to buy war bonds for “bonafide” and not “disloyal reasons,” i.e., because they were a bad investment. The identical act, attempting to persuade someone not to buy war bonds could be seen as a threat to national security or not, and treated as worthy of repression or not, based entirely on questions of power, interest, belief, and ideology. Thank you.

YOUNG: Our next speaker is Amy Knight.