

CONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNIST COLLUSION: A Case Study of Anti-Communist Fears in the 1948 Presidential Campaign in Muncie, Indiana

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As far back as 1948, Americans questioned whether the Soviets were attempting to meddle in their domestic elections. These fears in turn shaped the course and outcome of their elections. One such instance of how these fears influenced domestic politics is found in the thinking of residents of Muncie, Indiana, the subjects of the famous Middletown ethnographic studies aimed at characterizing working-class Americans before, during, and after the Great Depression. As incumbent Democratic President Harry Truman squared off against Republican Thomas Dewey and third-party candidates Strom Thurmond and Henry Wallace, he sought to prevent the capture of his fellow Democrats' loyalties. Recognizing the jeopardizing influence that these third-party candidates, particularly Wallace, could have upon Truman's voter base in towns like Muncie, Truman's campaign staff formulated their playbook to combat Wallace's candidacy by exploiting the most pressing fear of common Americans: the lurking dread of Communist influence. With this in mind, Truman leveraged preexisting American fears of Communist influence to portray Wallace as a pawn of the Soviets and an enemy of the US in the 1948 election, thus lessening the threat Wallace posed to his campaign.

The narrative of Russian influence upon American presidential elections is not a new one. As far back as 1948, before nuclear arms races and proxy wars and containment theories had turned the Cold War frigid, Americans questioned whether the Soviets were attempting to meddle in their domestic elections. In an era now called “the Second Red Scare,” a fear of the spread of Communism, both as a theory and as a political structure, permeated American political life.¹ This fear crept easily into the minds of average Americans, such as those of Muncie, Indiana, the subjects of the famous Middletown ethnographic studies aimed at characterizing working-class Americans before, during, and after the Great Depression. The results of these Middletown studies make for a unique vessel in analyses of how this fear bled into the 1948 presidential election. As incumbent Democratic President Harry Truman squared off against Republican Thomas Dewey and third-party candidates Strom Thurmond and Henry Wallace, he sought campaign strategy advice to prevent the capture of his fellow Democrats' loyalties. Recognizing the jeopardizing influence that these third-party candidates, particularly Wallace, could have upon Truman's voter base in towns like Muncie, Truman's campaign staff formulated their playbook to combat Wallace's candidacy by exploiting the most pressing fear of common

¹ Don E. Carleton, “‘McCarthyism Was More Than McCarthy’: Documenting the Red Scare at the State and Local Level,” *The Midwestern Archivist* 12, no. 1 (1987): 13-14.

Americans: the lurking dread of Communist influence. With this in mind, Truman leveraged preexisting American fears of Communist influence to portray Wallace as a pawn of the Soviets and an enemy of the US in the 1948 election, thus lessening the threat Wallace posed to Truman's campaign.

The fear of Communist influence, however, did not first arise in the 1948 election. As the name "the Second Red Scare" implies, there existed a long legacy of American suspicions and fears surrounding Communism, including a "First Red Scare" in the early twentieth century that followed the Bolshevik Revolution.² As previous scholarship posits, the Communist Party in the United States remained tiny, with most Americans fearing to associate with it.³ Despite the marginal effect of American Communists upon political life, concerned citizens such as Senator Joseph McCarthy, whose name is now synonymous with the Second Red Scare, imagined it to be much larger. This imagined fear constructed an ideal framework upon which Truman could build his anti-Communist campaign strategy.⁴ While "McCarthyism" was not coined to describe the phenomenon until 1950 (two years after the 1948 election), the phenomenon itself was still present in the looming threat that, should one become suspected of Communist connections, one would face ostracization and unemployment.⁵ Contemporary evaluations of the Second Red Scare vacillate between two poles, one that stresses the national security concerns posed by the Communist Party, and the other that criticizes the threat to democracy posed by political repression.⁶ These continuing debates over the Second Red Scare remain provocative because they resonate with present-day anxieties about the sometimes incongruous relationship between security and liberty.⁷

For the residents of Muncie, Indiana, who, according to the Middletown studies of sociologists Robert and Helen Lynds, were supposedly the idealized concept of typical Americans, the Second Red Scare had a particularly powerful effect. In 1937's *Middletown in Transition*, Muncie residents reported that they perceived that "the 'radicals' ('reds,' 'communists,' 'socialists,' 'atheists'—the terms were fairly interchangeable in Middletown) want[ed] to interfere with things and 'wreck American civilization.'"⁸ Furthermore, to them, the most reasonable solution to these "agitators who masquerade under the ideals guaranteed by our Constitution ... [was their] deportation."⁹ Surely this was a reasonable punishment, for only "foreigners and long-haired troublemakers" could be radicals; real Americans would never stoop to holding such unconventional and offensive beliefs.¹⁰ "Real Americans" believed that the American system already existed in its final, ideal form, and that there was little sense in attempting to change a form of government that had worked

² Markku Ruotsila, "Neoconservatism Prefigured: The Social Democratic League of America and the Anticommunists of the Anglo-American Right, 1917-21," *Journal of American Studies* 40, no. 2 (2006): 327.

³ James Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States 1945-1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 138.

⁴ Bernard Lemelin, "The U.S. Presidential Election of 1948: The Causes of Truman's 'Astonishing' Victory," *Revue française d'études américaines*, no. 87 (2001): 58.

⁵ Steven Heller, "The Lessons of a Cartoonist's Crusade Against McCarthyism," *The Atlantic*, The Atlantic Monthly Group, April 25, 2019.

⁶ Landon Storrs, "McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: American History*, Oxford University Press, July 2015.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Robert & Helen Lynds, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1937), 405.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 414.

well enough for Washington and Lincoln.¹¹ Communism was inherently incompatible with all that America stood for because Communism was inherently foreign. Perhaps an even better solution than deportation, one citizen referenced in *The Post-Democrat* mused, was “to build a Chinese wall to keep the foreign devils out.”¹²

Though the Communists were not the only threats to the American way of life perceived by the residents of Muncie, they were considered the most alarming. Among other perceived threats to a “proper American lifestyle” were non-Protestants, Jews, African Americans, intellectuals, pacifists, and international bankers, all of whom the people of Muncie categorized under the broad umbrella of “foreigners.”¹³ To be foreign in Muncie was to be “queer” or “backward”—a judgement that the Lynds attributed to the commonly-held belief that foreigners who had failed to pay their war debts were the cause of the Great Depression.¹⁴ But the worst sin a foreigner could commit was to align themselves with the Communist party. Communists orchestrated civil wars, sold people into slavery, killed innocent pets, engaged in orgies, and participated in virtually any other form of immoral activity that the people of Muncie felt disapproval toward.¹⁵ The people of Muncie saw only one Communism; to them, Soviets, European socialists, scholars of Marx, and members of American organized labor were all servants to a single monolithic evil.

If the most threatening identity a foreigner could have was that of a Communist, then the most threatening action a Communist could do was spreading their ideas. Locals at the Muncie Rotary Club warned of a “red fog” that had descended unbeknownst to unwitting citizens upon the town, spreading Marxist propaganda straight from Moscow.¹⁶ This propaganda supposedly made its way through universities, high schools, and YMCA clubs, where even the strictest adults could not prevent young students from discussing “radicalism” around the soda fountain.¹⁷ Some feared that the Communists had even infiltrated the federal government in Washington, D.C., with one concerned citizen claiming that Truman’s new farm program was “nothing but the Russian system.”¹⁸ Regardless of the Communists’ actual role in American politics, Americans believed that the Communists, as a single monolithic entity, had infiltrated domestic affairs, and if given the chance would strike in an attempt to topple the country.

Thus, when it came time for Truman to assemble his campaign strategy for the 1948 election, the widespread American fear of Communism took center stage. Truman knew he had a difficult race ahead of him: not only did he have to compete against the Republican candidate, Governor Thomas Dewey of New York, but he also had Strom Thurmond and Henry Wallace, two members of his own party, to worry about. Thurmond, a Dixiecrat Governor from South Carolina, threatened to claim the Democratic Party’s Southern votes with his states’ rights and anti-civil rights stances, while Wallace, former Vice President under FDR and leader of the Progressive Party, threatened to take the votes of Democrats who leaned further to the left.¹⁹ Truman knew he could no longer rely upon the typical incumbent advantage; if he wanted to win an election in his own right, he had to take up the aggressive campaign trail.²⁰

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹² “The Editor’s Corner,” *The Post Democrat*, June 14, 1935.

¹³ Lynds, *Middletown in Transition*, 407.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 428.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 429.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 431.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 433.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 431.

¹⁹ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 157.

²⁰ Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir*, (New York: Random House, 1991), 188.

To help him achieve this, Truman chose Clark Clifford as his chief advisor for the 1948 election. Recognizing that the election would be tricky (and even going so far as to admit that he was not sure whether Truman could win at all), Clifford began crafting Truman's campaign strategy.²¹ In 1947, he sent a memorandum to President Truman summarizing his predictions for potential challengers in the race and his suggestions for how to deal with them. Within the first few pages of this memo, Clifford predicted that Wallace would pose the most significant third-party threat (he was not able to foresee Strom Thurmond's fourth-party candidacy), not because Wallace had a chance of becoming President, but rather because Wallace's candidacy weakened Democratic support for Truman.²² In a close race against Dewey, every vote counted, even those from small, seemingly-irrelevant towns like Muncie, and thus it was important to treat the threat Wallace posed seriously.

Immediately in his memo to Truman, Clifford described Wallace and his advisors as Communist sympathizers whose "First Lord...is still Karl Marx."²³ Framing Wallace as less of a leader and more of a follower, Clifford suggested that Wallace was perhaps not a Soviet spy himself, but rather an unwitting pawn in the Communist game of destabilizing American executive leadership. With his idealistic stances on foreign policy and promises to guarantee "human rights over property rights,"²⁴ Clifford warned that Wallace's candidacy threatened to siphon enough voters from the Democratic base to potentially win even California or New York.²⁵ Though his money and guidance came from the American Communist party, Clifford argued, his broader appeal was to young people, pacifists, women, die-hard isolationists, and the "lunatic fringe."²⁶ Even if Wallace was not likely to win the election himself, he could very easily cause Truman to lose and thus give the election to Dewey and the Republicans.²⁷ The best solution, then, was to attack Wallace as the Communist conspirator he seemed to be and levy Americans' preexisting fears of Communism in the government against him. If Truman wanted to win the election with average American voters like those in Muncie, he had to speak the language of the Red Scare.

The task of portraying Wallace as a Soviet pawn was likely not a difficult one. His conduct and speeches offered the Truman campaign team plenty of material suggestive of his Communist sympathies, despite his attempts to deny political intimacy with the Party.²⁸ Though not a member of the Communist Party U.S.A., Wallace received their official endorsement, which he accepted with little protest, stating, "if the Communists support me ... if [they] are working for peace with Russia, God bless them."²⁹ In his speech to accept to Progressive Party's nomination, Wallace proclaimed that he was committed to peaceful negotiations with the Soviet Union, to "stopping the creation of fear," and "to using all of [his] powers to prevent the fear-makers from clogging the minds of the people with the 'red issue.'"³⁰ He blamed the division of Germany, the crisis in Greece, and deteriorating relations between the

²¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

²² Clark Clifford, "Memorandum for the President," November 19, 1947, From Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, *The Clark M. Clifford Papers*, 4.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Henry Wallace, "My Commitments," July 24, 1948, *Vital Speeches of the Day* XIV no. 18., 622.

²⁵ Clifford, "Memorandum for the President," 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ "Mr. Dewey's Victory Chances," September 17, 1948, *U.S News and World Report* XXV no. 12., 13.

²⁸ Americans for Democratic Action, "Henry Wallace: The Last Seven Months of His Presidential Campaign," December 1948, from Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum, *The 1948 Election Campaign*, 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁰ Wallace, "My Commitments," 623.

United States and the Soviet Union on the failure of Truman's diplomacy, claiming that these worrisome developments would not have occurred under Franklin Roosevelt's administration.³¹ Like Truman, Wallace had served as Vice President under FDR, and, in a move that "confused and disoriented [his] Presidential campaign," a part of his apparent strategy was to portray himself as the successor to FDR's legacy.³² Meanwhile, his campaign painted Truman as an impulsive hothead whose obstinate personality would undo the progress had been made under FDR's leadership.

Truman's response to this was to draw average American voters away from Wallace by painting him as average America's worst fear realized: a Communist who threatened to infiltrate and destroy democracy and the free market. Following dutifully along his party's platform to "condemn Communism and other forms of totalitarianism ... [and] expose and prosecute treasonable activities of anti-democratic and un-American organizations," Truman denounced Wallace's apparently Communistic beliefs and called for his fellow Americans to do the same.³³ In an appeal to the liberals of America, the Truman Administration lambasted Wallace and the Progressive Party, who "in their foreign policy...invite[d] a betrayal of free people throughout the world," as one of the most concerning threats of 1948.³⁴ To counter Wallace's claim that his plans for an American-Soviet friendship was congruent with FDR's foreign policy, Truman and his supporters asserted that FDR had not been deceived about the aggressive nature of the Soviet Union, and that it was instead Wallace who had been duped.³⁵ The "progressivism" of the Progressive Party was fake, and their ideas for American collaboration with Communists meant only American control by Communists.³⁶

During his rear platform tour of Midwestern towns and cities, Truman again pushed these stances. While speaking to a crowd at the Indiana World War Memorial just a month before the 1948 election, he repeated his belief that the Communists wanted another economic depression to destabilize the United States, thus reiterating the Communist status as the enemies of American freedoms.³⁷ Contrasting himself to Wallace, he asserted "the Communists don't want me to be President," suggesting that the opposite was true for Wallace: that they, the enemy, wanted Wallace to be President.³⁸ Consequently, Wallace was little better than the Communists and the enemies who wanted another economic depression to cripple the country. A vote for Wallace would be a vote for Karl Marx himself.

Truman's statements were seemingly aimed at people from towns like Muncie, Indiana, who had long demonstrated their distaste for and fear of Communism. In Muncie, Wallace's promises to negotiate peace with the Soviet Union and implement a program of progressive capitalism would have impressed few. By the time of the 1948 election, Muncie's perception of Communism demonstrated general continuity with their views from the earlier Middletown studies. Many still

³¹ *Ibid.*, 621.

³² Americans for Democratic Action, "An Appeal to the Liberals of America," October 14, 1948, *Americans for Democratic Action Public Relations File, 1936-1965*, Proquest, reel 113., 456.

³³ "Democratic Party Platform 1948," in *National Party Platforms, vol. 1, 1840-1956*, ed. Donald Johnson, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 436.

³⁴ Americans for Democratic Action, "An Appeal," 457.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Harry Truman, "Address in Indianapolis at Indiana World War Memorial," October 15, 1948, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman*, (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1964), 241.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

wished to avoid “foreign entanglements” as much as possible, while maintaining the belief that Communism was worthy of hatred.³⁹ Some believed that a war with the Russians was imminent and unavoidable, but the town’s opinion as a whole veered towards isolationism.⁴⁰ “I hear a damn sight more talk about the lack of butter, the lack of cars, the lack of white shirts, than about the United Nations,” one local observed.⁴¹ They did not want the United States to interfere with other countries’ affairs, and more importantly, they did not want other countries to interfere with theirs—least of all the Soviet Union.

As Election Day drew nearer, Muncie residents began to look critically at Wallace’s third-party campaign. In an opinion from the August 7, 1948 edition of the *Muncie Evening Press*, concerns were raised over the extent to which “Communists and recognized pro-Communists dominated the convention of Henry Wallace’s new party.”⁴² Just as Truman had portrayed him in his campaign speeches, Wallace was perceived as “just a stooge, a front man ... [who] would be kicked under the kitchen stairs at any moment he dared to cross the Red and pro-Red crew that really runs the party.”⁴³ It did not matter that Wallace himself was not a Communist; he was too willing to be friendly with the Communists, both domestic and foreign, for the comfort of the strongly anti-Communist people of Muncie. In this sense, Truman’s strategy to portray Wallace as a Communist collaborator in order to weaken his support base was successful.

However, perhaps Truman’s attempts to manipulate and heighten Americans’ existing fears of Communist interference in American politics worked a little too well. Indiana ultimately gave its electoral votes not to Wallace or Truman but to the Republican candidate, Thomas Dewey.⁴⁴ If, as Truman’s campaign staff suggested, the former Democrat Wallace was just a pawn of the Kremlin, then perhaps America needed a leader who lacked any associations with the Democratic Party at all, someone who would take an even stronger stance against the Communists. Perhaps, in voters’ minds, Truman was at least partly to blame for allowing a Communist sympathizer to capture the loyalties of a faction of his party while he was President. Dewey ran on an even more aggressively anti-Communist platform, dubbed “Operation Polecat” following his proclamation that he wanted “to make communism as [disliked] as a polecat.”⁴⁵ Truman may have succeeded in leveraging existing fears of Communist influence to prevent Wallace from gaining significant support among the general American public, but, at least in Indiana, he did so at the expense of the state’s electoral votes.

In 1948, concerns that Communist influence could stretch from Moscow to Muncie played a significant role in the Presidential campaign, resulting in “the most astonishing political upset in modern times.”⁴⁶ Understanding the deep-rooted fears of Communism that many Americans, such as those in Muncie, harbored, Truman leveraged these pre-existing sentiments to portray Wallace as a pawn of the Soviets and an enemy of the US, thus lessening the threat Wallace posed to his campaign. As the Middletown studies demonstrated, Communism was perceived as an enemy of American values; thus, people were quick to accept the narrative that Wallace was a

³⁹ John Martin, “Is Muncie Still Middletown?” July 1944, *Harper’s Magazine* 189, no. 1130, 101.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴¹ John Martin, “Middletown Revisited,” August 1946, *Harper’s Magazine*. 117

⁴² “Communists Run Third Party,” *Muncie Evening Press*, August 7, 1948.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ “Presidential Election of 1948” *270toWin*, 270towin.com.

⁴⁵ Thomas Dewey, quoted in Richard M. Fried, “‘Operation Polecat’: Thomas E. Dewey, the 1948 Election, and the Origins of McCarthyism,” *Journal of Policy History* 22, no. 1 (2010): 1.

⁴⁶ Irwin Ross, *The Loneliest Campaign: The Truman Victory of 1948* (New York, 1968), 6.

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Russian conspirator—in the same way that Russian conspiracies continue to be a topic of great concern today. But was Wallace really a Soviet pawn, or would he have potentially been an even better diplomat than Truman at the advent of the Cold War—could he even have prevented the Cold War altogether? Perhaps, or perhaps he was a naïve politician who believed too optimistically in the willingness of Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union to negotiate with the US toward peace. In the end, of course, Truman—and his beliefs about the evil influence of Communism in America—won. Truman, and not Wallace nor Dewey nor Thurmond, became President, and for better or worse, led the United States into the beginning of the Cold War.

About the Author

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