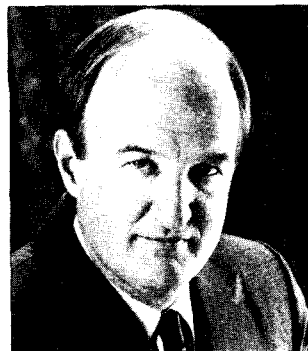




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“They Were Right”

“Americans need to know the history of American anticommunism if they are to understand the great role they have played in ridding the world of the most murderous of the twentieth century totalitarians.”

—RICHARD GID POWERS¹

On October 16, 1961, thousands of people packed the Hollywood Bowl. The occasion was not a rock concert or a sporting event but the biggest anticommunist rally in the country. “Hollywood’s Answer to Communism” was carried on nationwide television. Actor George Murphy was the master of ceremonies and other speakers included Herb Philbrick, Congressman Walter Judd, Dr. Fred Schwarz, Senator Thomas Dodd, and my uncle, W. Cleon Skousen, a former special assistant to J. Edgar Hoover and author of the bestseller *The Naked Communist*.

I was in my early teens when the anti-communist movement was at its zenith and remember seeing my uncle on TV. I watched shows like *I Led Three Lives* and read books like John Stormer’s *None Dare Call It Treason*, J. Edgar Hoover’s *Masters of Deceit*, and Whittaker Chambers’s *Witness*.

But despite this groundswell of concern over the threat of communism, communist sympathizers at high levels combined with

media forces to ridicule and vilify patriotic conservatives. Most historians deplored the anticommunist movement of the 1950s and 1960s as “extremist,” “paranoid,” “right-wing” hysteria. Accordingly, there was little credence given to this alleged vast communist conspiracy; reaction went rarely beyond references to McCarthyism, redbaiting, and blacklisting. They challenged the anti-communists’ claims that the Soviets had planted numerous agents in government, that Stalin had infiltrated the film industry as a means of promoting communist propaganda, that the Communist Party USA was a pawn of Moscow, and that the Soviet Union was a serious military threat.

They depicted the anticommunist era as an unwarranted “witch hunt” against liberal progressives and idealistic movie stars and a groundless attack on patriotic government officials who they say were falsely accused of espionage. They carried on a 40-year campaign to prove Alger Hiss and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg innocent. My uncle’s book so angered members of the political science and history departments at Brigham Young University that Richard D. Poll, a history professor, wrote a scathing critique of his “extremist” views on Karl Marx and communism.

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Mises and Socialism

In those days, the economics profession also cast doubt on free-market criticisms of socialism and the Soviet economy. Half a century earlier, Ludwig von Mises and F. A. Hayek were lone voices in charging that socialist central planning could not work. According to conventional wisdom, Mises and Hayek had lost the debate with the socialists in the 1930s, and in 1985 Paul Samuelson reported in his popular textbook that the Soviet Union had grown faster than any other industrial economy since the 1920s. As late as 1989, Samuelson claimed that "The Soviet economy is proof that, contrary to what many skeptics had earlier believed, a socialist command economy can function and even thrive."²

But then, following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and Soviet communism in 1989–90, economist Robert Heilbroner shocked his colleagues in the socialist world by boldly declaring that the long-standing debate between capitalism and socialism was over. "Capitalism has won," he confessed. "Socialism has been a great tragedy this century." Furthermore, Heilbroner was forced to change his mind about Mises and the debate over socialism. Following the unexpected collapse of communism, Heilbroner admitted, "It turns out, of course, that Mises was right."³ And it wasn't long before Paul Samuelson did an about-face in his textbook, labeling Soviet central planning "the failed model."

Revelations from the Soviet Archives

The fall of the Soviet Union brought about another dramatic outcome that would have far-reaching effects on modern history. The Russian government opened up thousands of secret KGB files in Moscow, revealing what one historian called "stunning revelations" about espionage and the Soviet economy under Stalin. This new information has sparked a harsh reevaluation of the anticommunist movement by historians and the media. As one reviewer put it, "It's like looking into the new edition of a book from which half the pages had previously been torn out."⁴

The KGB files prove beyond doubt that Alger Hiss, the Rosenbergs, and numerous other Americans accused of spying for the Soviets were guilty. They confirm what J. Edgar Hoover and the House Un-American Activities Committee were saying all along: that spies reached the highest levels of the State and Treasury departments, the White House, and the Manhattan Project, and that the Communist Party USA (which had 50,000 members in World War II) got its marching orders from Moscow.⁵

Stalin's Economic Disaster

Based on research at the Soviet archives, historian Sheila Fitzpatrick has written a pioneering account of everyday Russian life in the 1930s: "With the abolition of the market, shortages of food, clothing, and all kinds of consumer goods became endemic. As peasants fled the collectivized villages, major cities were soon in the grip of an acute housing crisis, with families jammed for decades in tiny single rooms in communal apartments. . . . It was a world of privation, overcrowding, endless queues, and broken families, in which the regime's promises of future socialist abundance rang hollow. . . . Government bureaucracy often turned everyday life into a nightmare."⁶ What a sharp contrast to Samuelson's glowing account of the Soviet economy.

After writing three books on the Soviet archives, historians John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr summed it up this way about the anticommunists: "They were right."

And being right, they deserve our praise and gratitude. □

1. Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 428.

2. Paul A. Samuelson and William D. Nordhaus, *Economics*, 13th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), p. 837.

3. Robert Heilbroner, "Reflections After Communism," *The New Yorker*, September 10, 1990, and "The Triumph of Capitalism," *The New Yorker*, January 23, 1989.

4. Joseph E. Persico, "The Kremlin Connection," review of *The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America*, by Allen Weinstein and Alexander Vassiliev, *New York Times Book Review*, January 3, 1999.

5. Several books have been published detailing new findings from the Russian archives, including John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr's *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) and *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale, 1998).

6. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism* (Oxford University Press, 1999), flyleaf.

BOOKS

Keeping the People's Liberties

by John J. Dinan

University Press of Kansas • 1998 • 259 pages

• \$35.00

Reviewed by George C. Leef

The title of this work comes from a 1792 essay by James Madison, "Who Are the Best Keepers of the People's Liberties?" How best to secure the rights of people was a question that bore heavily on the founders and still bears heavily on us today. Wake Forest University professor John Dinan examines the success—and lack thereof—of three different political regimes in their ability to "secure the rights" of citizens. The book is a valuable historical investigation, but is sadly disappointing in that it fails to give much help to those who search for political arrangements that will really *secure* our rights and not trample on them.

The first of the regimes Dinan examines is republicanism, that is, a system of elected representatives. The author finds that in the early days of the nation it was widely believed that elected representatives were best suited to the job of protecting the rights of the people. "[O]f the various public officials who might be charged with this responsibility," Dinan writes, "legislators were thought to be most capable of representing the popular understanding of rights; legislative assemblies were considered the proper forum for deliberating about the content of rights; and statutes were seen as providing the most effective means of securing their protection." Neither judges nor the general public were widely looked to as protectors of rights.

How well did republican institutions protect rights? Not too badly, Dinan concludes. Studying a limited number of state legislatures (principally Massachusetts, Virginia, Michigan, and Oregon), he shows that there were some signal successes achieved through legislation—for instance, freedom from min-

isterial taxes. Dating back to the seventeenth century in both Massachusetts and Virginia, taxes had been levied for the support of the official church. The battle to liberate people from such taxes was won in the legislatures, with the courts fighting a rearguard action on behalf of the vested interests that wanted the taxes to continue.

Another intriguing case Dinan presents is the controversy over protecting citizens against unlawful searches and seizures. Today we think of such protection as a judicial function of relatively recent origin, but that is far from the case. In the nineteenth century the problem of illegitimate searches and seizures by police and officials was much on the minds of the people, and the legislatures acted. The legislative remedy was to make public officials liable for wrongful invasions of individual liberty and property. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that the courts entered the scene with the controversial exclusionary rule, which forbids the use of evidence obtained illegally.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a growing dissatisfaction and impatience with legislatures led to the rise of the populist movement. The populists argued that legislatures were too beholden to special-interest groups and their own interest in re-election to do a good job of securing the rights of the people. Accordingly, many advocated popular initiatives and referenda as a means of bypassing or overriding the legislature.

In some instances, it worked. In 1921 a statute in Massachusetts established a censorship board to license movies that did not contain "indecent" material. The people promptly repealed the law by referendum in 1922.

The problem with populism is that it can result and frequently has resulted in laws that are incompatible with any respectable theory of rights. Dinan reports that when the Oregon legislature declined to enact a workmen's compensation system, "the people resorted to the initiative process to secure their rights." Compelling employers to obey a government edict on the treatment of injured workers is not a matter of "securing rights," however. It is a matter of one group's using the power of the state to get what it wants, overriding the