

POLITICAL HYSTERIA IN AMERICA
The Democratic Capacity for
Repression

by Murray B. Levin

Basic Books, 312 pp., \$8.50

**THE TRUMAN DOCTRINE AND
THE ORIGINS OF McCARTHYISM:**
Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and
Internal Security, 1946-1948

by Richard M. Freeland

Knopf, 432 pp., \$10

Reviewed by Robert Griffith

■ In recent years historians and other social scientists have sought to explore certain grim episodes of the American past—those marked not by the successive triumphs of democratic virtue but by war, racism, and the destruction of humane values. Anticommunist politics, which suppressed internal dissent while pursuing a foreign policy of global counterrevolution, is one such episode to which both Murray B. Levin and Richard M. Freeland have addressed themselves.

In *Political Hysteria in America*, Levin focuses on the Red Scare of 1919-1920 in an attempt to explain the causes of political intolerance. For Levin, the Red Scare was neither aberrational nor accidental but the natural, though extreme, product of a political culture characterized by a compulsive and exclusive commitment to the liberal dogmas of John Locke and Adam Smith. Lacking both reactionary and revolutionary traditions, Americans, Levin argues, were prone to overreact to even imagined challenges to their liberal orthodoxy.

The Red Scare was not, however, a spontaneous popular movement. Rather, it was generated by an economic and political elite whose self-interest the hysteria served. In this sense, according to Levin, the Red Scare seems to contradict the political theories of "pluralist" social scientists such as Daniel Bell, Seymour Martin Lipset and Richard Hofstadter, who locate the source of political hysteria within the irrationalism of mass politics, and who see in the interest-group organization of American society a pragmatically conservative bulwark against the danger of popular passions. Levin insists that the very interest groups to which the pluralists would turn for moderation and social stability were responsible instead for exciting public terror. Businessmen, politicians, newspaper publishers, and the leaders of superpatriotic societies all had vested interests in sustaining the Red Scare and the misperceptions upon which it fed. Indeed, the hysteria



Ross Terrill.

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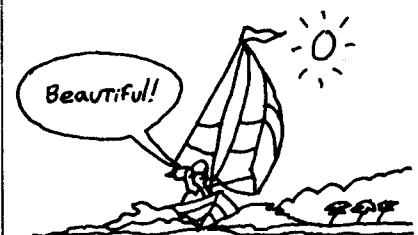
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Polly Stone Buck of Hamden, Connecticut, thinks Dickens buffs should easily recognize the occupations of these characters. Nonbuffs, please see page 88.

- | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Mr. Bucket () | A. actor |
| 2. Mr. Bumble () | B. blacksmith |
| 3. Rosa Dartle () | C. dolls' dressmaker |
| 4. Amy Dorrit () | D. waxworks guide |
| 5. Sarah Gamp () | E. child's nurse |
| 6. Joe Gargery () | F. architect |
| 7. Nicholas Nickleby () | G. lady's companion |
| 8. Susan Nipper () | H. valet |
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Senator Joseph McCarthy and his chief counsel, Roy Cohn (left)—McCarthy "capitalized on anxieties . . . that the [Truman] administration itself had helped to arouse."

abated only when members of the establishment perceived that its continuation could threaten their own interest. The opposition of Charles Evans Hughes, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and other prominent figures to the expulsion of five socialists from the New York State Legislature, together with the opposition of newspaper publishers and organized labor to a proposed peacetime sedition bill, disrupted the unanimity of high-level opinion, legitimized dissent, and helped bring the Red Scare to an end.

The American public was susceptible to manipulation, Levin continues, because the Red Scare was rooted in the repressed inner lives of common citizens who projected onto nameless conspirators their own secret fears and envy. Thus, while the hysteria produced concrete economic and political payoffs for various elites, it allowed the people the pleasure of "mass orgasmic release."

Finally, Levin argues that such "democratic repression" has been, by and large, lawful and nonviolent—a fact that heightens rather than lessens its danger. And he predicts that resort to hysteria is likely to become increasingly archaic as governing groups adopt "more sophisticated forms of managing tension and more sophisticated techniques of cooption and repression."

These are, in the main, provocative arguments. Unfortunately, the consideration they receive in *Political Hysteria in America* is painfully inade-

quate. Levin's analysis is often crude and frequently unsupported by evidence. His style is repetitious and blatantly polemical. Most important, his book is simply unoriginal. Levin's description of the events of 1919-1920 is drawn nearly exclusively from Robert Murray's *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920*, and his analysis of the monolithic character of American political culture derives from Louis Hartz's classic study, *The Liberal Tradition in America*. In addition, Levin's argument about the pluralist sources of political hysteria is based on Michael Rogin's brilliant book *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter*, while his thoughts on the future of repression are largely drawn from the writings of Herbert Marcuse. These are all significant works; they deserve, however, to be read on their own account, not in garbled paraphrase.

By contrast, Richard Freeland's study, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism*, which sharply challenges conventional explanations of America's second great Red Scare, is the result of careful research and disciplined analysis. Like William A. Williams and Gabriel Kolko, Freeland argues that postwar American leaders, haunted by the specter of depression, sought to insure American prosperity through the creation of a liberal world order characterized by the free flow of goods and capital and dominated by American power and wealth. Their plans initially included both Eastern

Europe and the Soviet Union; when these hopes were dashed by the firm opposition of the Russians, they sought instead to establish their liberal system within the Western "free world."

To create such a system necessitated large amounts of foreign aid—both to generate recovery and serve as a lever with which to force the Europeans to lower their tariffs. But, Freeland argues, the Truman administration was unable to win political support in Congress for its sophisticated economic diplomacy and so resorted to "crisis" politics and a strident anticommunism. The crusading rhetoric of the Truman Doctrine was thus intended to make foreign aid more palatable to a conservative and economy-minded Congress. So, too, was the climate of crisis that surrounded the passage of the Greek-Turkish aid bill in 1947, and, later, the Marshall Plan itself.

The idea of an anticommunist crusade abroad created seemingly irresistible political pressures for a crackdown on radicals in the United States. Freeland's secondary theme is that the Truman administration embarked upon a militantly repressive course at home in order to sustain support for its foreign policies. The creation of an employee loyalty program, the publication of the attorney general's list of "subversive" organizations, the deportation of alien radicals, and the prosecution of communist leaders under the Smith Act were all timed, Freeland suggests, to coincide with the administration's campaign for foreign aid.

But the politics of anticommunism also proved to be the administration's undoing. From 1947 to 1949 Truman had justified a foreign policy of limited economic aid to Western Europe on the

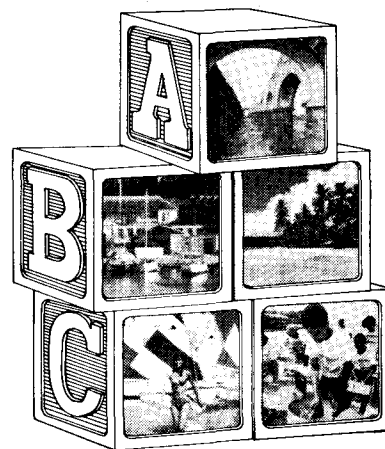
grounds that it was part of a worldwide crusade against communism. Crusades, however, are more easily begun than ended, and by early 1950 conservative Republicans were blaming the administration for the "loss" of China and demanding that it extend the Truman Doctrine into the Pacific. By the summer of 1950, following the outbreak of the Korean War, the administration had completely lost control of the communist issue. The twin symbols of its failure were General Douglas MacArthur and Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, both of whom were more faithful to the logic of the administration than was Truman himself. MacArthur's call for "victory" in Korea was premised on precisely the sort of indiscriminate anticommunism set forth in the Truman Doctrine. Similarly, Joe McCarthy capitalized on anxieties about domestic communism that the administration itself had helped to arouse. "The practices of McCarthyism were Truman's practices in cruder hands, just as the language of McCarthyism was Truman's language, in less well-meaning voices."

The main outlines of Freeland's argument are not entirely new. Athan Theoharis has advanced a similar thesis in a series of books and articles, the most important of which is *Seeds of Repression: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of McCarthyism*. Both Freeland and Theoharis argue that McCarthyism was not simply a function of conservative politics, but that it was a product as well of the Cold War and the anticommunist rhetoric used to sustain it. Truman was not just a victim of McCarthyism; he was one of its principal architects. The Levin and Freeland books unsettle the comfortable assumptions of earlier scholar-



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