Alex Goodall, 'Red Herrings? The Fish Committee and Anticommunism in the Early Depression Years'[1]

I.

What can be said of the Fish Committee beyond the damning indictment provided by the journalist Walter Goodman half a century ago? For years after it completed its work, Goodman noted, "critics were still pointing out that it took testimony from 225 witnesses in fourteen cities, produced a voluminous report, and passed at once into obscurity."[2] Even while the committee was conducting its investigations, between June and December 1930, newspapers and the general public showed little interest in its findings, distracted by the more pressing problems of rising unemployment and recession. When after a month in Washington the committee traveled to New York, then further afield, the *New York Times* commented that it had passed through the city "almost unnoticed." Even *Pravda* reportedly mocked the Committee as a sideshow.[3] The committee's calls for a strengthened Federal Bureau of Investigation were widely rejected as excessive and unnecessary, the *New York Times* noting that "watchfulness without panic is plainly the method which the great majority of Americans would wish to see applied".[4] No legislation followed the submission of concluding recommendations to Congress, and no lucrative speaking tours followed for its members, who more or less vanished from the congressional record after the hearings ended.[5] Only the

[1] For providing comments and suggestions during the drafting of this work, I wish to express my gratitude to Robert Justin Goldstein, George Lewis and Markku Ruotsila.
[2] Walter Goodman, *The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities* (Secker and Warburg: London, 1964), p. 12.
[3] 'Moscow Pokes Fun at "Sideshow" Here', *New York Times,* July 28, 1930.
[4] 'Neither Indifference Nor Panic', *New York Times,* August 2, 1930.
[5] R. N. Current, 'Hamilton Fish: Crusading Isolationist', in J. T. Salter, ed., *Public Men In and Out of Office* (New York: Da Capo, 1972), p. 215.

chairman and leading light, the aristocratic, charming and somewhat feckless Republican from upstate New York, Hamilton Fish III, continued his restless search for political celebrity; leading him later in the decade to the anti-interventionist movement and an outspoken policy of Nazi appeasement that would ruin his reputation and see him gerrymandered out of office by his own party in the later years of World War Two.

For good or ill, the Fish Committee merits the singular qualification of being the only anticommunist investigative committee in American history to have failed entirely to have a substantial political impact, either in terms of legislation or influence over public debate, begging the question why this particular dog did not bark when so many others did. After all, many of the features that historians have identified as underlying causes of anticommunist fearfulness were clearly present in 1930, including a widespread sense of alienation from the processes of modernization, urbanization and industrial mass production; continuing tensions between deskilled industrial laborers, poor rural workers and employers over pay, conditions and the right to organize; anxieties among ruling elites over their potential displacement by rising social and ethnic groups; and large numbers of non-assimilated immigrants living in the nation's cities, borderlands and industrial regions. Nor were the committee's complaints entirely without substance: Fish and his colleagues publicized specific and damning evidence about the Gulag, three decades before Solzhenitsyn's works were published in the West, and uncovered suggestive material relating to covert Soviet activities in the United States, an issue that would be central to resurgent anticommunist politics in the years after World War Two. If the party, as always, remained a miniscule presence in American life, the changes in the Soviet line that stemmed from Stalin's consolidation of power in Russia, most importantly the declaration of the "Third Period" in 1928, had given orthodox Communism a millenarian thrust that had been absent for much of the mid-1920s. Communists seemed to be riding the crest of a wave of political polarization, something that had the potential to open

the party to a wider audience and open bloody wounds in American society. This was a cause of great disquiet to their foes.

Local level repression of political activism had surged in response to depression-related discontent, especially in terms of labor-employer disputes, yet this was not paralleled by anticommunist action at the national level.[6] Despite the clear preconditions for Red Scare politics, Representative Fish's committee was unable to provide the spark to produce a national public outcry or to pass legislation to control radical activities. Indeed, inasmuch as it offered an unconvincing critique of communism, the committee's exertions ended up strengthening claims that antiradical fears were simply a bugbear promoted by elites to preserve their privileges and resist reform.

Undoubtedly, part of the blame for this failure can be laid at the feet of the organizers, especially the chairman, who consistently overpromised and under-delivered. Even Fish's personal assets turned out to be political liabilities. His polite, meandering approach in the chair was a major departure from the hectoring tones one normally associates with anticommunist committees, yet rarely produced the kinds of clashes likely to generate journalistic interest. Anticipating attacks from the left, Fish claimed to be developing a rigorous case against Communism on the basis of "facts" and "evidence", not accusations and opinion. Yet he and his peers were unable to avoid giving in to their own conservative prejudices when conducting the hearings. He attempted to marshal public anger over the economic crisis by blaming it on Communist machinations, but this failed to appeal either to business leaders or the suffering masses. Rather than strengthening his credibility, Fish's failed attempts at rigor saw him satisfy neither rationalists nor ideologues, while a series of blunders undermined key opportunities for the kinds of spectacular revelations that generally

[6] Robert Justin Goldstein, *Political Repression in Modern America: From 1870 to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1978), pp. 195-6; M. J. Heale, *American Anticommunism: Combating the Enemy Within, 1830-1970* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 101.

led to front page coverage. Fish ended up expressing neither the force of deep expertise nor the explosiveness of McCarthyite histrionics. Rather than praising him for his restraint or fearing his excess, Fish was mocked for his flimsiness.

Nevertheless, one cannot entirely separate these individual failings from the more systemic weaknesses of anticommunist politics in the depression years. The line adopted by the committee, a mistaken attempt to link anger over the depression to a more traditional anticommunist agenda and to pre-empt liberal attacks by focusing heavily on Communist institutions rather than the left as a whole, was due to circumstance as well as philosophy. Many of the key groups that normally propelled the right wing into anticommunist politics – patriotic organizations, federal investigators, bureaucrats and big businessmen – were divided among themselves, had been exposed as incompetent or were disengaged from the debate. Meanwhile, many of those who made the most effective case against revolutionary radicalism – especially anticommunists in the union movement – used fears of Communism to lobby for reform rather than repression. The outcome was a discordant political message with contradictory conclusions that satisfied neither right nor left and failed to persuade the public that Communist activities were a pressing issue of national security. Only once a new set of anticommunist alliances began to develop later in the 1930s, when anticommunist politics was driven primarily by a new coalition of business groups, anti-federal populists and southern segregationists, would anticommunists again be able to substantively impact the direction of national politics.

II.

Hamilton Fish was a fascinating and in many ways characteristic exemplar of the patrician order that still retained influence in East Coast politics in the interwar years. The Fish family traced their origins to Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch colonial governor of New York, and Thomas Hooker, the founder of Connecticut colony. Later scions boasted histories of proud public engagement in both state and national politics; Fish's grandfather had been Secretary of State under Ulysses S. Grant. Fish was named after a cousin who had died in the Spanish-American War fighting with the "Rough Riders", and there can be little doubt that TR's image shone brightly in Fish's mind. While he demonstrated less of the roving intellect so characteristic of the 26th President, he shared many of Roosevelt's personal values, including an enthusiasm for energetic outdoor activity and spirited gamesmanship, and for the army as a workshop of a republican, democratic order. Fish had led the 369th Infantry in World War One, was inducted into the *Légion d'honneur* for his service in France, acted as a founding member of the American Legion in 1919 alongside Theodore Roosevelt Jr., and authored the bill providing for the return of the unknown soldier to Arlington National Cemetery. Despite his aristocratic heritage, he prided himself on affecting no airs and graces, and – like Roosevelt before him – believed that elite status came with an obligation to further progressive reform for the benefit of the less fortunate: even to the point of supporting social security, minimum wage and anti-lynching laws in the New Deal years.[7]

After his election to congress in 1920, though, Fish had struggled to find an appropriate outlet for his patriotic energies, and the later years of the decade saw him engaged in what seemed like a scatter-gun search for an issue of public concern he might focus upon. In July, August and September of 1929 alone, Fish was quoted in the press denouncing Jim Crow laws in the South and praising the African American war record, defending the Kellogg-Briand pact as a glorious bloodless revolution for peace, attacking

[7] Current, 'Hamilton Fish: Crusading Isolationist', pp. 210-224.

Franklin Roosevelt and Tammany Hall, calling for a US military intervention to defend Jewish settlers against Arab violence in Palestine and involving himself in a complicated debate with various political opponents, the State Banking Department, a judge and J. P. Morgan over the proposed construction of a canal connecting the Great Lakes to St. Lawrence. Indeed, later in the year, he launched another ball into the air, correcting several misstatements in an ongoing debate over who was the tallest President.[8]

While anticommunism was undoubtedly a deeply-held commitment, then, there can be no doubt that it also offered a chance for an aspiring politician to attach his name to an issue in a way that would have offered clear advantages in any future bid for power within the Republican party apparatus. As the effects of the depression had become increasingly visible, society had polarized over the issue of political radicalism. Many of the antiradical groups that had emerged during and after World War One remained active and energetic, but were confronted by a growing civil liberties-based opposition. Pressure was building for the recognition of Soviet Russia: the United States was the last great power not to have established formal ties with the Communist regime. However, opponents of recognition were given a fillip after reports of the persecution of Russian Jews and orchestrated attacks on Christianity were circulated in late 1929 and early 1930.[9] Indeed, opposition to the Soviet Union on religious grounds was as strong if not stronger than hostility to the "socialist" economics the nation also embodied. At home, unemployment protests in which radical activists loomed large descended into violence as demonstrators and police fought for control of the streets, but opinions starkly divided over who was culpable. A number of senior Communists – including the party leader, William Z. Foster – were tried and briefly

[8] 'Blames Politics for De Priest Case', *New York Times,* July 1, 1929; 'New Citizens Urged to Obey Our Laws', *New York Times*, July 5, 1929; 'Two Add $50,000 to Palestine Fund', *New York Times,* August 29, 1929; 'Fish and Celler Urge Action in Palestine', *New York Times,* September 5, 1929; 'Christians Appeal for Palestine Fund', *New York Times,* September 16, 1929; 'St. Lawrence Canal Ridiculed by Fish', September 19, 1929; 'City Trust Enquiry Demanded by Fish', September 29, 1929; 'Topics of the Times', *New York Times*, November 1, 1929.

[9] 'Fish Urges Congress Protest Soviet Drive', *New York Times*, February 20, 1930.

imprisoned for allegedly provoking violence; however, liberals and socialists warned against a resurgence of "the lawless activities of Attorney General Palmer in 1919" and called for public hearings into police brutality.[10] Tensions continued to build in 1930 after three Communists, Alfred Luro, Steve Katovis and Gonzalo Gonzales, were killed during separate altercations with the police.

If resurgent anticommunist feeling explained the appeal of the issue to the Republican representative, then growing resistance to the same politics of anticommunism may explain why Fish sought to distinguish his case against the Reds from the more sweeping and uncritical forms of antiradicalism that had done so much damage to the credibility of the movement in previous years. In a statement issued to the press at the opening of the hearings, Fish declared that "this committee does not propose to investigate socialism, radicalism or pacifism as such, nor does it seek to interfere with the political beliefs of any one in this country, nor with the rights of American citizens to freedom of speech, as guaranteed by the Constitution."[11] Instead, his indictment centered on three key assertions: that the Soviet Union was single-mindedly focused on the destruction of the American system of government; that the Communist Party in America was entirely a tool of Soviet foreign policy; and that to achieve their revolutionary goals Communists sought to exploit vulnerabilities in American society and undermine the social contract: orchestrating riots and strikes among unemployed or suffering workers, using the Soviet Union's economic muscle to destabilize American businesses and markets, provoking hostility among ethnic and racial minorities, causing people to question their faith in religion, and inciting America's young people to rebel against existing structures of social, pedagogical and familial authority.[12] Fish

[10] 'Whalen Tells Employers of 300 Reds They Hired', *New York Times*, March 11, 1930.
[11] 'Congress Red Quest Shifts Here Today', *New York Times* July 15, 1930.
[12] United States Congress, *Hearing Before the Committee on Rules House of Representatives, Seventy-First Congress, 2nd Sess., on H. Res. 180* (Washington: USGPO, 1930).

also argued that the current economic crisis could in large part be blamed on subversive efforts by Communists to destabilize the economy.

This line substantially differed from figures further to the right who expressed little or no interest in the difference between pro-Stalinist Communists and other actors on the left and center of American political life. Taken together, it was an almost exact inversion of the orthodox Communist view of the committee, which depicted Fish and his fellow congressmen as part of a general effort among the capitalist classes to prepare the public for an imperialist war against Russia, as the stooge of Wall Street and corporate interests, and in denial that it was the contradictions of capitalism, not the agitation of Communists, that made social harmony impossible.[13] The committee declared that Communism was not a legitimate political movement because it sought the overthrow of the American government through force and violence; Communists insisted that while any revolution would naturally end in violence this would stem from the actions of capitalists attempting to hold onto power.[14]

In short, the committee focused on the Soviet Union, the relationship between the Communist International and the Communist Party of America, and the role played by Communists in the various Communist-dominated organizations through which the party worked. The only significant exception to this rule was the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU): which was non-partisan but had a small number of Communists in senior positions and a reputation as the most outspoken defender of dissenters' rights, for which Fish and several witnesses pounded them incessantly.[15]

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[13] United States Congress, *Hearings before a Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activities in the United States of the House of Representatives, Seventy-First Congress, 2nd Sess., Pursuant to H. Res. 220, providing for an investigation of Communist propaganda in the United States* (Washington: USGPO, 1930), Part 1, vol. 4, pp. 352, 358-9. Hereafter referred to as "Fish Committee."

[14] Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 4, p. 387.

[15] Ibid., Part 5, vol. 3, p. 11. In the case of professional patriot Francis Ralston Welsh, the committee offered the witness broad latitude to denounce the ACLU as an ally of Communists, but after his comments showed signs of obsession they tried repeatedly to get him to move on. Ibid., Part 1, vol. 4, pp. 128-132.

To emphasize their analytical credentials in the face of widespread criticism, the congressmen repeatedly stated that their job was to gather "facts" about Communist activities, not to offer "opinions", and encouraged witnesses to read thousands of pages of documentary proof into the record to substantiate their claims (presumably in the belief that the quantity of documentary evidence somehow spoke to its quality). This tendency could be seen in previous antiradical campaigns, many of which sought to distinguish their "education" and "investigation" campaigns from radical "propaganda" activities; however, the depression crisis and poor record anticommunists had earned for smearing and misdirection in previous years gave this language a new importance. To demonstrate its rigor, the committee studied Marxist-Leninist tracts, records of Communist Party proceedings and translations of the Soviet constitution.[16] Witnesses straying too far from the topic or speculating too wildly were warned to refocus their testimony on party organs and activities, and to avoid personal attacks and hearsay, while on several occasions Fish opened sessions by repeating his initial declaration that the committee had no interest in investigating socialists, pacifists or liberals.[17] "The only bad thing [Fish] could say about Socialist Norman Thomas," the historian Richard Gid Powers notes, "was that he had gone to Princeton."[18] Meanwhile, the most common lawyerly tactic deployed by the congressmen was not bullying and defamation insulated by congressional privilege, but damning through excessive civility.[19] Tactically, at least, the committeemen were more Joseph Welch than Joseph McCarthy.

One of Fish's key early witnesses was the Jesuit priest and founder of Georgetown's School of Foreign Service, Father Edmund A. Walsh: a man whose attitude toward

[16] For instance, see ibid., Part 1, vol. 1, pp. 11-17.
[17] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 1, p. 43; Part 1, vol. 2, pp. 5-10; Part 1, vol. 3, p. 12; Part 5, vol. 3, p. 287.
[18] Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 88.
[19] Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 4, p. 377.

Communism had been fixed by his experiences during a Vatican-sponsored famine relief mission to Russia in 1922-3.[20] As with many Christian anticommunists, the foundation of Walsh's personal opposition to the Soviet Union lay in a vision of Communism as the paramount force of organized atheism in the modern world. However, while he discussed this before the committee Walsh stressed that the geopolitical antagonism between the United States and the Soviet Union was at root a clash of political philosophies.[21] To him, Marxism-Leninism fundamentally conflicted with liberal republicanism because it declared all areas of society to be parts of a unified political whole, unlike the Anglo-Saxon tradition which designated certain key realms – the individual, the home, the community, the church – as 'non-political' spheres off-limits to state action. In this sense, Walsh's arguments grew from traditions of popular democratic anti-Europeanism that had infused American identity with a profound hostility to the centralized political systems of the Old World; although the Protestant underpinnings of this were downplayed by Walsh in his generalized assertion of the importance of non-sectarian Christian anticommunism. Walsh also claimed that the Soviets were using trade policy to conduct "economic warfare" against the United States. He argued that the Soviets were using predatory pricing strategies to destroy American businesses by swamping them with cheap Russian imports. Over time, this would induce a state of dependency, weakening America's capacity in any future war between the two nations.[22] Fish followed up by arguing that Communists in America had been instigators of the current depression crisis, not least by creating tensions between employees and employers

[20] Warren I. Cohen, *Empire Without Tears: America's Foreign Relations, 1921-1933* (New York: Knopf, 1987), p. 88.
[21] For Walsh's anticommunism, see Patrick McNamara, *A Catholic Cold War: Edmund A. Walsh, S.J., and the Politics of American Anticommunism* (New York: Fordham, 2005).
[22] For a more extended development of these arguments, see Edmund A. Walsh, *The Last Stand: An Interpretation of the Soviet Five-Year Plan* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1931).

that ground down American business, and later in the hearings claimed that radicals had been promoting "whispering campaigns" in order to precipitate runs on banks.[23]

Clearly, this "economic warfare" theory represented an opportunistic attempt to link pressing public concerns over the economy to the presence of Communists in America (and the world). However, as well as suiting the autarchic temper of the times, it anticipated broader tendencies among conservatives in later years to present their hostility to Communism in terms of free market economics; as with the enthusiasm for Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* or the writings of Ayn Rand.[24]

For 1930, this was a novel approach to explaining US-Soviet relations; and in the months following the Wall Street crash was certainly brave, if not foolhardy. The basic premise that politics and ideology were interfering with a "natural" pattern of free commerce was leveled at many nations in the aftermath of the near total collapse of international comity following the crash: as, for example, with claims that French "golden bullets" had caused the collapse of the central European banking sector and subsequent global depression.[25] But authors and political actors who specifically thought about "economic warfare" in the interwar years tended to use the term to refer to strategies for targeting an enemy's productive capacity *during* military conflict.[26] Arguably, the closest echoes of Walsh's arguments about a hidden economic war being waged against America could be found in the Marxist tradition to which he was responding: especially the Leninist attack on empire as a search for markets,

[23] 'Bank Run Laid to Reds', *New York Times*, December 25, 1930.
[24] Alan Brinkley, 'The Problem of American Conservatism', *American Historical Review* 99, no. 2 (April 1964), pp. 416-7; Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[25] Paul Einzig, *Behind the Scenes of International Finance* (London: Macmillan, 1931), pp. 10, 121-2.
[26] For instance, D. T. Jack, *Studies in Economic Warfare* (London: P. S. King & Son, 1940). Cf. Jacob Viner, 'The Prevalence of Dumping in International Trade', *The Journal of Political Economy* 30, no. 5 (October 1922), pp. 655-680; Robert J. Young, 'Spokesmen for Economic Warfare: The Industrial Intelligence Centre in the 1930s', *European History Quarterly* 6 (1976), pp. 473-89.

or arguments that the American government had used trade and fiscal policies to achieve dominance in the Caribbean, Latin America and Asia.

Later in the decade, the financial journalist Paul Einzig's *Bloodless Invasion* (1938) suggested that Nazi ambitions had been promoted prior to open warfare through the economic penetration of the Danube Basin and the Balkans by a secret "Nazi International".[27] By the time of the Cold War, the language of military struggle would be regularly used in reference to not only the economic but also the social and cultural spheres when describing the confrontation between East and West. In this sense, Edmund Walsh and the Fish Committee were ahead of their time. However, in another way this was a very traditional American argument. By linking moral outrage with economic self-interest, the effort to articulate an idea of Soviet economic warfare resembled the kind of free labor arguments that were so effective in mobilizing the North against the "slave power conspiracy" before the Civil War. It also picked up on anti-trust traditions in American political discourse. Walsh took ideas about the dangers of anti-competitive business practices in the commercial sphere and applied them to geopolitics, following a broader early twentieth century tendency to shift the language and ideals of American business into the conduct of foreign affairs.[28] He argued that since the Soviet Union exercised total control over its productive base through state-owned industrial and commercial enterprises, export cartels and foreign trade bodies, it was able to use monopoly influence in international commerce to promote a revolutionary agenda around the world.

Walsh's stress on clashing political philosophies and use of economistic arguments to structure his approach to international relations was useful to the committee, not least because

[27] Paul Einzig, *Bloodless Invasion: German Economic Penetration into the Danubian States and the Balkans* (London: Duckworth, 1938). See also Thomas P. Brockway, *Battles Without Bullets: The Story of Economic Warfare* (New York: Foreign Policy Association, 1939); Paul Einzig, *Economic Warfare* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1940).

[28] For instance, Emily Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

it allowed Fish to distance himself from several strands of anti-Semitic, ultra-conspiratorial or racially-derived anticommunism that were in circulation in the interwar years. Unlike the earlier anticommunist investigations at a state and national level headed by Lee Slater Overman and Clayton Lusk, none of the Fish Committee members and only a few of their witnesses claimed that Soviet Communism was part of a deep rationalist-collectivist conspiracy dating back to Adam Weishaupt and the Order of the Illuminati: a trope common among ahistorical right-wing conspiracy theorists who had been influenced by extremist writers such as the British anti-Semite and fascist, Nesta Webster, as well as many religious radicals who saw the Soviet Union as just another front in the eternal battle against Satan.[29] *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which had fuelled theories of the Bolshevik state as the manifestation of a hidden conspiracy to engineer a Jewish world government, made no appearance; despite the fact that Fish would be accused later in the decade of using his congressional office to circulate the *Protocols* to isolationist supporters.[30] When witnesses made casually racist remarks about Jews, Italians and Greeks as temperamentally more inclined to adopt radical ideologies, the chairman intervened to stress the patriotic loyalty of minority groups.[31] At one point, Fish repeated a claim that had been suggested to him by a Russian immigrant and former member of the Industrial Workers of the World: that the correlation between non-citizenship and revolutionary radicalism was the result of social conditioning rather than racial or national character; the experience of repression in Europe had accustomed immigrants to be hostile to all forms of government, a view they had "received with their mother's milk" and had left them unable to see that the United States was

[29] Richard M. Gilman, *Behind "World revolution": The Strange Career of Nesta H. Webster* (Ann Arbor: Insights Books, 1982); Markku Ruotsila, 'Mrs. Webster's Religion: Conspiracist Extremism on the Christian Far Right', *Patterns of Prejudice* 38 (June 2004), pp. 109-126; Martha F. Lee, 'Nesta Webster: The Voice of Conspiracy', in *Journal of Women's History*, 17, no. 3 (Fall 2005), pp. 81-104. At one point, Representative Nelson asked William Z. Foster to clarify whether Marx's ideas were "based more or less on the belief and teachings of the Order of the Illuminati." Foster replied: "Of whom?" Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 4, p. 347.
[30] Ernest Volkman, *A Legacy of Hate: Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1982), p. 42.
[31] Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 1, pp. 77-8, 119.

qualitatively different to the undemocratic countries they had left.[32] Fish continued to associate radicalism with immigrants, but emphasized this was a political and cultural, not a racial, phenomenon. Though he supplied no evidence to support the claim, Fish even implausibly suggested that Communism in the black community was linked solely to West Indian immigrants, not natural born citizens.[33] Fish had been regimental commander of the 369th Regiment in World War One – the "Harlem Hellfighters" were the first African American regiment to serve during the war – was a fervent opponent of lynching and was outraged by suggestions of black disloyalty. When one black ex-Communist claimed that there were 100,000 African American Communists in the Southern states ready to revolt, Fish vigorously dissented, pointing out that "by and large, the colored people in this country, men and women, are Christians who attend church and believe in God and … the communists teach hatred of God".[34] To support his view, he called upon black liberal leaders such as Illinois Congressman Oscar de Priest and the union leader A. Philip Randolph, who were eager to distance black people from any taint of communism for understandable reasons of their own, and conservative churchmen such as the Baptist preacher Dr. William A. Venerable, who when quizzed by the chair about the influence of communism in his church wryly remarked that he had generally found "more among the Methodists," much to the amusement of the audience.[35]

Clearly, then, the chairman was more of a conservative than a right-wing radical in his anticommunist politics, at least at a point in his career when he still aspired to a position of national leadership within the Republican Party. Nor were his fellow congressmen especially extreme in their analysis, although the presence of Carl Bachmann of West Virginia, Edward

[32] The same point was repeated by Ellis Searles of the United Mine Workers' Association. Ibid., Part 3, vol. 4, p. 4; Part 4, vol. 1, p. 125; Part 5, vol. 3, p. 245.
[33] Ibid., Part 4, vol. 2, p. 337.
[34] Ibid., Part 6, vol. 1, pp. 222-3.
[35] Ibid., Part 3, vol. 1, pp. 243, 252; Part 4, vol. 2, p. 336-7; Part 5, vol. 3, p. 284.

E. Eslick of Tennessee, and Robert Hall of Mississippi – with Bachmann playing a particularly vocal role – did give the committee a distinctly Southern feel. The hearings thus presented a less extreme indictment of Communism than that offered by more radical counter-subversives, who were either excluded from the witness rosters or carefully managed when giving evidence. It offered a critique shaped by anti-authoritarian and free market capitalist political assumptions, a whole-hearted endorsement of American political institutions, a rejection of simple ethnic determinism, and a focus upon Communist institutions rather than on the left as a whole. Indeed, their detailed analyses of Communist activity were founded on substantive evidence and were sometimes plausible and convincing.

Among other things, the committee uncovered some of the first evidence of Soviet covert operations in the United States: an issue that would become a central part of the anticommunist debate after World War Two. The most revealing discoveries came from some of the earliest Soviet defectors, who shed light on the role of secret agents working within Amtorg: the Soviet trading bureau in New York that, in the absence of formal diplomatic infrastructure, had come to resemble something close to a Soviet embassy in the public mind.[36] Edmund Walsh presented information that had come from the published memoirs of a senior defector from the Parisian Embassy, Grigori Bessedovsky, who had been scheduled to take up post as president of Amtorg but was diverted at the last minute. Bessedovsky had abandoned Communism after he came under suspicion of disloyalty and subsequently released a slew of self-justifying accounts of the secret side of Soviet diplomacy.[37] Much of this material had so far only been published in French. The most important witness to appear in person before the committee was Basil Delgass, who until

[36] See testimony in ibid., Part 3, vol. 3.
[37] Grigory Bessedovsky, *Revelations of a Soviet Diplomat* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1931), pp. 90-91, 109-118; Gordon Brook-Shepherd, *The Storm Petrels: The First Soviet Defectors, 1928-1938* (London: Collins, 1977), pp. 85-106. Bessedovsky also implicated Boris Skvirsky, the Director of the Soviet Union Information Bureau, in covert activities; something that was strongly denied by Skvirsky on the stand. Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 5, p. 39.

recently had been the Vice President of Amtorg. Delgass had been summoned back to Moscow a few months prior to the hearings' commencement and, fearing for his safety, resigned once the Fish Committee began and offered to testify against his former colleagues. Delgass declared that Amtorg was systematically lying about the presence of Soviet secret police (OGPU) operatives on American shores. He claimed that the current president, Peter A. Bogdanov, and his office manager Feodor Mikhailovich Ziavkin were political appointees and in all likelihood members of the Soviet secret service themselves; a claim substantiated by another émigré witness.[38] Delgass also stated that there was a hidden party cell within the bureau whose members passed themselves off as trade delegates while they conducted covert operations. He ridiculed the idea that it was possible to have such an important bureau in the United States without close supervision from the secret apparatus.[39] Witnesses from Amtorg claimed that their employees were either not Communists or had left the party before coming to the United States; this was shown to be largely an administrative fiction designed to overcome visa and immigration issues in the wake of the 1918 Immigration Act, which made it a deportable offense to belong to an organization committed to the overthrow of the United States government by force or violence.

In uncovering this material, the committee did not concern itself with the distinction between espionage conducted against the American government and crucial industries, of which there was relatively little evidence uncovered, and Soviet efforts to monitor their own people while they worked in foreign lands, which was clearly endemic. Nevertheless, the testimony suggested much about how deeply the habits of a surveillance state had come to shape the Communist world.[40]

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[38] Fish Committee, Part 3, vol. 3, p. 301-2; Part 3, vol. 4, p. 28.
[39] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 4, pp. 211-3; Part 3, vol. 4, pp. 173-176.
[40] For the development of Soviet espionage during the 1930s, see Katherine A. S. Sibley, *Red Spies in America: Stolen Secrets and the Dawn of the Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

While Soviet espionage activities in the United States spoke most directly to the committee's claims about a national security threat at home, arguably the committee's most important efforts were in publicizing the testimony of journalists, Russian exiles and former Communists about the conditions of millions of Soviet prisoners held in the labor camps known as the Gulag.[41] This stretched far beyond the committee's mandate, which was only to investigate Communist activities in the United States. Nevertheless, the congressmen effectively ignored their brief by claiming – in line with the "economic warfare" hypothesis – that the Soviet Union was exporting goods to the United States that had been effectively produced by slave labor. This, they argued, was not only a moral outrage but also a violation of anti-dumping laws. It was also, in their terms, a domestic issue since it threatened to push American businesses into bankruptcy. The theme of "Soviet slave labor" had been developed sporadically in the past by anticommunist politicians, but now was given full rein through a detailed study of Russian labor practices.[42]

Despite the best Soviet efforts to keep foreigners away from and unaware of the Gulag, after several years of large-scale operation it had become increasingly possible to construct a surprisingly detailed picture of life in the camps.[43] Although mention was made of forced labor in the Doretz Basin mines, Karelia, the forests around Kirov Oblast, and regions of collectivized farming in the Ukraine, the committee principally focused on the lumber camps on the mainland close to Solovetski Island, where several hundred thousand people were being worked to death to produce material for commercial exportation. This was on the

[41] Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 4, pp. 27-8, 95-109, 158-162, 202-206; Part 3, vol. 4, pp. 28-9; Part 4, vol. 2, pp. 437-444.
[42] See, for precursors, the attacks upon the Russian Information Bureau in United States Senate, *Russian Propaganda. Hearings before a subcommittee of the Committee on Foreign Relations pursuant to S. Res. 263, directing the Committee on Foreign Relations to investigate the status and activities of Ludwig C. A. K. Martens, who claimed to be a representative of the Russian Socialist Soviet Republic* (Washington: USGPO, 1920).
[43] Despite the criticism he would later receive for his later articles on the hunger and starvation in the *kolkozy*, Edmund Walsh recommended consulting the writings of Walter Duranty for information on forced labor in Russia. Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 4, p. 26.

grounds that such activities could be directly traced to trade with the United States. Witnesses provided information on conditions, working hours, rates of pay and nutrition, as well as estimates of export volumes. The most powerful testimony was of course the anecdotal experiences of escapees and their families. Alexander Lukovitz, who had fled to the United States after a harrowing escape from the camps through Finland in 1929, told the committee he had endured 16 to 18 hour days cutting wood in freezing weather, fed only on salted fish heads, black bread and thin barley soup, and sleeping at night in damp, overfilled barracks. In an environment that resembled something akin to a Darwinian nightmare, those who couldn't keep up with the vicious work routine were stripped naked and made to stand on freezing tree stumps, cudgeled to death, or simply shot by guards. Meanwhile, typhus, scurvy, gangrene and a variety of other diseases were common and lethal.[44] Another witness, an indigent Latvian merchant sailor named Alexander Grube, told how he had been arrested after going ashore illegally in Russia and had been imprisoned by the OGPU for four months before being sent to the labor camps for two and a half years. Because of his rough and rambling manner, several of the representatives doubted the wisdom of hearing Grube's testimony, but Fish insisted on it. As a result, the committee heard how Grube had been sent on lumber details in which literally thousands of prisoners had died from malnourishment and overwork.[45]

Communist witnesses explicitly denied the existence or the scale of the camps, or that the Soviet system would ever make use of forced labor.[46] These denials formed part of a broader set of implausible arguments about the character of international Communism put forward by its American defenders: that the Soviet leadership had no responsibility for the activities of the Comintern; that Russians working for the Soviet government in the United

[44] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 4, pp. 430-5.
[45] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 4, pp. 84-94.
[46] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 4, p. 357; Part 3, vol. 4, p. 230.

States were non-political appointees; that workers' conditions in proletarian Russia were sublime; and that Stalin did not really run the Soviet government since he was only the head of the Communist Party.[47] These were joined by self-justifying circumlocutions, as when, confronted with the apparent contradiction between Communist demands for constitutional protection in the United States and their refusal to accord similar rights to protestors in Russia, William Z. Foster explained: "The worker in America who fights for the program of the Communist Party is a fighter for the progress of society in general. The capitalist who proposes the overthrow of the Soviet Government is an enemy of the human society".[48]

Others on the non-Communist left – unaware or unwilling to listen to evidence of Soviet repression and hopeful that socialist politics more generally offered a way out of the crisis of capitalism in which the nation found itself – also rejected, and even mocked, the evidence raised by the committee on these issues. One writer for *The Nation* described Fish's decision to question Amtorg's president Bogdanov about the origins of Soviet exports as "play[ing] medicine ball with a man who is in charge of trade worth at least $100,000,000 a year to the United States," and dismissed debates over the patterns of control within the international Communist movement as "tedious metaphysical discussions."[49] In a particularly extreme *ad hominem* attack in *The New Republic*, Edmund Wilson denounced one escapee from the Gulag as "one of the most untrustworthy characters who has surely ever been called upon to testify to anything, a pale-eyed, shifty-eyed, shaved-headed man, represented as an honest Russian farmer sent to prison for criticizing the Soviets". Several decades later, when republishing the piece in a collection of essays, Wilson apologized for his comments, noting they were the "kind of thing that is to be sedulously avoided by honest reporters. On the strength of a physical impression and solely out of sympathy toward the Soviet Union about

[47] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 4, pp. 382-383; Part 1, vol. 5, pp. 55, 58, 60-61, 86-8; Part 3, vol. 3, pp. 61, 69, 116, 216; Part 5, vol. 1, p. 83.
[48] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 4, p. 376.
[49] Emanuel Blum, 'A Fish out of Congress', *The Nation*, 131, no. 3398, pp. 202-3.

which at firsthand I knew nothing, I assumed that this man was lying. His experience may well have intimidated him and turned his face grey, and he may well have been made uneasy by the presence of the American Communists. I leave my report of the incident as an example of the capacity of partisanship to fabricate favorable evidence."[50]

III.

Despite their comparatively moderate conservatism and important achievements in publicizing issues of global humanitarian significance, though, the committee and its carefully chosen witnesses ultimately failed to live up to their high aspirations of objectivity or to deflect accusations of systematic bias sufficiently to gain a wide hearing for their ideas. Defining the conflict between Russia and America in terms of a clash of competing political philosophies may have been an advance on social Darwinist visions of anticommunism as *volkskreig*, but it still permitted fundamentalist readings that left little space for a more open examination of the historical evidence or an ironic and nuanced understanding of the complex, often conflicted behavior of Communists. In Walsh's words, the Bolshevik revolution had been "entirely different … from every other revolution that the world has ever known" because it had been founded with the intention to "block out, lock, stock and barrel, every form of civilization whatever, whether they knew anything about it or not". As such, it represented a "frank and open declaration of war against all humanity".[51] None of this rhetoric helped explain why Americans joined or aligned with the party. The committee also often took Communists' statements of their large and growing influence at face value rather

[50] Edmund Wilson, 'Foster and Fish', *The New Republic,* December 24, 1930, p. 162; Daniel Aaron, 'The Life and Thought of Edmund Wilson', *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 28, no. 5 (February 1975), p. 27.
[51] Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 1, pp. 2, 6.

than recognizing such statements might be conditioned by Communists' own delusions of grandeur.[52] By contrast, it almost completely ignored evidence of the compromises that Bolshevik ideologues had made when putting their ideas into practice, the ways the aspirations of the Communist movement had been shaped by Russian power politics, and the manner in which American Communists struggled to reconcile their global, revolutionary ideology with tendencies toward localism and nationalism: all of which would have substantial implications for devising policies to undermine the appeal of revolutionary politics in America and the world. Not only was this a dogmatic vision, it offered little appeal to a public that conceived of America's exceptionalism as lying in its commitment to liberty. Were Fish's arguments about the scale and unity of the Communist conspiracy to have been accepted, they would have required a vast array of new police powers, something that held as little appeal for traditional conservatives, states' rights advocates and populists as it did for civil liberties activists. Whether it was party organizers helping strikers in repressive company towns, radical lawyers defending imprisoned revolutionaries or angry young teenagers picking fights with rivals in school, according to Fish all Communist actions should be seen as part of a singular master plan directed from Moscow and focused upon the destruction of American civilization.

Moreover, as inventive as it may have been, Walsh's concept of Soviet economic warfare offered a simplistic account of Soviet behavior just as other economistic explanations of international affairs tended to reduce the complexity of national behavior to a single index. The more straightforward explanation for Russian trade policies – that Stalin was using primary exports to build up currency reserves in order to fund breakneck industrialization –

[52] This point was put by Rep. Nelson to William Green of the AFL, and accepted. However, in practice it was entirely ignored. On only one occasion, Representative Bachmann's prickly exchange with Walter S. Steele, was there any sustained engagement with the idea that propaganda and action were not indistinguishable, and that there was a large distinction between a riot and revolution. Ibid., Part 1, vol. 1, p. 73; Part 1, vol. 2, pp. 6-15.

could certainly accommodate an eventual goal of worldwide revolution, but it suggested that the US could not only influence Soviet economic policy but also that the American economy stood to benefit from the sale of industrial goods and services to a rapidly industrializing Russia, rather than being driven into the ground by accepting cheap primary imports. It obscured the tension between the Soviet need for foreign technical expertise and the Stalinist desire for isolation, as manifested through the contrast between the amelioristic policies of the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (Narkomindel) and Amtorg, and the more radical agenda of the Third International (Comintern). Perhaps most importantly, it entirely ignored the fact that France, Britain and the United States held the overwhelming majority of the world's gold reserves and were thus the only states with genuinely monopolistic potential in international commerce. If the Soviets had subsumed their economic policy to political goals, which they undoubtedly had, it was more accurate to see this as part of a desperate effort to catch up with the capitalist world than the actions of an all-powerful monopoly threatening the security of a weak and febrile America. Stalin's policies were driven by a near-paranoid fear of capitalist "encirclement" rather than an ambitious agenda to remodel the world. The substantive components of anticommunist thought were therefore undermined by a sense of American victimhood and national fragility that simply did not hold up to the United States' position as the first or second most powerful nation in the world.

While stepping back from the worst and most overt extremes of racism, the veneer of objectivity laid over the committee's work did little to obscure the underlying prejudices which shaped the congressmen's worldviews. Even while the chairman made great effort to stress the patriotic loyalty of immigrant groups, the premises underpinning the committee's work equated ethnic groups at a basic level with children and youths on the grounds that a shared irrationality left them more vulnerable to subversive propaganda than mature Anglo-Saxon Americans; a position that was used to justify immigration restriction as a quick and

easy solution to America's problems with radicalism. Even Fish's avowals of African American loyalty were so repetitive that it is hard not to see in them the peculiar cognitive patterns that originally emerged from American 'Sambo' stereotypes: whites determined to stress that African Americans were among the most loyal social groups and content with their lot, yet anxious to the point of obsession that secretly they might not be.[53] A whistle-stop tour through Chattanooga, Memphis, New Orleans, Birmingham and Atlanta was designed to meet his southern colleagues' desire to assess the danger Communism posed to the Southern racial order, and the influence of Communists among black people was one of the most common questions raised by the committee elsewhere as well. In response to accusations of racism leveled by William Z. Foster, the Southern congressmen vigorously denied there was a problem with lynching in the South except in the rare occasions when it was necessary to preserve Southern women's honor, while even the token liberal on the committee, Representative John E. Nelson of Maine, engaged in exchanges with witnesses on the stand about the susceptibility of "darkies" to radical utopian promises.[54]

While they were fodder for the committee's critics, such prejudices conversely did little to strengthen the anticommunist agenda among its supporters. Efforts to envision Communists as a new form of carpetbagger lacked salience as long as white supremacy remained firmly entrenched in the South and it was still assumed, in Hall's words, that "the Southern Negro is too wise to listen to this social equality propaganda that they put out".[55] Father Edmund Walsh informed the committee that "the large mass of negroes, especially in the South, as I know rather well, are considered a conservative element, rather than an inflammatory element."[56] Until the New Deal years, when government action raised the real possibility that the state, in combination with an emerging civil rights movement, might

[53] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 1, pp. 24-5, 35, 63; Part 3, vol. 1, p. 110; Part 6, vol. 1, p. 62.
[54] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 4, p. 352, 359-360, 387-9; Part 6, vol. 1, p. 239.
[55] Ibid., Part 6, vol. 1, p. 281; 'Tennessee Smiles at Fish Statement', *New York Times*, November 23, 1930.
[56] Fish Committee Hearings, Part 1, vol. 4, p. 8.

genuinely upset the racial order in the South, the equation of communism with African American protest remained a minority pursuit and white supremacists contented themselves with self-justifying beliefs that black people were generally satisfied with their lot.

An equally strongly set of gendered prejudices running through the committee's descriptions of Communism offered greater potential for winning supporters to the anticommunist cause by presenting the radical project as an inversion of gender norms and a threat to the sanctity of the home. The congressmen repeatedly enquired into rumors that Communists had a policy of cynically placing women and children at the front of violent demonstrations in the hope of generating effective propaganda of police brutality.[57] Inspector John Lyons of the New York Police Department's Anti-Radical Bureau said that he had seen women and children pushed up during strikes, "while the men skulk behind the women and children and throw bricks and other missiles at the police."[58] Despite being denied by other witnesses, these claims served to reinforce the idea that revolutionary radicals were set upon destroying traditional male and female roles – in this case, the male's responsibility to protect women from harm – which in turn spoke to anxieties about masculinity in the context of a climate of widespread unemployment and social instability.[59] Other witnesses expressed disgust at the un-feminine behavior of female Communists. One union activist explained, "The women communists were equally as bad as the men. They were mad fanatics. They all carried Gillette safety razor blades, and in this mass of people trying to get to work these women would walk behind our women, behind our men and slash them down the back with these razors."[60] The editor of *Labor World*, Louis McGrew, declared that under a communist

[57] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 4, p. 55; Part 3, vol. 2, p. 47; Part 4, vol. 2, p. 475.
[58] Ibid., Part 3, vol. 1, p. 178.
[59] Ibid., Part 4, vol. 1, p. 123. On the effect of the depression and unemployment on masculinity and gender relations, see Alice Kessler-Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), ch. 2; Alice Kessler-Harris, 'Measures for Masculinity: The American Labor Movement and Welfare-State Policy during the Great Depression, in *Gendering Labor History: The Working Class in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).
[60] Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 1, p. 118.

state women were turned into prostitutes and their families were declared property of the state; echoing claims heard before earlier congressional committees that Communists practiced "free love" and the "nationalization of women".[61] Meanwhile, conservative women in the Daughters of the American Revolution used their gendered status to privilege their attacks on communism, as when Mrs. Ruben Ross Holloway explained that, as "a mother, and the grandmother of six children" she was particularly concerned that educators were not required to take the pledge of allegiance.[62]

Given this tendency to trade on group identity to justify anticommunist views, it was perhaps unsurprising that the most salacious interest expressed by the committee was when race and gender intermingled, as with claims that Communists were using white women at interracial dances to seduce black men into joining the party.[63] A representative of the ultra-patriotic American Vigilant Intelligence Federation declared that there had been at least three dances in recent months in Chicago, "in which Japanese, Filipinos, Chinese, Negroes, and whites all intermingled and danced together." To the concern of the congressmen, he reported that a member of the AFL news service who attended one such event had told him that the "white girls at that dance would not dance with the white men and the negro girls would not dance with the negro men; in other words, the theory was that they should not dance with their own races, but should dance with those of the opposite races".[64] The sexual implications of such forms of interracial congress were left unsaid, but clear to all.

Despite professions of open-mindedness and investigative rigor, then, the committee repeatedly showed itself to be subject to a set of prejudicial assumptions that clouded their

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[61] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 4, p. 172-3; United States Senate, *Brewing and Liquor Interests and German Propaganda: Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Sixty-fifth Congress, second and third sessions, pursuant to S. Res. 307* (Washington: USGPO, 1919), vol. 2, 2777; vol. 3, 147.
[62] Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 4, p. 166.
[63] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 4, p. 168; Part 3, vol. 1, pp. 188-9. The point was put to A. Philip Randolph during his testimony, but he carefully avoided responding. Ibid., Part 3, vol. 1, p. 249.
[64] Ibid., Part 4, vol. 2, p. 33.

understanding of Communism, weakened their diagnoses for dealing with revolutionary politics and aided critics in presenting the committee as more interested in defending conservative values than in challenging Communism. The committee's depiction of the relationship between non-citizenship and political radicalism as a cultural inheritance stemming from the experience of growing up in repressive regimes abroad encouraged them to emphasize education, especially the teaching of American history, alongside more straightforwardly repressive policing activities and restrictions on immigration as ways of dealing with Bolshevism.[65] But it also shifted attention away from poverty, social exclusion and political repression in America as causes of Communist growth. Meanwhile, the language of objectivity was often used to close off debate at the point when liberal ideas were put forward. The committee generally responded favorably to suggestions from conservative union leaders that improving the conditions of labor would reduce Communism's appeal, but witnesses who suggested that police violence was acting as a tool for radical recruitment were told that this was not relevant to an investigative committee solely focused on Communist activities.[66] When African American leaders argued that, as Alderman Fred R. Moore put it, "if Congress could adopt or enforce the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments, protecting the negroes from the South who are lynched, I think that would help [reduce support for Communism]", the committee declared that civil rights and anti-lynching bills were, whatever their merits, a diversion from the committee's object of study and therefore not to be discussed.[67]

[65] At one point Representative Fish complained, "There are many people who know the names of the kings of France and the kings of Great Britain, and yet know nothing of American history... [we should] give them less geometry and medieval history than we do, and increase the necessary knowledge of American history". Ibid., Part 3, vol. 3, p. 35.
[66] Ibid., Part 3, vol. 1, p. 260.
[67] This was not an unbreakable rule. Despite being told not to, Secretary Walter White of the NAACP was able to make the same point. Randolph raised these issues when asked why some black people had turned to communism and was listened to without interruption. Ibid., Part 3, vol. 1, pp. 246, 254; Part 3, vol. 4, p. 203.

The tendency of the committee to interweave focused attacks on the institutions of international Communism with gendered, racial and class-based agenda items shows how hard it is to separate "anti-Communism" – opposition to the Soviet Union and its institutional manifestations around the world – from "anticommunism": opposing the broader values and goals that were correctly or incorrectly ascribed to Communists.[68] In this sense, it should not be surprising that, like most anticommunists, Fish revealed complex intermixtures of both accurate analysis and prejudice in his attacks on the "Red menace."

However, it is hard to see these as conscious attempts to smear by association so much as manifestations of the latent prejudices of the time. Indeed, when testimony conformed to the congressmen's assumptions, it proved difficult for the committee to separate real risks from peripheral matters best addressed through studied neglect. In one particularly extensive wild-goose chase, the committee obsessed about Communist efforts to recruit children into their ranks, trading on perennial fears over the safety of young people in educational environments in which teachers were assumed to be politically to the left of parents. The Boy Scouts movement in Great Britain was created at the turn of the century in response to fears that modern mass education had failed to instill discipline in future generations. For anticommunists in the United States in the interwar years, these same fears were newly refracted through claims that Communism sought to destroy parental authority, bring about the collapse of the family and encourage the "utter debauchery of youth".[69] This

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[68] Joel Kovel, *Red-Hunting in the Promised Land: Anticommunism and the Making of America* (London: Cassell, 1997; 1st Edn. 1994), p. x. Related dichotomies are highlighted in Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 272; and Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. xv.

[69] Allen Warren, 'Sir Robert Baden-Powell, the Scout Movement, and Citizen Training in Great Britain, 1900-1920', *English Historical Review* 101, no. 399 (1986), pp. 376-98; Allen Warren, 'Popular Manliness: Baden-Powell, Scouting, and the Development of Manly Character', in J. A. Mangan and James Walvin (eds.), *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (1987), pp. 199-219; Robert H. MacDonald, *Sons of the Empire: The Frontier and the Boy Scout Movement, 1890-1918* (1993); Tammy Proctor, '(Uni)forming Youth: Girl Guides and Boy Scouts in Britain, 1908-39', *History Workshop Journal* 45 (1998), pp. 103-34; Sam Pryke, 'The Popularity of Nationalism in the Early British Boy Scout

line of argument combined latent anxieties over young people's sexuality with a more overt political hostility toward left-wing thought. As Mrs. Holloway of the Daughters of the American Revolution put it, "All over the country, they will tell you in the schools they have not the same wonderful respect from children that they had. Look into the homes and you will see they are taught, 'Your bodies are your own to do with as you please,' every place you go."[70] The response was to call for greater supervision over students, the curriculum and teaching profession, including teacher loyalty oaths and measures to oblige educators to "teach patriotism" to their students. According to New York's recently retired Police Commissioner, Grover Whalen, these measures would "offset … seditious propaganda" by selling "our national ideals to the younger generation." In an orgy of kitsch, Whalen argued, "We must recreate in our children the thrill of devotion that characterizes a silver-thatched veteran of the Civil War", promoting activities "that aim at the building up of body and mental health through recreation." This would ensure "sound thinking, hearty enjoyment of life, and, inevitably, a spirit of devotion to our flag and the national life which that flag so beautifully symbolizes."[71]

Despite extensive testimony, the committee actually found no evidence of teachers' involvement in promoting radical ideas and strong evidence that the tiny number of young Communists identified by school officials were influenced by their radical parents.[72] If anything, the reams of testimony from principals, superintendents and members of school boards showed that teachers were extraordinarily severe with young people who had become involved in radical politics. A fourteen-year-old child from the Bronx was suspended for refusing to give the pledge, despite later pleading that she didn't even know what she was

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Movement', *Social History* 23, no. 3 (1998), pp. 309-24; Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 1, p. 40; Part 1, vol. 4, pp. 59-60, 96, 121-2, 135, 176, 219.

[70] Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 4, p. 167.

[71] Ibid., Part 3, vol. 3, p. 34.

[72] Ibid., Part 3, vol. 1, pp. 1-2, 5, 30, 59.

doing wrong.[73] Another student, Harry Iseman, who persistently refused to accept his school's orders banning him from handing out leaflets, was suspended. After getting involved in an altercation with some Boy Scouts, he was sent to reform school for six months. Following his release, he attended a demonstration against the Scouts at Union Square and was promptly returned to the reformatory until he was 21 – spending a total of six years behind bars.[74]

IV.

The limits to the committee's objectivity were not just a matter of individual failings and personal prejudices. From the beginning, the committee's efforts were shaped by a fragmented anticommunist community that struggled to substantiate the conservative vision of Communism laid out by Fish and his peers at a time when conservatism itself seemed to be in crisis.

While Fish may have been acting pragmatically in his effort to link anticommunism with a broader selection of contemporary social anxieties, congressional support for the committee had been based on a narrower definition of national security than the one articulated by Representative Fish: namely, that Soviet agents were working in the United States to overthrow the American government. This was the foundational claim that underpinned the first wave of national security legislation passed during World War One and it persisted as virtually the only basis for consensus over national security restrictions to civil liberties in the interwar years. The resolution creating the Fish Committee had initially been

[73] Ibid., Part 3, vol. 1, p. 2.
[74] Ibid., Part 3, vol. 1, pp. 15-16.

killed by the Rules Committee in March 1930. It was only approved after a set of documents were released to the press by Police Commissioner Whalen that seemed to offer conclusive evidence of an organized conspiracy of secret agents in Amtorg plotting against American institutions and working with the American Communist Party; a claim that was strengthened by the fact that some years earlier the equivalent organization in Britain, Arcos, had been caught engaging in similar activities.[75]

The problem was that even before the committee began its hearings, rumors had begun to circulate that the crucial Whalen Documents were not genuine. In fact, they turned out to be not only forged, but forged so badly that they called into question either Commissioner Whalen's integrity or his competence.[76] (Whalen had been attacked for his police force's aggressive response to a communist protest in Union Square in March, and was desperate to uncover evidence that would heighten the threat of Communism and justify his heavy-handedness.) In hearings in late July, John Spivak, a left-wing fellow traveler and occasional writer for the *New York Graphic* and Communist *Daily Worker*, showed how rudimentary detective work had led him to the printer who produced the letterheads on which the forged documents had been typed; a man with no link to Amtorg.[77] Whalen admitted he had done nothing to verify the documents' accuracy beyond accepting assurances from his subordinates.[78] Furthermore, an employee of Amtorg identified several dozen basic errors of fact and language in the documents.[79]

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[75] Goodman, *The Committee*, p. 6; Harriette Flory, 'The Arcos Raid and the Rupture of Anglo-Soviet Relations, 1927', *Journal of Contemporary History* 12, no. 4 (October 1977), pp. 707-723.
[76] Scholars originally raised the possibility that the documents may have been a product of a Bolshevik disinformation campaign, however more recent evidence suggests that this was almost certainly not the case, making the most likely source a disgruntled émigré. Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes and Fridrikh Igorevich Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 126; John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr and, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press), pp. 161-3.
[77] Fish Committee, Part 3, vol. 3, pp. 278-283.
[78] Ibid., Part 3, vol. 3, p. 22.
[79] Ibid., Part 3, vol. 3, pp. 315-20.

The revelations forced Fish to distance himself from the material on which the committee had been founded.[80] Despite the attendant embarrassment, Fish repeated almost exactly the same mistake several months later, when he followed another set of false leads supplied by the patriotic organization, the National Civic Federation, in the hope of uncovering a cache of Soviet espionage documents that did not exist.[81] Coming at the tail-end of a decade which had seen repeated exposure of forged documents relating to Soviet activity in the Western hemisphere, these debacles consolidated an image of anticommunists as so viscerally hostile to Bolshevism that they were unable or unwilling to give the evidence before them even the most cursory analysis; an ironic turn for a committee that had staked so much on its single-minded focus on facts.

Whalen's embarrassment turned out to be only the first example of a broader pattern of unprofessional conduct that revealed the limits of using police forces in sensitive political investigations. Some of the larger forces with anti-radical bureaus or bomb squads were able to supply officers who had detailed knowledge of the history and development of American Communism. However, many policemen who testified before the hearings revealed varying degrees of ignorance, incompetence, aggression, casual racism and anti-Semitism, not to mention brazen disregard for constitutional rights. Officers openly, often proudly, explained how they routinely arrested radicals using petty local ordinances that banned "speeling" on sidewalks or parading without a permit.[82] The Pittsburgh-based editor Louis McGrew assured the committee that the police knew how to control radicals in his city: "They just knock their blocks off."[83] Other witnesses explained how policemen worked closely with conservative groups to undermine protests, as when unemployed members of the Ku Klux Klan in Birmingham cooperated with the police and local business leaders in efforts to identify,

[80] Ibid., Part 3, vol. 3, p. 21.
[81] 'Fish in Anti-Red Drive', *New York Times*, November 19, 1930.
[82] Fish Committee, Part 3, vol. 5, p. 39; Part 6, vol. 1, pp. 203-4.
[83] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 4, p. 179.

monitor and harass Communist organizers in their city. As the historian Robert P. Ingalls noted, this kind of local antiradical violence in Alabama was "purposeful and economically motivated", directed against union workers and African Americans and ceasing as soon as labor disputes were settled.[84] It also suggested that the disturbed conditions the committee was investigating were less a product of Communism and more down to police impunity and collusion.

Although the South ran a close second, perhaps the most open admissions of police misconduct came in the committee's hearings in the industrial Midwest. The region had some of the highest concentrations of Communist membership as well as, not coincidentally, the most divisive industrial environments. After the Chief of Police in Flint, Michigan, Caesar J. Scavarda, told the committee that he routinely arrested radicals without charge, Congressman Bachmann suggested that he try arresting them for disorderly conduct. Scavarda replied, "Well, possibly that would be a good excuse."[85] Even more egregiously, the Chief of Police in Pontiac, Floyd R. Alspaugh, explained his method of dealing with radicals: "We just hide them, that is all – bury them within the jails so that they can not get a writ out and get released".[86]

While it seemingly raised little concern for the committee, the routine admission of illegality provided opportunities for opponents to condemn Fish by association. Representatives of the ACLU and the Socialist Party attacked the committee for giving too much credence to patriotic groups and for failing to identify police corruption as a major recruiting tool for the Communist Party.[87] "Your committee's work is based on the proposition that revolutionary propaganda produces revolution," the ACLU president Roger

[84] Ibid., Part 6, vol. 1, p. 194; Robert P. Ingalls, 'Antiradical Violence in Birmingham During the 1930s', *Journal of Southern History* 47, no. 4 (November 1981), 521-2.
[85] Fish Committee, Part 4, vol. 1, p. 3.
[86] Ibid., Part 4, vol. 1, p. 111.
[87] Ibid., Part 3, vol. 5, p. 82; Part 5, vol. 3, pp. 299-321; Part 6, vol. 1, pp. 69-70.

Baldwin said when he took the stand. "All history refutes that notion. Revolutions are produced by unbearable conditions, not talk."[88] When the congressmen reached California, a hastily assembled band of civil liberties activists managed to hijack the last day of the hearings by recounting routine constitutional violations by the LAPD. The writer and socialist Upton Sinclair told how he had been arrested and held incommunicado for more than eighteen hours after participating in a non-partisan free-speech protest earlier in the 1920s, during which time his wife was driven frantic by rumors that he had been handed over to the Klan for extra-judicial punishment.[89]

Not that Fish would have admitted it, flawed police testimony offered an ironic testament to the truth of one of the central claims promoted by the committee: that existing forces were ill-equipped to deal with the complexities of counter-espionage investigations, especially when unsupported by a professional Federal Bureau of Investigation. The Bureau had rarely been staffed with professionals, and after the excesses of the post-World War One Red Scare had been banned from investigating political extremism altogether, which is why Bureau chief J. Edgar Hoover did not appear before the committee.[90] Neither did the committee benefit from liaisons provided by Military and Naval Intelligence which had been available to the World War One Overman Committee but had been discontinued in 1919 in response to constitutional concerns over spying on citizens in peacetime.[91]

Nevertheless, instead of admitting the limits of their competence, most police witnesses were determined to show that they were in command of the streets and described

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[88] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 4, p. 407.
[89] Ibid., Part 5, vol. 3, pp. 325-8.
[90] Fish had stated during the Rules Committee hearings of his desire to call the Bureau chief to the stand, but apparently Hoover had claimed he felt he did not have the right to testify, even under invitation. United States Congress, *Hearing Before the Committee on Rules House of Representatives, Seventy-First Congress, 2nd Sess., on H. Res. 180* (Washington: USGPO, 1930), pp. 6-7.
[91] Roy Talbert, *Negative Intelligence: The Army and the American Left* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), pp. 148-9.

Communist activities as well "in hand".[92] This further undermined the claim that there was an urgent problem to be fixed. Inspector Lyons of the NYPD's anti-radical bureau claimed that a month's worth of wholesale deportations would see "the bottom … drop out of the communistic movement in this country".[93] When pressed on the wisdom of federal assistance for local policing, Detroit's Police Commissioner agreed it would be "a nice thing if we had a Federal law to stand back of us." But this hardly amounted to a clarion call for action.[94] Other executive branch officers also revealed strong professional incentives to show that Communism was under control or to resist congressional oversight over their activities. Achmed H. Mundo, from the Alabama governor's office, declared in exaggerated terms that there were 8,000 Communist sympathizers in the state who had been shipping in tear gas bombs to use against the police, but swiftly added that state authorities were entirely on top of things.[95] Indeed, A. Dana Hodson, the Chief of the State Department's visa office, not only refused to testify in public session under instructions of the Secretary of State (who believed that undue public attention could only draw unwanted attention to the department), but also refused to say why he was refusing.[96]

Without effective support from the police or the executive branch, Fish turned to the loose network of patriotic and veterans' groups on hand to promote the anticommunist message. However, many of these also performed badly. Walter S. Steele, editor of *National Republic* magazine, was unprepared for the hearings, having only been called at the last minute, and was taken to task by Representative Bachmann for making excessive, unsubstantiated claims about Communist activity. On the same day, Bachmann also attacked the General Counsel of the Daughters of the American Revolution, H. Ralph Burton, for

[92] Fish Committee, Part 3, vol. 1, pp. 206, 233; Part 3, vol. 5, p. 72.
[93] Ibid., Part 3, vol. 1, p. 204.
[94] Ibid., Part 4, vol. 1, p. 122.
[95] Ibid., Part 6, vol. 1, p. 190.
[96] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 5, pp. 121-2.

exaggerating America's vulnerability to internal subversion, and mocked suggestions that the Communist propaganda might manage to demoralize the armed forces.[97]

Undoubtedly the strongest testimony against the Communist Party in America came from the leadership of the American Federation of Labor, whose accounts of Communist activities were based on experiences fighting them for control of the union movement for more than a decade. In the context of a badly weakened anticommunist community, the AFL came to form much of the motive force behind the committee. Matthew Woll, the current Vice President of the organization, stated that unemployment riots were solely caused by the Comintern, while John Lewis of the United Mine Workers complained that radicals were seeking "to impose their boiler plate, oriential [sic] philosophy upon the western world." [98] AFL agent Edward McGrady told how, during efforts to resist Communist influence in the fur workers unions, "Men who were more courageous than the average were beaten into insensibility" while people who refused to collaborate with radicals found "gangs of men were sent into their homes, their furniture was destroyed, their women folk insulted and in some cases assaulted."[99]

Even here, though, the committee's agenda was undermined by the distinctive priorities of their witnesses. AFL representatives honed the argument first popularized by Samuel Gompers earlier in the century, that the first and last line of defense against Communism was a powerful union movement. William Green, President of the AFL, framed this in apocalyptic terms. In his view the British and German trade union movements had saved their nations from Communism, while the absence of trade unionism in Russia was the reason why it fell to Bolshevism.[100] If such testimony strengthened claims that Communism

[97] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 2, pp. 9-12; Part 1, vol. 3, pp. 6-9.
[98] Ibid., Part 3, vol. 2, pp. 1-49; Part 4, vol. 3, p. 72.
[99] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 1, p. 115.
[100] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 1, pp. 44, 70.

was an unhealthy presence in American life, it weakened the case for government action to fight it. Some union officials supported calls for a federal secret police force, but generally the desire to legitimize the union movement caused them to stress that the non-Communist trade unionists "will handle it." [101]

Perhaps the only force that could have countered these contradictory messages and consolidated the support of influential groups behind Fish's anticommunist campaign was business, which would become the lynchpin of resurgent conservative anticommunist politics in mid-century.[102] However, in 1930 business groups revealed themselves to be deeply divided over Communism. Companies that had been directly targeted by Communist-led strikes were eager to send representatives to testify against the party.[103] But a surprising number of corporations and professional bodies showed no real interest in the issue. Indeed, representatives of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, Georgia Manufacturers' Association and the Citizens' Committee of Detroit all explained that they generally left such issues to the police.[104]

Viewed with hindsight, this appears surprising. However, much of this indifference was driven by straightforward commercial factors as business groups divided according to their positions along the supply chain rather than on simple fault lines between employers and employees. Primary producers who were threatened by cheap Russian imports – especially the lumber and pulpwood companies of the Pacific Northwest, the Association of Manganese Producers of America, and iron ore miners – were quick to buy into the idea that the Soviet government was employing unfair dumping tactics for political ends. Hearings in Seattle and Portland were almost overwhelmed by representatives from lumber companies and logging

[101] Ibid., Part 1, vol. 1, p. 125.
[102] See Kim Philips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: Norton, 2010).
[103] Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 4, p. 46; Part 6, vol. 1, pp. 65-7, 181-2.
[104] Ibid., Part 4, vol. 1, pp. 107; Part 6, vol. 1, p. 230-1.

unions who were suffering under the pressure of the depression and keen to make the case for protection.[105] By contrast, secondary industries – such as steel producers who benefited from cheap manganese supplies and some of the larger paper companies who relied upon wood imports for production – had no interest in cutting off cheap imports, and manufacturers who had developed export relations with Soviet Russia at a time when domestic demand was collapsing sought to minimize fears of communism altogether. Indeed, the General Manager at Ford, Charles E. Sorenson, not only challenged the suppositions of the committee directly but also gave interviews to the press criticizing the idea of a federal police force, saying "If the Reds are as explosive and can do what they boast in America, then there is something wrong with our system."[106] In a tense and somewhat hostile session with the congressmen, Sorenson was forced to backtrack. Nevertheless, he insisted that Ford had dozens of Russian engineers working with them in Michigan and that their relations with Amtorg had been of only the highest order.[107]

As a result, more often than not the attempt to deploy anticommunist arguments in favor of protectionism ended up turning one set of American businessmen against another. Looking at their corporate customers with unconcealed anger, one iron ore producer declared that "the political stomach turns at the sight of American steel and Soviet Russia in the same bed."[108] Union leaders opportunistically joined these patriotic attacks on multinational manufacturing industries; John Lewis declared that any businessman who traded with the Russians might as well be a Soviet agent.[109]

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[105] Ibid., Part 5, vol. 1. See also http://depts.washington.edu/depress/fish_committee.shtml [accessed 2 August 2011].
[106] 'Ford Chief Back; Doubts Red Menace', *New York Times,* July 15, 1930.
[107] Fish Committee, Part 4, vol. 1, p. 304; 'Ford Chief Alters Statement on Reds', *New York Times*, July 27, 1903. This was a notable contrast to Ford's attitude during the Dies committee hearings, when the company offered to supply HUAC and its staff with cars. Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are The Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), p. 91.
[108] Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 4, p. 78.
[109] Ibid., Part 4, vol. 3, p. 78.

Perhaps the most intriguing case in which the arguments of the committee were frustrated by divisions within the business world came in an extended debate over a series of financial operations by Soviet traders on the Chicago Stock Exchange: the original home of the derivative. Soviet representatives had made a series of large purchases of grain futures through Chicago trading houses, hoping to hedge their sales in a declining European market. Since these trades related to several million tons of wheat, and since the Soviets were involved in short trading, wheat producers claimed that the deals were part of a scheme to depress the American grain market and exacerbate the already intense sense of crisis among American wheat farmers who were witnessing the collapse of their livelihoods. After the story became public, farmers' associations, aided by Secretary of Agriculture Hyde, accused the Russians of "communistic activities … threatening the welfare of the American farmer" and forced through a temporary embargo on certain Soviet goods.[110] In early 1931, this was followed up by bills put to congress to embargo the importation of all Soviet products and strengthen restrictions on the importation of goods produced by forced labor.[111]

The problem was that the committee's argument made no sense to anyone with a basic understanding of the stock market. As a series of traders insistently and repeatedly pointed out to the confused congressmen, short selling was a perfectly normal operation and was designed to *stabilize* the price of commercial exports not collapse the market. If the Soviets had wanted to engineer a panic, they would not have bought quietly and in the largest grain market in the world, they would have signaled their intent very publicly and targeted a smaller market, such as Liverpool, England, in order to maximize the psychological and material impact of their purchases. Indeed, one did not need to understand the function of

[110] 'Embargo List Against Soviet May Increase', *Washington Post*, July 27, 1930; 'Soviet Grain Deals Put Up to Chicago by Secretary Hyde', *New York Times*, September 21, 1930; 'Legge Backs Hyde in Grain Price Quiz', *New York Times*, September 23, 1930.
[111] United States Congress, *Embargo on Soviet Products, Hearings Before the Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives, Seventy-First Congress, 3rd Sess., on H. R. 16035, A Bill to Prohibit the Importation of Any Article or Merchandise from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* (Washington: USGPO, 1931).

derivatives trading to realize that the idea of generating a panic in secret was a contradiction in terms. As it was, the supposedly enormous volumes of trading turned out, to America's financial wizards, to be not much more than that taking place on a normal day and certainly not enough to have substantially affected prices. This was especially true when compared to the carnage wrought in the markets by the global glut in supply of key commodities such as wheat – against which the Soviets had been trying to hedge in the first place.[112]

Certain that there was a nefarious conspiracy at work, the congressmen nevertheless continued to insist that short trading was not about price insurance but "gambling", subterfuge and economic warfare. Since Soviet "economic warfare" as articulated by Fish and Walsh was precisely supposed to follow from the Soviet's unfair, anti-competitive, anti-capitalist instincts, it could hardly have been more ironic that the behavior for which the committee was attacking the Soviet Union was in fact an instance of the Soviets operating in a particularly capitalistic manner. Among other things, it showed that, like many Americans at the time, the committee members did not properly understand the mechanics of the free market system that they were so vigorously defending. As Edmund Wilson pointed out, "one of the most striking features of this Committee which has been investigating the Communists for six months is its apparent ignorance of everything connected with Communism… And they not only ask Foster what he understands by Communism, a question perhaps defensible – but want to know, also, what he means by capitalism, a word which seems honestly to puzzle them."[113]

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[112] Fish Committee, Part 3, vol. 4, pp. 77-86, 115-124; Part 4, vol. 3, pp. 1-10, 53-6.
[113] Edmund Wilson, 'Foster and Fish', *The New Republic,* December 24, 1930. Later reprinted in Edmund Wilson, *The American Jitters: A Year of the Slump* (New York: Arno, 1980; 1st Edn. 1932), pp. 19-20.

Not all of the committee's claims were red herrings. If he lacked the faculties to answer his own questions, Congressman Fish's endeavors revealed a genuine attempt to highlight the challenge Communism posed to a liberal, republican political order. For this, the committee deserves to be removed from the blanket "McCarthyite" designation commonly applied to right-wing anticommunists. While he and his fellow congressmen tended to respond to difficult issues with closed and prejudicial assumptions, at certain moments their efforts, however inarticulately, raised serious questions about a world system in which communism and capitalism competed on entirely conflicting terms. Historians often argue that their job is to give voice to the voiceless and make sense of the apparently contradictory expressions of the inarticulate, to interpret the views of individuals lacking the ability to clearly express themselves in order to separate kernels of truth from apparently discordant utterances. Perhaps this instruction should be as true for Republican politicians educated at fine public schools and among the elites at Harvard as for the oppressed, the weak and the excluded.

However, even while he steered clear of more extremist visions of communism, Fish was never fully able to make the leap toward a purely evidential and institutional analysis of the movement he opposed. Unable to escape its members' prejudices or avoid the perennial politician's temptation to link the anticommunist crusade to the pressing concerns of the day, the committee found itself falling into an intellectual double bind. Efforts to demonstrate rigor and fidelity to the American liberal tradition and anticipate attacks from left-wingers encouraged the committee to define Communism through reference to its authoritarian and illiberal features. However, logic dictated that, if this were true, the best way of responding to Communist totalitarianism would be through the expansion of liberty to those who as yet did not feel its benefits, sweeping the rug from under revolutionaries who claimed that the American system was incapable of reform. This challenged the conservative inclinations of

Hamilton Fish and his peers, whose preferred prescriptions were immigration restriction, policing, and ritualistic patriotic education. Even the committee's efforts to stress the basic loyalty of ethnic and racial minority groups ended up undermining the case for action, since doing so challenged the vision of a powerful, united and dangerous Communist movement.

As a result, the committee's final report, issued in January 1931, presented a set of conclusions that were in stark dissonance to the messages that had emerged during the hearings. While witnesses' testimony in 1930 had revealed forged evidence, conflicting testimony, lackadaisical police officers and self-reliant trade unionists, the Fish Committee assembled from these fragments a vision of a disciplined Communist movement with more than half a million members and "active sympathizers", on the verge of driving the United States into the ground. Despite the explanations provided by some of Chicago's most experienced businessmen, claims of economic warfare on the trading floors were restated uncritically.

The Whalen Documents, the sources on which the committee had been founded, were dismissed in less than a paragraph. This marked a fitting epitaph for the committee, and a demonstration of how far the fear of imminent revolution had diminished in the months during which the Fish Committee had been conducting its investigations. Once the initial shock of the crash had receded (and before politics began to polarize once again in the New Deal years), many Americans seemed to have been surprised not by the fragility of their compatriots' republican faith but by its resilience. "The Chairman seems honestly to believe that there is imminent danger of a Communist revolution here, and that our Government and our institutions may be overthrown unless we adopt radical measures," a *New York Times* editorial averred. "This is not the judgment of our police authorities, or of the keenest and most impartial observers… Indeed, the wonder is that, given the favorable conditions for

violent agitation during the past fourteen months, there have been so few demonstrations by Communists."[114]

It was little surprise, then, that the committee's recommendations, which included outlawing the Communist Party, cancelling the citizenship of all party members who had previously been naturalized, barring Communist propaganda from the mails, prosecuting people caught spreading rumors about banks and a complete embargo on all Soviet trade, were ignored. The only liberal member of the committee, John E. Nelson, refused to sign the report. Denouncing anticommunist "hysteria", he said that "our best defense against the red shirt of the Communist and the black shirt of the Fascists is the blue shirt of the American working man."[115]

In this sense, and not for the last time, right-wing anticommunists' lax approach to evidence and argument made them their own worst enemies. As Boris Skvirsky, the Director of the Soviet Union's Information Bureau in New York, pointed out in his statement to the committee, allegations about the Bolshevik destruction of civilization were part of a "fine harvest of stories" that dated back to the absurd post-war claims about the Soviet nationalization of women, while the forged Whalen Documents were "quite similar to previous forgeries" designed to build up a "war psychology against the Soviet Union."[116] This consistent pattern of failure was more than enough to pull a curtain over the legitimate points being made by the committee about the international Communist movement, which were effectively ignored by many Americans for a generation to come.

Still, the failure of the Fish committee was not solely a product of the intellectual limitations or analytical errors of the congressmen who sat on its benches. It was both shaped

[114] 'Communists and Criminals', *New York Times*, January 19, 1931.
[115] 'Fish Report Asks Outlawing of Reds As National Menace', *New York Times,* January 18, 1931.
[116] Fish Committee, Part 1, vol. 5, p. 40. The point was also made by Bogdanov. Ibid., Part 3, vol. 3, p. 231.

by and reflected in the composition of the witnesses who were called to testify before it, which in turn spoke to the systemic weakness of anticommunism in the depression years. Critics were wrong to argue that the committee was little more than the mouthpiece of capitalism. The most consistently conservative anticommunist groups, whose vision would have most strongly supported the committee's dogmatic interpretation of Communism, presented weak or compromised evidence. Meanwhile, the most powerful indictments of Soviet politics came from moderate union leaders, who focused upon reform as the best response to revolutionary radicalism.

In this sense, the more moderate the investigations became, the more incoherent the narrative they presented. Fish's efforts were uniquely hampered by bad timing. However, they also highlight many of the difficulties experienced by conservative anticommunists hoping to work with liberals who may notionally agree with their basic hostility toward revolutionary radicalism but disagree profoundly with the reasons why and the implications they draw from it. As a result, many figures – including Fish himself – have preferred to drift rightwards, rather than to the center, in search of allies who shared not only their antipathy to Communism but many of their prescriptions for defeating it. In Fish's case, this led to a systematic shift during the rest of the decade towards an implicit defense of Nazism as the only force on the global stage capable of restraining Soviet Russia. While by the onset of World War Two his committee was already disappearing from memory, this new course would ultimately leave his name entirely blackened in history.