

Seeing Reds: The Case of the SCHW and Red-baiting

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I. Introduction

This paper aims to examine how anti-Communism was used to resist the civil rights struggle in the U.S. during the early Cold War era by focusing on the case of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW), one of the leading southern organizations committed to racial and economic reform of the region. I have come to be interested in this topic while examining the relationship between the Cold War and the civil rights struggle. Most scholars now agree that the civil rights movement did not start with the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954, but was part of the long-term and larger struggle black people had been waging for decades. In particular, they regard the World War II years as a crucial period in the history of the civil rights struggle, since wartime exigencies led to an array of changes that eventually helped to unsettle the grip of white racism.

However, the onset of the Cold War and the attendant anti-Communist paranoia came to reverse this favorable setting. As Mary Dudziak shows, the Cold War did occasionally help the civil rights cause. Racism became a major liability to the U.S. national interest. The Soviet Union was willing to embarrass America over the conditions of African Americans, while their continued plight undermined the U.S. efforts to win over the newly independent nations in Asia and Africa. As this highlighted the need for racial reform, Dudziak argues, the civil rights reform including the *Brown* decision was in part an outcome of the Cold War (2000:

12–13). Yet, the Cold War seems to have done more harm than good to the civil rights struggle. As many scholars have shown, the anti-Communist fervor and the red scare in the early Cold War period reflected more than a genuine concern for the Communist threat, real or imagined. Instead, the fear of Communism was often intentionally fueled and exploited for political gains or to silence the Communists, liberals or dissidents who challenged the status quo. Any call for reform was seen as Communist-influenced. In this context, the civil rights struggle was not also free from the charge that it was influenced by the Communists. Rather than a statement of real condition, the accusation often represented an attempt to suppress the rightful demand of black people by suggesting that the burgeoning civil rights struggle was a Communist scheme.

Given this, I have become interested in how the anti-Communism hysteria during the early Cold War years affected the civil rights struggle. I am drawn to this topic, since, as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall points out, an expansive understanding of the civil rights movement requires the examination of the dialect between the civil rights struggles and resistance to them (2005: 1235). In particular, following the recent studies that examine how Southerners used the fear of the Communist influence behind the civil rights struggle—or the “southern red scare”—to resist desegregation before and after the Brown decision (Lewis 2000; Woods 2004), I intend to look at the attempts to discredit the civil rights struggle by painting it red. As Jeff Woods points out, the southern red scare was a complex phenomenon, diverse in its purpose and range. Some Southerners were truly troubled by the possibility of the Communist involvement in the black struggle, while others were simply red-baiters, exploiting this fear as a way to maintain the racial status quo (2010). Although these two were often mixed, it seems that cynical red-baiting was far more frequent, since the charges of the Communist influence were levied on almost all civil rights advocates despite ample evidence pointing otherwise.

Accordingly, in this paper I focus on the instances of red-baiting as a conscious strategy to repulse the civil rights challenges. As a specific case, I examine the SCHW and its tribulations as a foremost example of the fate that fell to most liberal and racially progressive organizations in the South that challenged the regional status quo. In particular, I examine the report on the SCHW by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1947 as an example of

red-baiting that later served as the model for similar reports and/or investigations at the local and state levels across the South. Given the frequent charge that the civil rights struggle was Communist-influenced, I first briefly examine the tension between the Communists and blacks before the post-World War II period. By doing so, I intend to show that linking blacks and reds was indeed an instance of red-baiting. I then look at how the SCHW was subject to conservative attacks and red-baiting even before the Cold War. Finally, I examine how the anti-Communist hysteria undercut the civil rights cause by looking at the HUAC report on the SCHW and the latter's eventual demise. As the HUAC report on the SCHW was not available in Korea, I rely on the secondary sources to get the required information. Following the common usage, I use the term Communism/Communist to refer to the thoughts (or a person) specifically related to the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA).

II. Blacks, Reds, and the South before 1945

As the anti-Communist hysteria ravaged American society after World War II, what amounted to a southern red scare gripped its southern part. Unlike the national red scare that was built on America's long-held loathing for radicalism, its southern counterpart was mainly a response to the civil rights challenges. As such, it was almost exclusively shaped by the need to defeat them by arguing that the civil rights struggle was Communist-influenced. For many Southerners, claiming the Communist influence enabled them to smugly explain away the racial foment in their region as a work of the subversive outsiders. In that way, they could not only discredit what were in fact African American's legitimate demands for their rights, but also maintain that blacks had been content with their lot until the Communists came to incite them. Claiming the Communist influence also implied a racist assumption that blacks were incapable of working on their own and that, being gullible, they were easily duped by the Communists to become their "pawn" (Woods 2004: 5, 22, 48; Lewis 2000: 98).

However, linking the civil rights struggle with the Communists was not entirely without substance. In fact, the Communists and radicals had long supported racial

justice and the black civil rights when few cared. The Communists first came to address black questions in 1928. Following the decisions by the Communist International (Comintern), they adopted a program that included the purge of “white chauvinism” in its ranks, the promotion of blacks to leadership positions, and the self-determination of blacks in the Black Belt, an agricultural region in the Southeast with dark rich soil (Lewis 2000: 23). Yet, its program was mostly impractical and failed to help the Communists’ standing with blacks. For instance, the self-determination of blacks was incompatible with the reality of the growing migration of blacks from the South and could be interpreted as promoting segregation of blacks instead of fighting it. As a result, it was largely dropped as a program (Woods 2004: 22).

It was thus not until the early 1930s that the CPUSA made some headway among blacks. In 1931, nine black boys were arrested for the alleged rape of two white women on a freight train near Scottsboro, Alabama. As eight of them were sentenced to death, one escaping the charge being a minor, International Labor Defense (ILD), a legal defense arm of the CPUSA, came to defend them. Although ILD failed to secure no guilty verdict for the boys, who eventually served six to nineteen years in prison, it did succeed in generating publicity for the plight of blacks both at home and abroad. Around the same time, the ILD was also involved in the defense of Angelo Herndon, a black Communist arrested in 1931 while organizing a biracial demonstration protesting unemployment in Atlanta. He was sentenced to twenty years in prison for inciting “insurrection,” thus violating the state law of Georgia. Both the Herndon and Scottsboro cases greatly helped to enhance the CPUSA’s reputation as a champion of oppressed blacks. As a result, the CPUSA was able to gain “a degree of legitimacy it had been unable to achieve by any other means” (Lewis 2000: 234; Egerton 1994: 170).

Unfortunately, the CPUSA’s prominence in these instances led to firmly link the civil rights struggle with the Communists in the mind of southern segregationists. Many conservative southerners claimed that the CPUSA was using the Scottsboro case to stir up racial strife, and the Alabama state officials regarded the pouring of mails protesting the conviction of the Scottsboro boys as the product of Communist propaganda. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) which later joined the CPUSA in the defense of the Scottsboro boys was viewed one and the same as the CPUSA. Given this, the Scottsboro

case presented civil rights advocates with the question of how to react to the Communists' help in the fight against racism. In most cases, as they did not wish to burden their already formidable task with the accusations of Communist influence, the common response was "It's bad enough being black, why be red?" (Woods 2004: 20; Henretta 2000: 787).

In fact, despite the CPUSA's endorsement of the black civil rights and the gains it made among blacks after the Scottsboro case, it would be wrong to assume that the Communists enjoyed unconditional support among blacks. For example, the NAACP eventually became critical of the CPUSA's participation in the case. Its principle criticism, which was to shape its anti-Communist stance well into the 1950s, was that the Communists were exploiting the Scottsboro case as well as the plight of black people ultimately to advance their own political agenda. Likewise, George Schuyler, *The Pittsburgh Courier* columnist, opposed the Communists' participation in the Scottsboro trial and would remain adamant in his anti-Communist conviction (Aldridge 2003: 3-6).

Moreover, if racism and economic hardship during the Great Depression made CPUSA's messages appealing to some blacks, its policies from the late 1930s alienated many more—for that matter, non-Communist white liberals as well—and undermined its hard-won prestige among them. In August 1935, in accordance with the Comintern decision, the CPUSA adopted a popular front strategy of forming broad alliances with almost any group opposing fascism. Yet, as the Soviet Union signed the non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany in August 1939 to avoid war, the CPUSA dumped the popular front and ceased anti-fascist fight. It also reversed its position on the entry into war. Before the pact, the CPUSA criticized the U.S. for not intervening in the war against fascism. After the pact, it came to oppose the U.S. intervention in what was now defined as an "imperialist war" against Germany and Italy, in which American working class and blacks had no stake (Gilmore 2008: 301; Berg 2007: 80).

Undoubtedly, the signing of the non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany and the CPUSA's post-pact policies did damage to the CPUSA's reputation. After the pact, the intense anti-Communist sentiment gained ground, unleashing attacks on the Communists as well as their previous popular front allies. The pact also deprived the non-Communist left and the popular front supporters of their foremost rational for working with the Communists, i.e., anti-fascism. In fact,

appalled by the Soviet's willingness to collaborate with Hitler, the non-Communist left began their transformation into the anti-Communist left. Accordingly, after the pact, any cooperation with the Communists risked criticism from the disillusioned anti-Communist left in addition to red-baiting from conservative Southerners. Besides, the pact hurt the civil rights struggle by undercutting an effective weapon against segregationists, the comparison of southern Jim Crow with fascism. Given this, one columnist wrote in the *Nation* about the Communists that "If they had set out to prove themselves scoundrels they could not have worked to better effect" (Gilmore 2008: 301, 307; Woods 2004: 22).

However, the CPUSA's stance on war further strained its relationship with blacks. As it came to oppose the U.S. entry into a war after the non-aggression pact, it condemned black and other supporters of the war as "pawns of an imperialistic war and citizens of an antidemocratic country" (Gilmore 301). Then, once Hitler reneged on the non-aggression pact and attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, the CPUSA again reversed its position. It resumed the anti-fascist fight and the popular front. In particular, with the Soviet Union at war, it was now fully supportive of war efforts of the Roosevelt administration and urged the labor to maintain wartime no strike pledge. Given this, when A. Philip Randolph, a black union leader, proposed a march on Washington in 1941 to protest discrimination of blacks in war industries, the CPUSA harshly criticized him, fearing that the march would interrupt war production (Gilmore 2008: 354).

Accordingly, many blacks came to view that the Communists had traded their racial advocacy and labor activism for the interest of the Soviet Union and were subservient to the latter. Foner thus noted, "It was to be exceedingly difficult for the Communists to overcome the resentment among blacks created by the Party's wartime policies. The Communists never completely erased the feeling in sections of the black community that they placed the Soviet Union's survival above the battle for black equality" (Marable 1984: 20-21). In sum, despite the CPUSA's support for the civil rights cause and the significant representation of blacks in the party leadership, the CPUSA was unable to make significant inroads into African Americans.

III. The Southern Conference for Human Welfare

Although the CPUSA largely failed to win blacks, this fact mattered little to conservative segregationists' perception of the Communist involvement in the civil rights struggle. As Glenda Gilmore points out, from the fact that the Communists supported black equality, they simply concluded that those supporting black equality were Communists (2008: 302). This would in turn inform their view of the civil rights struggle as well as the liberal southern organizations that advocated racial reform in the region. In this regard, the ordeal of the SCHW well demonstrates how race-baiting and red-baiting interplayed to harass and undermine a progressive southern organization prior to the Cold War and how this acted as constraint on its agenda and its members' activities.

The SCHW was formed in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1938 by mostly white, middle-class Southerners eager to extend the New Deal reform to the region as well as the liberal and leftist supporters of the popular front. Inspired by the findings in the National Emergency Council's *Report on the Economic Conditions in the South* and by Roosevelt's statement that "the South presents right now the Nation's No. 1 economic problem—the Nation's problem, not merely the South's," the SCHW aimed to tackle the most pressing issues that faced the region, i.e., the problems of poverty and racism as the root cause of poverty. Given this, blacks and labor representatives were to constitute the majority of the delegates who attended the SCHW biennial conferences. As the largest interracial organization dedicated to progressive causes, its initial supporters included prominent figures and the leading liberals such as First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, Alabama Governor Bibb Graves, Aubrey Williams of the Works Progress Administration, and Frank Graham, the president of the University of North Carolina (Gilmore 2008: 232).

From the beginning, race proved to be an explosive issue. At the first SCHW conference held in Birmingham in November 1938, it was rumored that Eleanor Roosevelt intentionally placed her chair into the aisle between black and white sections of the auditorium, thus violating the local ordinance on racial segregation. Not surprisingly, this—along with the SCHW's alleged adoption of an anti-segregation resolution, which was in fact a condemnation of segregation as it

affected its conference sessions and the city of Birmingham only—provoked criticism from local newspapers and conservatives. This in turn led to the desertion of the conference by politicians—including Congressman Luther Patrick, Senators Lister Hill, Claude Pepper and John Bankhead, and Governor Bibb Graves of Alabama—who feared the association with the SCHW could jeopardize their political career. Given this initial setback as well as the sensitiveness of the issue, the SCHW, although endorsing racial equality in principle, remained unresolved on segregation prior to the postwar years. Instead of an all-out attack on segregation, it decided to hold its biennial conferences in cities without segregation enforcement and focused on a less divisive issue of abolishing the poll tax that was estimated to disenfranchise almost 11 million people, 60% of whom were white (Krueger 1967: 38, 48; Lewis 2000: 78; Gilmore 2008: 337).

At the same time, the charges of the Communist affiliation were levied on the SCHW from its first conference. *Alabama: The News Magazine of the Deep South*, a mouthpiece for Birmingham industrialists, charged that the SCHW, attended by over 600 Communists, was “a joint enterprise of Southern radicals and left-wing members of the Roosevelt administration.” The Alabama Council of Women’s Democratic Clubs, a front organization for Birmingham industrialists, similarly accused that the SCHW was a gathering of the Communists. Once made, these charges quickly spread. For instance, the Chattanooga *Free Press* repeated the accusations even before the 1940 conference held in Chattanooga, Tennessee (Krueger 1967: 37–38, 65).

As a popular front organization, the SCHW did include the Communists. H. C. Nixon, one-time SCHW executive secretary, identified six people, not 600, including Joseph Gelders, Howard Lee, John B. Thompson, John P. Davis, Rob Hall, and Donald Burke as possible Communist members within the SCHW, while only Burke and Hall openly acknowledged their associations with the CPUSA. Although few, this—coupled with the SCHW’s interracial nature, its pro-labor stance and some of its members’ affiliation with the Communist front organizations—meant that the charges of Communist affiliation would plague it to its end. In fact, the Communist presence was a divisive issue even for the SCHW members. Francis Pickens Miller, a Virginian Democrat, declined to serve any position at the SCHW because of Burke’s presence at the 1938 convention. Likewise, Mark Ethridge and Barry Bingham, journalists of the *Louisville*

Courier–Journal, resigned in 1941, as Thompson failed to answer their questions about his political affiliation (Lewis 2000: 78; Krueger 1967: 38, 85).¹⁾

Yet, the mere presence of the Communists did not guarantee their influence on the SCHW in any major way. In fact, all the available records pointed to the contrary. At the Birmingham conference, “unbelievably large votes were cast in opposition to any proposals made by the small communist group,” thus undercutting its possible influence (Lewis 2000: 81). Moreover, the Communists could not block the adoption of the resolution condemning the Communist aggression in Finland at the Chattanooga conference in 1940. Despite the decision to focus on the domestic affairs, W.T. Couch, the director of the University of North Carolina Press, insisted that the SCHW adopt a resolution denouncing the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1940, as it did in 1938 on the Nazi aggression. Despite the opposition from the Communists, the delegates overwhelmingly adopted a resolution that castigated all forms of aggression—be it Communist, fascist, or imperialist—and opposed the aid to the Allies in the spirit of the U.S. neutrality laws. In addition, the SCHW leaders, mainly Frank Graham and Clark Foreman, banned the suspected Communists from serving the administrative positions and by 1942 successfully removed most of them. At its 1942 conference held in Nashville, Tennessee, the SCHW also decided to deny membership to those advocating, or belonging to organizations advocating, the violent overthrow of the U.S. government (Krueger 1967: 61–63, 83, 89, 92). Given this, John Egerton comments that, at the Nashville conference, the SCHW leaders and delegates “leaned over backwards to avoid flashing a radical image to the public” (1994: 300).

Although the SCHW leaders feared that war would divert attention from domestic reform, they gave themselves fully to war mobilization, once it broke out. During the war period, the SCHW managed to expand its activities, adding eleven state committees in the South and two associate committees in Washington D.C. and New York between 1944 and early 1946. Its work received the endorsement from the executive boards of both the NAACP and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), while the financial contributions from the latter been crucial in keeping it afloat. With more activities and recognition, its

¹⁾ Thompson’s failure was due to the fact that he was recovering from a serious car accident (Krueger 1967: 85).

memberships and revenue also increased. In early 1946, its membership reached a new height with more than 6,000, when Mary McLeod Bethune of the National Youth Administration conducted a speaking tour in the South and recruited people for the SCHW. Its revenue quadrupled from 1944 to 1945 and hit record high in 1946 (Krueger 1967: 136–7). Yet, this new-found success soon proved to be the last hooray before its precipitous fall.

As many scholars point out, the World War II years brought various changes—the creation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee that embodied the idea that the employment practices should be fair to all, the Double-V campaign that called for victory over fascism abroad and victory over racism at home, the deployment of blacks in the military and various war industries, to name the least—that seemed to portend a radical break with the prewar racial relations. Alarmed by these changes, southern segregationists were determined to restore the prewar racial order, while blacks, with their expectations raised by the wartime experiences, were resolved to fight for their rights. As a result, the race issue grew more explosive and the instances of racial violence increased. Faced with this, the SCHW tackled racism with renewed vigor, denouncing segregation by the end of 1946 and actively participating in the campaign against lynching. In fact, while fewer delegates attended its 1946 conference than the 1942 conference (no conference was held in 1944), some 40 to 60 percent of them were blacks (Krueger 1967: 151–2).

Yet, southern segregationists were soon greatly helped by the onset of the Cold War and anti-Communist sentiments that further enabled the red scare and red-baiting as a strategy to resist the challenges from the civil rights struggle and to undermine a small, but growing, group of white Southerners who opposed segregation. Besides, Woods points out that postwar anti-Communism had one added appeal. Prior to the Cold War, the alleged Communist instigation of blacks was mainly a southern concern. However, the Cold War and the anti-Communist consensus made it a national security problem, enabling southern segregationists to present their reactionary racial agenda in the rhetoric of patriotism and providing them with “a rhetorical bridge to a national audience” (2004: 6) As a result, red-baiting the civil rights struggle became of a national phenomenon. For instance, Albert Canwell, the chairman of the Washington State Legislative Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities, asserted that “If someone

insists that there is discrimination against Negroes in this country, or that there is inequality of wealth, there is every reason to believe that person is a Communist” (Whitfield 1991: 22).

For the SCHW in particular, the Cold War anti-Communist hysteria signaled that the issue of its Communist affiliation, which was never fully resolved despite its leaders’ efforts, returned to haunt it with vengeance. Already in late 1945, Democrat Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi called the “the South’s number one enemy.” The SCHW was especially vulnerable to the charges of Communist influence, not simply because of the prewar accusations of its Communist affiliation, but also because of its failure to take sides in the emerging Cold War conflicts. As a popular front organization, it welcomed people of various ideological spectrums and this openness was the source of its pride. Even when the suspected Communists were barred from the SCHW administrative position, this was not to judge them by their beliefs or to conduct a witch-hunt, but to save the conference from the alleged Communist taint.²⁾ In the postwar era, the SCHW did not seriously tackle the issue of its members’ ideological allegiance, instead focusing on more pressing domestic issues (Krueger 1967: 136, 160).

In the Cold War context, this liberal stance took its toll. Even Eleanor Roosevelt, the long-term liberal supporter of the SCHW, declined to attend its 1946 conference held in New Orleans, Mississippi, disillusioned by the SCHW’s “occasional connections with fellow travelers and known American Communists.” An equally serious blow to the SCHW was the CIO’s withdrawal of the financial support. Faced with increasing hostility toward unions, the CIO felt the heat of the anti-Communist paranoia and began to sort out the Communists from its own ranks. It thus found the charges of the SCHW’s Communist taint a liability to its reputation. Van Bittner, the organizer for Operation Dixie, the CIO’s unionization drive in the South, probably reflected this growing rightward shift of the CIO as well as the need to distance itself from the SCHW, when he asserted in 1946 that “No crowd, whether communist, Socialist, or anybody else is going to mix up in this organizing drive. That goes for the SCHW” (Krueger 1967: 152; Woods

²⁾ In fact, Frank Graham, the first chairman of the SCHW, informed the alleged Communists of the charges against them and requested their responses. He believed that the charges against the SCHW were “not because it is one percent Red,” but because “it was fifty percent Black” (Ashby 1980: 168).

2004: 34). Following this public denunciation, the CIO gradually ended its support to the SCHW. While this greatly hurt the SCHW financially, its refusal to take firm stances on the charges of the Communist affiliation led to the further loss of its members.

IV. The HUAC report on the SCHW

In this context, the SCHW drew attention from the HUAC. The HUAC—initially called the Dies Committee following its chairman, Democrat Martin Dies of Texas—was established in 1938 with an aim to investigate extreme groups on the left and the right. It was one of the congressional committees chaired by conservative southern Democrats including the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (chaired by James Eastland of Mississippi) and the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (chaired by John McClellan of Arkansas) (Woods 2004: 5). They owed their chairmanship to their seniority on congressional committees, which was made possible by their longevity in the Congress. Their longevity, in turn, was the outcome of the disenfranchisement of the southern electorate through various means including the poll tax (Gilmore 2008: 338).³⁾ In the postwar years, they used their congressional positions to investigate the alleged Communist influence on the civil rights groups, since their political power was threatened by their activities. In fact, as early as 1942, Martin Dies deplored “the fact that throughout the South today subversive elements are attempting to convince the Negro that he should be placed on social equality with white people, that now is the time for him to assert his rights” (Whitfield 1991: 21). In the postwar years, the HUAC fanned the anti-Communist paranoia with the investigations of Communist influence in Hollywood in 1947 and the Alger Hiss case in 1948.

In the late 1930s, conservative Southerners requested the Dies Committee to investigate the SCHW, which obviously did not occur, although it was said that it did send observers to the SCHW Birmingham conference in 1938. According to Thomas A. Krueger, the confirmation from the CPUSA secretary Earl Browder in

³⁾ In 1943, 17 of 47 permanent committees in the House and 10 of 33 in the Senate were chaired by poll tax state Congressmen (Gilmore 2008: 338).

1939 that the SCHW, along with other organizations including the American Civil Liberties Union, was “a Communist transmission belt”—whatever that meant—was enough to make the committee convinced that the SCHW was a Communist front (1967: 65–66). Yet, it was under the leadership of Democrat John Rankin of Mississippi that the HUAC came to pursue the civil rights groups. Rankin never chaired the committee, but had a significant influence on it, helping it to turn into a permanent committee in 1945. When the HUAC issued a report on the SCHW on June 12, 1947, it was chaired by Republican J. Parnell Thomas of New Jersey, but conservative southern Democrats—Rankin, John Wood of Georgia, Herbert C. Bonner of North Carolina, and J. Hardin Peterson of Florida—were also on the committee (2004: 28–29).

The HUAC report on the SCHW was a clear instance of how the southern and national red scares converged in the postwar era to browbeat and eventually bring down a progressive southern organization. According to the report, the SCHW is “perhaps the most deviously camouflaged Communist front operation” of the day whose “professed interest in southern welfare is simply an expedient for larger aims serving the Soviet Union and its subservient Communist Party in the United States.” It also maintained that the SCHW, instead of having “the long-range welfare of the Negro” at heart, used the issue of race as “explosive and revolutionary tinder in destroying American democracy” and “wittingly or unwittingly” promoted a goal and a technique of the CPUSA in handling “the negro question” (Gellhorn 1947: 1193; Woods 2004: 30).

To say that the ways in which the HUAC arrived at the above conclusions were problematic would be an understatement. As Walter Gellhorn meticulously documents, the quotes the HUAC cited in order to support its assertions were frequently taken out of contexts, while the person it mentioned had no organizational connections with the SCHW. It also constantly quoted to the Communist press even when better, fuller, and non-Communist sources were available, giving the false impression that the SCHW was a Communist organization given the frequent references to it in Communist publications. In addition, the HUAC charged that the “most conclusive proof of the Communist domination” of the SCHW was its “strict and unvarying conformance to the line of the Communist Party in the field of foreign policy” despite the fact that the SCHW mostly focused on domestic issues and that it adopted a resolution

condemning the Communist aggression. Ignoring this clear evidence against its assertion, the HUAC instead quoted Senator Pepper's address given at the 1946 SCHW conference held in New Orleans, allegedly in defense of Russia, as an indication of the SCHW's support for the Soviet Union. Yet, what the HUAC quoted was not part of Pepper's conference address, but part of an interview he had with a newspaper while he stayed in New Orleans for the conference (1947: 1199–1200, 1204, 1229, 1232; Krueger 1967: 167–72).⁴⁾ In short, while the evidence the HUAC quoted did include some elements of truth, this was jumbled, misplaced, presented in ways to make untruthful and unfounded accusations against the SCHW.

Another major tactic the HUAC used was guilt by association. As Gellhorn points out, it involved “first, seeking to establish a tie, however tenuous,” between the Communists or those linked to them and anyone from the SCHW and then attributing Communist taint to that person, who would in turn transmit that taint to the SCHW as whole (1947: 1218). Following this logic, not just the simple presence of the Communists within the SCHW, but the SCHW members' slightest ties with the CPUSA, the Communist front organizations or any organization cited as subversive by the Attorney General were seen sufficient to prove its Communist taint. In addition, some of the SCHW members' involvement in the ILD, the demand for the release of the Scottsboro boys and the support for “an independent Negro Soviet Republic in the southern Black Belt which in essence is a call to civil war” were all viewed as the SCHW's following of the Communist line on the black question. Besides, the fact that Rob Hall, the Communist secretary for Alabama in 1939, highly praised a book written by H.C. Nixon was presented as one of the reasons to label Nixon as a Communist, which was in turn seen as a case for the “Communist Manipulation” of the SCHW (Woods 2004: 30; Gellhorn 1947: 1217).

Given this, the HUAC was not really interested in probing the Communist influence in the SCHW. Nor did it intend to find out whether those accused of being Communists were current or past members of the CPUSA or simply fellow travelers and what was the nature and the extent of their associations. Instead, the HUAC was more concerned with establishing a link between the SCHW and

⁴⁾ It was said that he had been asked for his views on the U.S. relations with Russia, to which he answered that Russia had been made “the whipping boy for many interests” (Gellhorn 1947: 1232).

the Communists by any means to make sweeping accusations that the SCHW—or even the civil rights struggle as a whole—followed the Communist line. Its report was thus a brazen attempt to red-bait a progressive southern civil rights group out of existence.

Accordingly, the report was heavily criticized when it was first released. Its timing was criticized, for it was released hastily right before a SCHW-sponsored speech by the former Vice President Henry Wallace on June 16, 1947 (Krueger 1967: 165; Woods 2004: 29), obviously aiming at both the SCHW and Wallace. The HUAC was also faulted for failing to grant hearings to anyone from the SCHW to clarify and/or defend its position. Pointing out the absurdity of incriminating an entire organization by the alleged political associations of some of its members, Gellhorn concluded that the report only proved the HUAC had “either been intolerably incompetent or designedly intent upon publicizing misinformation” (1947: 1194, 1233). Given this, the report initially brought positive publicity for the SCHW, and Wallace’s speech was a success (Krueger 1967: 173).

Yet, this criticism on its SCHW report did not stop the HUAC from making another attempt to brand a civil rights organization red in its second report titled “Civil Rights Congress (CRC) As a Communist Front Organization” issued in August 1947. In addition, while it is easy to dismiss the HUAC report for the procedural and logical flaws, it would have a lasting impact. Whatever its flaws were, it was one of the first government documents that established links between civil rights activism and Communism (Woods 2004: 30). It thus rendered an official seal of approval to the charges of the alleged Communist influence that haunted the SCHW from the beginning. Given this, the report proved to be damaging not least because its charges—coupled with the internal split over the 1948 presidential election between supporters of Truman and those favoring his contender Wallace—contributed to the eventual dissolution of the SCHW in late 1948. It was also damaging—probably more so—as it set the template for browbeating civil rights organizations, as George Lewis puts, by publicly targeting them, linking them with Communism and declaring them subversive (2000: 76). In doing so, the HUAC provided fuel for the southern red scare, while also serving as a model for state and local agencies across the southern states—notably the Georgia Commission on Education, the Johns Committee in Florida, Joint

Legislative Committee on Un-American Activities—that were designed to resist integration in the years before and after the Brown decision (Woods 2004: 6).

Moreover, there was no end to guilt by association. Because the SCHW was labeled as a Communist front by the HUAC, any individual or organization associated with it could acquire the Communist taint and then transmit it to other individuals or organizations through association. Following this logic, even though the SCHW was gone, the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF), an offshoot of the SCHW created in 1946, also faced the charges of Communist influence through its association with the SCHW and was eventually subject to the hearings by the SISS in 1954, which James Eastland, “Mississippi McCarthy,” headed. Citing the HUAC report on the SCHW as proof, the SISS labeled the SCEF as subversive. Not only was there no end to the process of guilt by association, but one investigating committee quoted “a report of the other as its authority,” “in that way avoiding any necessity for proof of anything that was said” (Woods 2004: 42, 44–45, 48).

V. Conclusion

Although available evidence indicates that the influence of Communists on the black civil rights as well as African Americans was limited at best, red-baiting was readily used as a way to undermine the civil rights and other reform-oriented groups and to oppose desegregation, sometimes leading to their dissolution as in the case of the SCHW. Yet, according to Woods, the impact of red-baiting on the civil rights struggle and its efficacy to stop desegregation should not be overstated, since it often backfired against segregationists who excessively used it. As he sees, the “clearly false accusations” of red-and black-baiters “only added to their reputations as hate-mongers and undermined their cause...The money, time, and human resources devoted to the southern red scare ultimately constituted an enormous waste.” In fact, segregationists’ claim that the federal government and the Supreme Court were Communist-influenced because of the federal endorsement of civil rights reform and the Brown decision seemed to be too far-fetched to be taken seriously. Besides, segregationists

could block neither desegregation nor the rise of black political power, although they did disrupt the civil rights struggle. Given this, Woods argues that red-baiters never had the devastating effect on the civil rights cause. Finally, referring to Dudziak's work on how the Cold War helped the civil rights cause, he contends that anti-Communism worked for the civil rights struggle as much as for those who opposed it (2004: 9-10).

However, it seems that anti-Communism, red scare and red-baiting in the early Cold War period did more harm to the civil rights struggle, while they did more good to segregationists. The aforementioned short-and long-term damage the HUAC report incurred on the SCHW and the civil rights struggle as a whole by ascribing the Communist taint to them was only one instance. As civil rights groups tried to fend off such damaging charges, most of them, much like red-baiters as Woods points out, spent enormous time and resources. Yet, as the case of the SCHW showed, no amount of effort and/or no amount of evidence pointing otherwise was enough to dispel these charges, since perception, not reality, was all that mattered to the anti-Communists and red-baiters. As a result, the efforts of civil rights groups, while not ending their ordeal, only drained time and resources they could have used to fight for the civil rights cause. In addition, the charges of Communist influence limited the permissible boundaries of the civil rights discourse and reform, leading civil rights groups to pursue "the still difficult, but politically safer" issues, notably legal segregation and political rights, at the cost of economic- and class-based issues (Anderson 2002: 107). According to Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, this divorce of the civil rights struggle from the economic issues made the civil rights movement in the 1960s inadequate to deal with poverty and various social problems (1988: 811).

Given this, even while excessive red-baiting proved to be damaging to segregationists' reputation and their causes, it still inflicted more harm to the civil rights cause. If segregationists failed to stop the civil rights struggle, this does not mean that red-baiting was any less effective. It just indicates the dedication and determination of those who fought for the civil rights. The impact of the Cold War on the civil rights struggle should be carefully assessed. Yet, there is no doubt that the Cold War, coupled with the anti-Communist hysteria and red-baiting, was a regrettable chapter in the history of the civil rights struggle.

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Abstract

Seeing Reds: The Case of the SCHW and Red-baiting

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This paper aims to examine how red-baiting was readily deployed during the early Cold War era in the U.S. to browbeat the civil rights and other reform-oriented groups by focusing on the case of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW), one of the leading liberal organizations in the South.

As the anti-Communist hysteria ravaged American society after World War II, the civil rights struggle was not also free from the charge that it was influenced by the Communists. Although available evidence indicates that the influence of Communists on the civil rights was limited at best, the anti-Communist hysteria in the early Cold War years enabled the red scare and red-baiting as a strategy to resist the civil rights struggle and to undermine a small, but growing, group of white Southerners who opposed segregation.

In this regard, the tribulations of the SCHW were symptomatic of the fate that fell to most liberal and racially progressive organizations in the South that challenged the regional status quo. Created in 1938 to promote racial and economic reform of the South, the SCHW was subject to race-baiting and red-baiting from the beginning. In the early Cold War era, the continued charge of the SCHW's Communist affiliation as well as its heightened challenge to segregation drew attention from the HUAC, which issued a report in 1947 on the alleged Communist influence on the SCHW. The report rendered an official seal of approval to this allegation, as it asserted that the SCHW was a Communist front despite ample evidence pointing otherwise. In doing so, it represented a brazen attempt to red-bait a progressive southern civil rights group out of existence, while also serving as a model for similar agencies across the South that were designed to resist the civil right challenges.

Key Words: SCHW, HUAC, Civil Rights Struggle, CPUSA, Anti-Communism

SCHW, 반미활동위원회(HUAC), 흑인민권운동, 미국공산당, 반공주의

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