Evolution of an American Communist

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Why I Quit After 27 Years

Where I Stand Now

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Youngstown, Madrid, Budapest

When I resigned from the editorship of The Daily Worker and from the Communist Party on January 10, I had been a member for 27 years, and one of its leaders for 20. Many editorials have "welcomed me back" and telegrams have arrived, and scores of letters of support, some of them from old friends, some from people who remain within the Party. No man takes a step like that lightly, nor can I talk about it glibly.

A movement to which hundreds of thousands of fine people gave so much of their lives, their dreams, for which millions had respect and admiration, secret or avowed, a Party which did carry hopes for a better America, ideals for which men I have known gave their lives . . . how did it fail, and where? And why?

My mind goes back over 27 years in the Party:

City College, N. Y., March, 1931: Students who were always arguing in the alcoves got together to publish a magazine denouncing the ROTC, and a score were suspended. One of these was Max Weiss, a Communist, later to become a close friend. My only contact with communism until that time was the reading of George Bernard Shaw's "Intelligent Woman's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism." But I believed this attack on the students was wrong, and I took part in their defense. Max Weiss lost, but the Young Communist League gained a member. (Curiously enough, 26 years later, presidents of the same City Colleges barred me from speaking at my old Alma Mater . . . how little our educators have learned.)

Warren, Ohio, November, 1932: It was my first trip outside New York, my native town, and the bus arrived early in the evening. At 19 years of age, I had not a cent in my pocket, no idea of where I would live, but I was proud to have become a "full-timer" for the Young Communist League, to devote myself to organizing steel workers, happy to get away from college, from humdrum existence at home.

Joe Dallet, Comumnist, graduate of Dartmouth and son of wealthy parents, was there to meet me, the same Joe who was later to be killed in Spain. Within two hours, he had me addressing the Warren City Council, demanding relief for the jobless. Years of the slow, slogging task of organizing workers set in, around Youngstown, and a biographer of John L. Lewis must have had some of us in mind when he said: "Every place where new industrial unions were being formed, young and middle-aged Communists were working tirelessly." William Z. Foster had pioneered the way, and we were proud.

I ran for the Youngstown City Council, though a native of The Bronx. Street corner meetings heard me speaking for Negro rights. Time

and again we helped the unemployed with direct action; we turned on the gas, water and electricity in the homes of workers who couldn't pay their bills. In March, 1933, I heard the inaugural address of Franklin D. Roosevelt while sitting out a 30-day sentence in the Warren jail. I had been arrested addressing a demonstration; the charge was "making a loud noise without a permit."

Cordoba, Spain, March, 1937: Having received military training in Albacete (how I regretted opposing ROTC in college!) which consisted of firing three rounds out of an old Canadian Lee-Enfield rifle, I was shipped to the front. A man had come to Youngstown, thrilling us with the vision of an International Brigade, then forming in many parts of the world. Americans were volunteering, and so did I, first man from Ohio, "so that freedom shall not perish from the earth," as the banners of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade read.

Starting as a private, in a battle at Pozoblanco, that lasted three days (I don't remember how many we lost), I was made lieutenant-colonel at the age of 24, the highest ranking American officer in Spain.

When someone asks me today, in all sincerity: "How come it took you so long to learn about Stalin and what went wrong in Russia?" I can answer with equal sincerity that it looked nothing like that in Spain. Stalin had said "the cause of the Spanish Republic is the cause of all advanced, progressive humanity." Soviet arms, tanks, planes came to our aid in the toughest moments, and if the Western powers had done the same, we would not have been with our backs to the Ebro River those last days of September, 1938.

It was the day of the Munich pact, when Britain and France handed Czechoslovakia over to Hitler, and we talked quietly in the trenches. We knew Spain was doomed, and we were convinced a general war had become inevitable. From the trenches, we sent a cable to the White House: "The bombs falling on Madrid and Barcelona would fall on London and Paris," it said, "unless fascism was defeated in Spain."

We never got the aid we asked. President Roosevelt was to admit the failure to help the Spanish Republic was one of his biggest mistakes. Many of my best friends were in the half of the 3,000 men of our Brigade, most of them Communists, who never came back. They lie in Spanish earth. It could never have entered my head in those days to be ashamed of the name, Communist.

And I could never have imagined then a scene at the N. Y. State convention of the Communist Party, one year ago, when a young woman, veteran of the student movement days, got up to say:

"I loved the Johnny Gates who fought in Spain, but I hate the Johnny Gates who has taken the same position on Hungary as Franco. . . ."

Here was the triumph of hate over that love of Man that had sent us all to Ohio, to Spain. Had I been part of such hate? Can it ever redeem mankind?

Other scenes come back now, as I write this, as the telephone rings, as my wife comes in after a long day's work:

Camp Chafee, Arkansas, 1942: The order alerting our Armored Artillery Battalion for overseas duty had come in, and though I was battalion operations sergeant, the word from the War Dept. was that I should be left behind. That's the way it was for many Communists. Strange as it will sound to many ex-GIs, I was pretty heartbroken. I wrote to President Roosevelt that night, explaining who I was, talking about my Party, and I remember writing that we had made mistakes, mistakes about the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and in our stand against the draft. "You yourself, Mr. President," I wrote, "have made mistakes, for example, on Spain, and the point is whether people will learn from their mistakes." I cited Lincoln's appeal for "malice toward none" while staunchly defending my Party's devotion to the war.

But I did not get to go with my outfit. I was shipped to the Aleutians, from which I volunteered as a paratrooper, and saw action in Germany. I remember an argument with a Party leader later. He felt it was wrong, very wrong, to have admitted mistakes to the President. To him, we had always been right.

New York, National office, Communist Party, October, 1956: Soviet troops had started shooting in Budapest, then ceased, and were supposed to be pulling out. The world was in upheaval, and resident members of the Party's National Committee were debating their views on Hungary and Poland. I remember rising to speak. I said Khrushchev almost created catastrophe by trying to unseat Wladislaw Gomulka in Poland, that Gomulka had saved socialism in Poland, and, instead of being threatened, should have been supported. I could not hold back my feelings. This Soviet intervention in Hungary, I found myself saying, is a crime, a crime it will take us years to overcome, if it can be overcome. I cried out:

"For the first time in all my years in the Party, I feel ashamed of the name, Communist."

My colleagues sat with frozen faces. None of us would ever be the same again, nor could we continue for long to live in the same movement. They could not tolerate The Daily Worker editorials which spoke the truth as many of its editors and staff, not only myself, saw it.

Four months later, the Party's national convention in February, 1957, was to pass many notable resolutions, to which virtually all my colleagues subscribed, in which it was agreed that "the roots of our errors are to be found not in the last 10 years alone. . . ."

No, not in the last 10 years, nor in my own 27, however much I shared the responsibility for the great days, and the sad. To those of my

friends who still think the Party can change, I can only wish "good luck." We know each other well, and the argument is past: The crisis lies deeper than we realize, and to grasp it, we will have to go back, and still farther back, before we can ever go ahead.

First Doubts

In American Communist Party circles, I was, by contrast with most of my colleagues, one of the younger leaders. Those mysterious years and those wonderful passions which had brought older men and women to this movement were things I had heard about, and respected. But they weren't part of me. For example, I was one of the few top-leaders who, to my regret, had never visited the Soviet Union.

I had joined the Party at the age of 17, returned from two years combat in Spain at 25, and then come out of the U.S. Army to become a National Committee member at 32. I had no feeling that time was breathing down our necks. Our Party seemed to have a long future, and it would surely bring a Socialist America.

It never occurred to me that this movement, based on a theory of change as Marxism is supposed to be, might find itself left behind by the changes in American life itself. This thought has come late. It has been hard to face.

And it hit me hardest one afternoon, just a year ago, when 1,200 students on the Columbia University campus came to hear me speak. I had been banned from the City Colleges, whose presidents seem to repeat themselves every quarter century: it was the ban on the Social Problems Club at City College in 1931 that had first attracted me to communism.

"Mr. Gates," one young man shouted in the question period: "You say the Communist Party did big things for America. What were they?"

I started to answer, as so many Communist speakers do, beginning with the long, bitter fight for social insurance, the payments to the aged and the unemployed on which so many depend today. Who does not remember how splendidly the Communists fought for that?

A wave of laughter flooded McMillan Theatre, swept through every corner of the hall. My face flushed, as though something had hit me.

I rode the subways home that night in grim bewilderment: I can still hear that laughter. These young people knew nothing of what I took for granted. Something sacred in my own life was unknown to them. There was a gulf of generations between us. Into that gulf so much work, so much heartache, and sacrifice of the "best years of our lives" had disappeared with hardly a nod of recognition.

Suddenly, the bare figures of what was happening to the Party took on new meaning. From the 75,000 members in 1945 and our high prestige when Earl Browder was general-secretary, we had gone down hill in a hurry to 7,000 today. No one knows the exact figure, and this may be on the optimistic side.

I doubt that there are more than a few hundred Negro members in a movement which a quarter of a century back startled the minds of millions, and caught the ear of the world, with the Scottsboro and Herndon cases. Of the 15,000 Communists who, like myself, served in the U.S. armed forces, many of them winning decorations, maybe 1,500 remain. The young faces are gone: The age level in the Party is well into the 50s.

And the 10,000 or so members who left in these past two years, of whom I am only one and not the last—these were no Johnny-come-latelys or fly-by-nights. They joined before communism had become fashionable at cocktail parties and then stayed after. Neither prison nor persecution had beaten them. This is the point I kept trying to make to Party leaders:

"How do you explain the fact that our best, most tested people are leaving?"

These were the men and women who had done so much of the job in the early '30s, the years when the CIO was not yet born, when the AFL (with three million members at that time) had nothing in the steel and auto, the rubber and textile plants, the days when the bread-lines were the headlines.

I remember those young faces, the unheated buses carrying "hunger marchers" to Washington. It was just such a ride, in December, 1931, which convinced me I had little to learn in college. My parents, immigrant working people, were heartbroken. They were proud that I had won honors in high school, and a Regents scholarship to college. How could they understand that I wanted to "make the revolution"? When I rode into Warren, Ohio, a year later, the proudest fact to me was having become a "full-timer," dedicating myself to "organizing the unorganized."

It will be said that in those years, I thought in terms of a "Soviet America." True enough. The Communists did believe—and this is why they were in such bitter battles with the Socialists and liberals—that only the Soviet path, pretty much to the letter, would make America over. Was not the Five Year Plan remaking old Russia, and was not capitalism everywhere in panic and ruin?

I am sure that our ideas made us look queer to many, and our dogmas dogged us at every turn. Yet we had a vitality, a stubborness and a courage that attracted millions.

It didn't make us any less effective on the picket lines, or in putting the furniture back for a jobless Negro tenant, that late the same night,

in the home of new and exciting friends, we read the "Little Lenin Library" and pored over copies of thin-paper magazines with strange names that sold in the Workers' Bookshop, names like "Inprecorr"—the International Press Correspondence—that came from abroad.

That only made us part of a vibrating, embattled world: we marched with Chu Teh in provinces whose names we learned to pronounce with the accents of Kansas and Texas as well as New York. Our fists clenched with nameless students beheaded by the "White Terror" in Fascist Bulgaria and Cuba . . . the world was one.

That was the way I felt for years. Where others doubted the Moscow trials, and charged a "frame-up," their arguments carried no weight with me. The Soviets were beleaguered: how many times had they proved to be right where others were wrong? When others charged that anarchists and Trotskyists had been mistreated in Spain, I answered with anger and contempt: I had been there. War is war.

And if I had my doubts on the Party's behavior when the Soviet non-aggression pact with Hitler caused our flip-flop here at home, I did not doubt the essence of our ultimate "correctness." And later I was sure our course had been justified by what we did to help win the war. And what the Red Army had done.

This was my feeling when I picked up a copy of "Stars and Stripes" in a village near Essen, in Germany's Ruhr, where I was stationed with the 17th Airborne Division in May 1945. It carried a brief story that Jacques Duclos, the French Communist leader, had attacked our general-secretary, Earl Browder, causing quite an upheaval in the Communist Party of the U.S.

I was very upset; I had to know more. My letters to my wife Lillian were full of doubts and complaints: why were the French Communists interfering in American affairs they knew little about? Yet what could it mean if Communists of such prestige as the French had found us wanting?

I wasn't released from the army until Jan. 1946, and the date has meaning in many ways. (Little did I know that three years later, the Smith Act indictment would charge us with conspiring to organize the Communist Party when, in fact, neither I nor Henry Winston, who is still in jail on this charge, had actually been in the country at that time.) It did take me months to convince myself that Earl Browder was wrong in his view of the postwar world. Had I been home in those months, I guess I would have gone along with the hysteria. In subsequent years, I became as staunchly "anti-Browder" as any.

Thousands of Communists stayed in the Party, despite doubts and disagreements, because they felt they were part of something bigger than themselves which could not be wrong: hadn't the Russians overcome overwhelming odds? Weren't the French Communists on the right track? Who were we to doubt?

If our own Party was headed for stormy weather, it was because our opponents were strong. If only we held firm, and searched out the weaknesses within ourselves, we would win. That our view of history needed re-appraisal, that the Soviet Union had the deepest kind of problems of her own, that things were not as simple as they seemed in Ohio years before—such questions I could not face until, of all places, jail.

It was in Atlanta Penitentiary—to which I had gone firmly, with a certain pride, holding the handcuffs high, sarcastically, for all the photographers to see—that problems thrust themselves upon me which could not be brushed aside.

In Atlanta, Looking Out

Prison is a lonely place even if you share a cell with seven other men, one of them an amiable drug addict, another a car thief from Missouri, another a bank robber from Kentucky, sleeping on double-decker cots, with a solitary toilet bowl in the middle of a 10-by-15 room. That's what prisons are for—to isolate prisoners and break them down.

In itself, prison had no visible effect. I knew why I was there. As a leader of my Party, I took its tough times as part of its destiny. The Smith Act was just the legal device with which to imprison the Communists for their ideas, and in doing that, to terrorize Americans of many different views. And terrorized they were.

Few Americans protested the Supreme Court's decision on June 4, 1951, even though millions applauded six years later when the court all but vindicated us, without apologizing for the many years taken unjustly from so many men and women.

Hardly a voice was head from the trade unions we had helped to build. How many of those Chevrolet workers in the big plant just outside the prison on the southeast of Atlanta even knew who we were? And the Party's own voice was muffled, many of its leaders hiding. Not much of an amnesty campaign ever got under way, though brave people tried. I could not help compare it all with the days of Debs. . . .

Confident as I was that history would bring justice to our side, five years of Atlanta (with 16 months off for good behavior while I worked at the cement-mixer and other jobs) had a deep effect on me, for reasons quite apart from anything physical.

I went over the Foley Square trials in my mind, blow by blow, re-argued with the lawyers, with the judge. In the "yard," I saw Eugene Dennis every day. Later, after his capture in the ill-fated "underground," Bob Thompson joined us. We talked endlessly—of what we might have

done better in the past, what we could do in the future, what the day's news meant.

I had subscribed to magazines—The Nation, New Republic, The Reporter, and others. The N. Y. Times spread the world before us each day. (I was denied the Daily Worker.) The prison library had many good books, some of which I had been wanting to get at for a long time. I made a special study of the South, reading books like Van Woodward's "Reunion and Reaction," and "Origins of the New South," Key's "Southern Politics," Heard's "A Two Party South," the autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois.

Things were happening abroad which coincided with our behind-the-bars re-appraisal of the Party's work at home. Stalin had died. Within a few days, the "Jewish doctors' plot" was revealed as a hoax. Lavrenti Beria, the Soviet Police chief, was executed, turning out—so it was said—to have been an imperialist spy from way back. Working people in East Berlin demonstrated against the government of which they were supposedly the backbone.

Soviet newspapers were warning about the "cult of the individual." What did this phrase mean if not a retroactive criticism of Stalin himself? Dennis could not see that. If Beria were a rat, how did this jibe with Stalin's intimate reliance upon him. To Dennis, the question was "impermissible."

And if the Soviet Union's peace offensive of those months, which would soon lead to truce in Korea and Indochina, could pick up such scope and imagination, why hadn't that been possible in Stalin's time? We argued, disagreed, returned to the argument. For the virtual inevitability of war was a key idea in our ranks; if it could be receding so fast, maybe our own Party had misjudged this crucial matter. Maybe this pessimistic view of the danger of war and our estimate of impending domestic fascism—the premise on which several co-leaders had gone into the "underground" and taken much of the Party with them—had to be re-examined, too.

This raised questions of a fundamental kind. On top of it all, there were hints of a Soviet change toward Tito's Yugoslavia. Dennis unfortunately had neither eye nor ear for such queries. To me they spoke volumes.

Only once in those four years did I leave Atlanta's walls. I was to testify as the Party's chief witness at the Subversive Activities Control Board, on the McCarran Act charges that the Party had to "register as a foreign agent." My idea was for Dennis to go. How long could he evade facing the public, acting like a Party General Secretary? A complex man, Dennis; he had no fear of prison, and had served longer for his ideals than the rest of us; but he had a terrible inner fright before people.

He refused, and I was flown to Washington, the handcuffs on me

all the time, and I testified for six days. After each session, and every time I went to the bathroom, the manacles went back on my wrists. But these were unimportant handcuffs.

The one question I couldn't answer to my satisfaction, no matter how good my answers sounded to others, was the familiar old one: "name one example in which the American Party ever differed from Soviet policy?"

My testimony, though the chief defense of the Party's record in these proceedings, was not published in pamphlet form, because it was felt I had not sufficiently defended the Communist International, the organization we announced we had left in 1940 and which had itself been dissolved in 1943. Some Party leaders were apparently still reliving it.

As prison libraries go, Atlanta was not bad. It was a great tradition of political prisoners everywhere to make prison their school. I felt the need intensely, to re-study. It was true of so many of us; we thought we knew it all, but this very certainty had kept us from acquiring that far-ranging knowledge which always seemed to me the pride of Marxism. My life as a Communist has meant an education I would not trade with many a man, and yet it was full of gaps, enormous holes.

Much has been made of a report that George Orwell's book, "1984," had a crucial effect on my ideas. This is not quite true. Events which I have described made me receptive for the first time, curious to read such a book, curious to understand why so many anti-Communists found this book so illuminating.

Why was it that we had gotten into a frame of mind where we would not even read a book by an opponent, whatever our ultimate judgment of it? Was that not stultifying our own capacities?

Orwell's book is a depressing work, full of despair for humanity. It repelled me by its meager faith in man. It drove its point to a bizarre conclusion. It was saying something I could not accept, yet I could not evade, either.

No, I did not believe Socialism necessarily led to the dehumanized world he described. But I had come myself to believe that Socialism did have to be humanized.

I can remember the excitement, our feeling of triumph, as Dennis and I left Atlanta prison on a sunny morning, March 1, 1955. Reporters, friends, comrades were there. The children in the streets skipped, shouted, laughed. I had not seen kids for four years. I could not tear my eyes from their faces.

But we were not yet free. Ten months of parole kept me from returning to The Daily Worker, and to satisfy parole conditions, I took a job in a Long Island plastic plant. Yet I was free enough to meet socially with friends, and scores—even hundreds—came with their own

stories, their worries, their doubts and despair. This was a whole year before the Khrushchev report.

The Communist movement was in a deeper crisis than I had imagined, and events moved swiftly; within a few days, the Russian leaders flew into Belgrade, with unprecedented apologies. I found everyone in the throes of an enormous "intellectual black market." Big political battles had rocked the Party in our absence, revolving around the very same issues which had risen within me, in the prison walls.

Soviet Influence—How It Worked

Were the half million or so Americans who at one time or another joined the Communist Party "agents of a foreign power"? Was the Party itself, in its heyday or its decline, the "tool of conspiracy" and bent on forcible overthrow of the U.S. government? Did it engage in Soviet espionage?

These questions have been thrown at me, and thousands like me, for a generation. More important, the myths surrounding these questions have done our country very great harm. They were the stock-in-trade of McCarthyism and the witch-hunts which the country now realizes were responsible for our lag in education and science. To those who asked such questions in good faith, however, I would say that they are getting nowhere near the real point.

That there has been a decisive influence of the Soviet Union on the American Communist Party is real enough. But it is important to grasp the true nature of that influence if only to understand what is basically false about the "foreign agent" charge.

I remember a long, heated meeting of the C.P.'s national officers only a few months ago. We were debating an article in the Soviet theoretical publication, Kommunist, about our 1957 convention decisions, which had said things all of us knew to be false. The argument was whether we should answer that article, and how.

One officer put it this way:

"We American Communists are in no position to criticize the Soviet Communists. They have just shot Sputnik into the skies. This is a brilliant achievement of Soviet science. When we are able to record such achievements as this, then maybe we can criticize the Russians.

"Until then, we have no right to do so. Even if we are right and they are wrong. . . ."

Even if we are right and they are wrong. . . ." The phrase still haunts me. This is where the Communist dilemma lies.

I remember another one of my former colleagues, a cultivated man with a long record of devoted activity. Someone had remarked in the

course of a meeting that "we have got to tell the truth." To which he replied:

"That kind of thinking belongs in the ministry. It has no place in a Communist Party."

I do not believe the Communist Party was ever a "cloak and dagger conspiracy," and it isn't today. Our defense at the Smith Act trials was sound, when we denied that force and violence would come from us, when we avowed our belief that a peaceful transition to Socialism was possible, and only the resistance of the propertied minority to the majority will might make the defense of Socialism require force.

As for espionage, I have no personal knowledge of it. I was a proclaimed Communist for every bit of the 27 years I was in the Party. During that time, I was never approached by anyone for the purpose of espionage.

I know, of course, that both the U.S. and the Soviet Union engage in it, but I also know that the Communist Party as such was not part of an espionage network. If the Soviet Union ever used members of the American Communist Party for such purposes, it was stupid for doing so—and that the Soviet Union has done stupid things on occasion is quite evident. For one thing, this could only have been a disservice to the Communist Party. If any Communist lent himself to such purposes, he was doing what no American should be doing—just as no Democrat or Republican should either.

In retrospect, it is becoming clear that the hysteria developed in the early '50s around the question of Soviet espionage here did the country more harm than any espionage itself might have done. An atmosphere was created which curtailed civil liberties and drove some of our best scientists out of government. The craze for super-secrecy finally resulted in Soviet scientists knowing more about American science than American scientists themselves. It created the dangerous delusion that Soviet science was incapable of progress unless it stole secrets from us. Moreover, as the years go by and the madness of the cold war recedes, more and more doubts are being raised about various trials.

The problem of Communist relations to the Soviet Union were far more complex than is generally suggested. It had to do with views of world history, with ideas, with an estimate of how American life was evolving. It was the magnetism of the Soviet example, and the Party's failure to distinguish between sympathy for the good things about the Soviet Union and the fact that its example could not be, and should not have been followed in American life, that the trouble lay.

It was this fatal confusion which caused decent men to spurn the very idea of truth itself, and fail to do the things necessary for their own survival as a political force . . . "even if we are right and they are wrong."

The Russian Revolution of 1917 had an enormous effect on Ameri-

cans of a Socialist outlook. It helped bring the Communist movement into being. Socialists opposed the attempt to strangle the Soviet experiment, and rightly so.

But in the legitimate admiration for the achievements of Soviet life (to which many non-Communists are now awakening), the American Communists came to believe that the Russians were the most authoritative, wisest men in the world. That there might be defects, crimes, blunders would not be admitted. The Soviet Communists were supposed to know more than anybody else. They could do no wrong. If they did, they were smart enough to correct themselves.

Our basic assumption for a long time was that revolutionary change in the rest of the capitalist world would follow the Russian pattern. If it had succeeded there, and was well nigh perfect, why not elsewhere?

We defend what we are doing because it was right for them, and was, at the bottom, the only right way for us. We would not grant that any important part of it might be wrong for them, or invalid for us. Our natural sympathy for the Russian Revolution became subtly transformed. Anything they did which might conflict with our own better judgment of our own country could only mean that they were right, and we were wrong.

This was a process of the mind and heart. Nobody pulled strings to accomplish it. It came from deeply good motives. Its consequences were more destructive to the Communist movement than anything the opposition could throw at us.

All this can be compared with the relations between two people, one of whom is forceful, experienced, often brilliant, the other of whom is worshipful, unable to stand on his own feet, glossing over his idol's defects, basking in reflected glory. This is a destructive relationship for both.

What this destructive oversimplification did to the American Communist Party is well-known. It can be traced far back. Its first great harm was shown in the Party's reaction to the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact in August, 1939.

Good arguments can be made to justify the Soviet move, since the attempt to unite with Britain and France against Hitler had failed. The Soviets certainly gained important time, although if it is true, as Khrushchev has said, that Stalin left his country unprepared for the Nazi blow, this argument loses some force. On the other hand, the Soviet Union did lose prestige, which only the extraordinary defense against Hitler was able in part to restore.

Whether or not the Soviet leaders did right, or wrong, the American Communist Party had little justification for "switching" overnight. Our anti-Fascist position which had won us great support and reached its height in our defense of Republican Spain, suddenly gave way to a

"plague on both your houses" policy toward the British-French and Fascist sides. This brought us into conflict with the late President Roosevelt and destroyed our ties with the democratic-labor-liberal alliance of which we were part and with whom we would again join after Pearl Harbor.

We might have pursued an independent policy. We could have continued our emphasis on the Hitler danger to America, without falling into the hysterical sterile anti-Soviet path that many did take, and which the country had to reverse soon enough.

As I think back on it now, my own impulse while in the Army in 1942 to admit the Party had been mistaken—in the letter to President Roosevelt I described yesterday—was really expressing the inner doubts and thought of many Communists and their friends. When 15,000 Party members went into the armed forces, when Communist unionists threw everything we had into victory, this became part of a new effort to become an American radical, working-class, Socialist movement, throwing off the straitjackets of our origins and misconceptions. But this was to be short-lived.

Another nail in the Party's coffin came at the war's end. Whatever changes or refinements were needed in Earl Browder's view of postwar history could have been made by normal discussion and debate. Yet when Jacques Duclos, the French Communist leader, criticized Browder in May, 1945, the Party's reaction was hysterical. Browder was kicked out. It showed we had learned so little. We were still in the grip of the idolatrous relationship to the Communist movement abroad.

This was not only a personal injustice to Browder (although he probably believes now it was the best thing that happened to him). It was an injustice to the Party itself. It showed a deep immaturity. Until we outgrew that, we could not move ahead. In fact, we moved backward very fast.

There is no doubt in my mind that American Communists would have had tough sledding in the postwar world. They were the butt of a vicious attack, intended to terrorize the whole people, and I think American Communists acquitted themselves as well, if not better, than many anti-Communist liberals whom McCarthyism ultimately attacked.

But the Communists might have survived as a political force if it were not for the pell-mell return in the wake of Browder's expulsion to policies that had been discredited in the 20's and abandoned in the '30s.

Wasn't it all summed up in that remark of a Communist leader in 1949, which he immediately admitted was foolish and wrong but which dramatized the trouble:

"I would rather be a lamp post in Moscow," he said, "than Presi-

dent of the United States." That statement has haunted all Communists, whether they heard it or not.

No American Socialist movement can be built on such premises. Only when this approach recedes into history, and an independent American movement is built which is neither infatuated with the Socialist countries nor hysterically hostile to everything about them, as other Socialist movements have been can any progress be made. This was the underlying issue of the bitter fight of the past two years.

How the Party Split

The American Communists were in deep trouble long before Nikita Khrushchev broke the spell of the Stalin era in February, 1956. This is what most party leaders realized when they came out of jail, or hiding in the spring of 1955.

As I have shown in these articles so far, the party's crisis had its own long, twisted roots. Though related to Soviet events, the whole story has to be taken back to 1945, and probably even further back than that, to 1919.

Yet I did not myself realize how badly off we were. For some time, I resisted the logic of my own thinking. Prison makes you think, but you don't see too clearly through prison walls.

My wife Lillian Gates, herself a former leader in the New York Communist organization, had been writing me about a bitter conflict between her colleagues and the Foster leadership in the national office. I didn't take it too seriously.

Upon returning from jail, I learned that the two Daily Worker editors abroad—Joe Clark in Moscow and Joe Starobin in Paris and then Peking—had come back in the summer of 1953 with proposals for drastic changes in the party's course. Both were veterans of the movement. The further they had gotten from home the more clearly they had seen our troubles. But the party leadership would not even hear them out. In protest Starobin, who had been expressing such views for several years, refused to re-register in the party.

These moods were everywhere. The California Communists had been in such conflict with Foster's aides that they conducted their Smith Act trial defense on their own. Most of the party's trade unionists had their own bitter beefs. More and more, they lost confidence in "the center," as we called the national leadership.

Not everyone related their differences and their despair to the central issue—that the party had lost contact with American realities, and had based itself on mistaken premises, mechanically transported from Russian premises. But everyone knew that drastic changes were

needed. There was a new situation in the South. The war danger had receded. McCarthyism was being pushed back. The labor movement was merging. New problems faced us everywhere, as they did the whole people.

Eugene Dennis, general-secretary at that time, had decided in Atlanta that he would press for change. At the first meeting we had a chance to address in public—Jan. 20, 1956, at the Carnegie Hall celebration of The Daily Worker's anniversary—we both quite deliberatedly hinted at new paths, and reappraisals of many theoretical propositions. Some of our listeners were skeptical. Others were jubilant.

Our first national committee meeting in five years—in April, 1956—was devoted to frank talk of the party's crisis which was then sharply outlined against the grim backdrop of the Khrushchev revelations in Moscow. William Z. Foster was much on the defensive. His policies since 1946 were being disproved by events. The Daily Worker opened its columns for a thorough debate, unheard-of in U.S. Communist history for its frankness and honesty, and the anguish with which party members were speaking their minds. Dennis delivered the main report. At last the "left-sectarianism" of the whole decade was out in the open.

Yet the party's leaders were far behind their own members and still further behind events. It might have been possible at that time to hold things together. But Dennis, not to mention Foster, still could not face the meaning of their own history, and the will of their own members.

Much has been said about "three factions" in the American Party over these 30 months. I think this oversimplifies the story. Throughout 1956 and to the convention in February, 1957, most party leaders were in loose agreement on the need for change. The Foster position was consistently outvoted. I agreed to postpone discussion of my own view that a change in "name and form" was necessary. This was a compromise with the position of those who wanted to change the program, but not the party as such. Many of my friends were leaving because they thought I was wrong.

The fact is that the party never split in the sense of the "splits" of the '20s. Instead it decomposed. It disintegrated. The faith and morale of thousands were shot, and they voted, to use a phrase from Lenin "with their feet."

Many left because of the Khrushchev revelations on Stalin. Others left because they could not stomach the atmosphere of bitter recrimination and name-calling. Still others quit because they lost all faith in the leadership and decided the fight to change the party was a hopeless job.

The convention itself resolved on many important changes, at least in words. It decided on a peaceful, constitutional American path to Socialism. It said that Communists had no monopoly on Socialism and that we would join with other Socialist-minded people to form a united

party of Socialism. The old "monolithic" and supercentralized character of the party was modified to establish the right of dissent and the protection of minority views. A new attitude to trade unions was outlined embodying respect for their inqependence and disclaiming a desire to impose our ideas upon them.

Most important of all was the statement of a new attitude to Communists abroad. Relations with other Communist parties and countries were to be fraternal but must include the right of frank criticism where necessary. The theory on which the party had always based itself, the ideas of Marx and Lenin, were henceforth to be interpreted by the American Communists for America and not by Communists abroad for the American party.

Many newspaper reports spoke of this as a "declaration of independence" from Moscow. The advice of Jacques Duclos, the French Communist leader, who twice in 12 years had found it essential to dot all the "I's" and cross the "T's" for the U.S. Communists, was politely received and cordially rejected. The posts of chairman and general secretary were eliminated in favor of a seven-man administrative committee within a larger executive. This was a demotion in itself for Foster and Dennis.

I remember the final scene. The leaders of differing trends rose to pledge themselves to these decisions. As the convention record shows, I spoke with "full confidence in the future" and I said: "We have adopted a program which will enable us to earn the confidence of the American workers and the nation."

Yet, I had strong misgivings. Certainly, what the convention had done was remarkable, almost revolutionary for a Communist party. But it was too little and too late and I seriously doubted whether it would ever be implemented.

The people around Foster had fought against the new policies before the convention and would continue to do so. Those who thought like Dennis were at best lukewarm toward the convention results. They had gone along only because of the pressure of the membership and the fear that they would not be reelected. The Foster-Dennis forces combined had either a majority or a near majority in the leadership, strong enough in any case to paralyze and stymie any efforts to fulfill the promise of the convention. Their following in the party was growing stronger, not because they were attracting new support but because their opponents were leaving by the thousands.

The post-Stalin thaw that had set in the world Communist movement was showing definite signs of freezing over again. This along with many articles in the Soviet press favoring the Foster position discouraged members who had been hopeful of change and made them give up; those who continued to believe in the old way were emboldened.

Benjamin J. Davis Jr., the most prominent Fosterite in the party,

became head of the New York organization. This led to the defection of thousands in New York and drastically changed the whole balance of power in the party nationally since New York was half of the party. From then on it was clear that the bold new program of the convention was still-born.

I now knew that the fight was hopeless, that there could not possibly be a successful outcome. But I determined to stay on as long as I could carry on a fight inside, feeling this could be of real value for the future.

Then the in-fighting took on more bitter forms. The convention decisions began to be sabotaged. Wherever an independent note was struck toward the Soviet Union, as occasionally happened in The Daily Worker, violent campaigns were started against it. When foreign Communists falsified the convention results, the party's national leaders refused to repudiate the falsehoods, though they knew the truth. Only Alan Max of The Daily Worker wrote about it and he was denounced.

The Daily Worker and its staff came under increasing fire, although I tried, as editor-in-chief, to reflect not so much my own opinions as those of the convention as a whole. Many friends were critical of me and of the paper for this retreat as they called it. But it could not appease our opponents. There was one moment last March when the House Un-American Activities Committee had me on the grill, and that was just the occasion when the Foster aides made a strong attempt, though unsuccessful, to force me out.

With each successive National Committee meeting, more and more out-of-town leaders were getting a clearer picture of the morass in the national office. Only a few weeks ago, the California Communists formally charged the top leaders with betraying the convention decisions—a sign of how the truth had become country-wide.

A most shocking example of this is the story of how a proposed letter from the American Party to the Soviet central committee—on the Jewish question—has been allowed to gather dust. It was drafted many months ago, pursuant to the convention's will. This letter called for an official Soviet statement on what had happened to Yiddish-language writers and culture between 1948 and 1952, and for the restoration of Yiddish cultural institutions. The document lies buried in a desk drawer.

Small wonder that a movement which once inspired high idealism on behalf of humanity was falling to pieces. On this issue, no one could plead ignorance any longer.

Speaking of humanity and idealism, the one thing which my former colleagues could not forgive was my attitude toward Joseph Clark, who resigned from the party last September after a vitriolic campaign from people who should have found more important things to do. At that time, I considered Clark mistaken, and said so. But if he were to leave, after 30 years of service in the movement, I felt a staff farewell was

proper. We were parting as friends. Was it not the old practice of calling everyone who left us a traitor and an enemy that accounted in some measure for our failures? My colleagues could not see that.

In this atmosphere, they decided to close down the paper, instead of giving it the support that was still possible. It is an open secret in the party that many thousands of dollars that could have sustained the Daily Worker were withheld from it by sympathizers with the Foster group. After a year of blackmail, they finally took the deadly step.

Most party leaders knew what a breach of ethics this was and where it could lead, but they did nothing. That is why I charge the Daily Worker did not die a natural death. It was murdered. When things had gone this far and this low, it was time to face the realities.

For me the day that the Daily Worker died was the end. It dramatized for all to see what I had known for some time—that for all practical purposes, the Communist Party of the United States of America had ceased to exist.

Where I Stand Now

I did not quit the American Communist Party in order to enlist in the cold war. The ideals which originally attracted me to communism seem to me the ones that give meaning to life, and they are worth trying to realize. I left the Communist Party because it no longer offers a way to further those ideals.

It is doubtful, if you consider what Man is accomplishing in this century, that capitalism is necessarily the last word in human wisdom. America can do much better than it has been doing, and Socialism seems to me the necessary and inevitable way of resolving what is wrong with this society, while preserving what is best within it.

Though a lot of re-thinking is needed on how our country will come to a cooperative society, and I feel the personal need of this re-thinking, I cannot pretend that I don't have strong convictions on some pretty essential matters.

If the American Communist Party has gone through a long crisis, it is surely true that all political trends are also in a crisis. Our society feels a crisis in every realm—in its moral outlook, its economic affairs, its politics. The Democratic Party is hopelessly split between its Dixiecrat and liberal wings, and the Republicans are deeply divided as between the "Old Guard" and those who are looking for what they call "modern Republicanism." And much has been written on the lack of effectiveness of American liberalism.

All of this results from a time of rapid change, of great conflict and turmoil, of technological advances outstripping our political forms

and habits of thought. Vast new problems have been thrust forward which demand fresh approaches, new solutions.

The fallacy and irrationality of capitalist society still lies, as I see it, in that production depends on the profit of the few rather than the use and welfare of all of us. In this fabulous new era of atomic energy, automation, and the conquest of space, production for private profit of the few becomes incompatible with needs of society as a whole. Events are proving that what may be good for General Motors is not good for the general welfare. What might be best for the country is to take over Big Business, which is after all the outcome of everybody's work and talent but has become the domain of a handful.

The present recession is admitted to be arising from over-capacity, the over-expansion of productive equipment relative to the immediate market. It is hard to argue that this is Man's highest state of intelligent management of economic affairs, since at least one-fifth of the nation is poorly fed and badly housed and not well clothed. Our country is half-educated and unprotected against diseases.

The crisis in education has broken on us with great force, but it has been long in the making. Its reasons lie deep in the values of a society which holds the making of money to be so important, instead of the making of better men and women. A business society can hardly inspire either young people or their teachers to the idealism and the devotion to truth which the scientific age demands. In the long run, science is bound to revolt against making the means of destroying mankind when its true function is to liberate mankind. It cannot be served by the aims and ways of business society; that is why the Eisenhower Administration, spokesman for Big Business, cannot get away from military obsessions and cannot really do what has to be done for re-educating America for the space age.

The failure of American capitalism is most dramatic with respect to the inequality and discrimination the Negro people still face. This cancer persists because huge profits are still coined from racism. Superprofits are made from the lower wage levels of Negro working people which are bound—unless racism goes—to affect the wage levels of all. Take the profit out of Jim-Crow and you remove its main bulwark.

And the ultimate insanity of this society is found in its reliance on an arms economy. If capitalism cannot be harnessed to the goals of peace and cannot function without massive preparations for war, then what justifies its continued existence? Nobody can be deader than dead. Yet the arms race is increasing deadly weapons and the means for destroying civilization itself. The time is now to outlaw war as an instrument of national policy and to make competitive co-existence the basis of settling all outstanding problems between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

Many Americans will agree with me on these points, but they do

not go along with my conviction that a Socialist society would be better for us. Until a majority does feel this way, it seems to me that the immediate need is for popular regulation, for control, and for curbs upon Big Business. So long as the interests of Big Business dominate both political parties, such controls will not be enacted. A new political advance is needed to bring the representatives of the working people, Negro and white, the farmers, the liberal middle class into Congress itself.

Political democracy does not come automatically with the transfer of production from private to public control. Power can be abused; tyrannies can arise in planned societies, and eternal vigilance is the price of liberty for Socialism, too.

To fulfill its promise, a Socialist society demands political democracy on a level higher than anything which exists in the most advanced capitalist countries. As I see it, Socialism provides the framework for preserving what is most precious in capitalist democracy, and offers us a far greater expansion of democracy than is possible today.

The most important fact about the Soviet Union lies in the way one of the world's most backward countries has been transformed within the short span of 40 years. But it is far from making a corresponding political advance. The Soviet people have far to go in acquiring control over the selection of their leaders and their policies. They need freedom of discussion, and a mechanism for choosing between alternative leaders and policies.

Today, the Communist Party has become irrelevant, and it is not my objective to spend time trying to get members of the party to leave it. That is a decision for each individual to make, or not. There are larger issues and problems that ought to concern us all. But I consider that the Communist Party's right to exist and to function needs to be defended because to violate that is to endanger the liberties of all. This is where the early freedom for my former colleagues, Henry Winston, Gil Green and Irving Potash, is so important: they are the last of the Smith Act victims.

America would be on higher moral ground in opposing the imprisonment of Milovan Djilas and the writers of Hungary for their ideas if the imprisonment of men for their ideas in this country were ended.

As for my personal political plans, I do not profess to have all the answers. After being so certain, and dogmatic, on most of what I did for a quarter of a century, I am not inclined to make hasty decisions. I want to talk with people—those who know me, and those who don't. I want to do some listening, some reflecting, some study.

I am convinced that American life would benefit from an effective and courageous radicalism, for there are problems that cannot be solved without getting to the roots of them. But I do not want to go from one

sectarianism to another. The answer to the present splinters on the Left is not to form still another one.

When a new American radicalism arises it will be acceptable to substantial sections of the labor movement, of the Negro people. Its Americanism will be unchallengeable. It will act within our constitutional framework. It will not go down the dead-end street of a sterile and negative anti-Sovietism which has proved harmful to America; neither will it be unduly influenced by Socialist movements abroad. It cannot be uncritical of Socialist countries nor obsessed with their failings. It will have to encourage a climate of peace and interchange in the course of which freedoms can best expand here and the liberalization now proceeding in the Communist countries, though with ups and downs—can become a certainty.

A new American Left will possess the idealism and morality that young people are bound to bring to it. It wil be bolder, more creative, more imaginative than what we knew in our younger years. It will have confidence in America, and America will place confidence in it. Such a Left will build on the best thought of a rich past, and will not fear to learn from every seeker after the truth, Socialist or not.

Such an American Left will strive to make, not only our own nation, but the world itself—indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Published by John Gates

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