

Politics, Paranoia, and Poly: The McCarthy-Era Red Scare and Its Impact on
California State Polytechnic School, San Luis Obispo

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by

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Introduction

Commie, Red, Pinko, Ruskie, bread-line potato-drinker; all of these are slurs made by Americans towards communists or communist sympathizers during the Cold War. Although communism is only a political theory designed by Karl Marx that predicts inevitable class warfare leading to publically owned land and shared labor,¹ when this theory was applied in countries like Russia during the Cold War, it proved to be damaging to its citizens. The United States emerged from World War II as a dominating power, economically wealthy from wartime spending,² and seemed to prosper in comparison to the U.S.S.R; which had suffered heavy losses during the war by serving as the main ground troops against Germany. As a result of these disparities, the U.S. took up a campaign focused on the “American way.” A majority of Americans held anti-communist sentiments due to the perceived immorality of the system. These prejudices influenced the university system. Encouraged by fear of political corruption and suspicion, liberally inclined individuals and organizations were identified as “political undesirables on campus” and either marginalized or sometimes removed from campuses.³

There are studies of the effect McCarthyism had on administration and university curriculum.⁴ Coming out of World War II, the U.S. developed an attitude of authority over those countries that had been defeated or suffered severe damage. The War had profited the United States by taking the nation out of the depression through wartime spending, solidifying their

¹ “Communism.” oxforddictionaries.com. Oxford Dictionary. Web. January, 2016.

² Noam Chomsky et al., *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 171-184

³ Ellen Schrecker. *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. 339-340

⁴ Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities*. New York: Oxford University Press 1986; Naom Chomsky, *The Cold War and The University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years*. New York: The New Press, 1997; Sigmund Diamond, *Compromised Campus*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

stance as a dominant world power, and building up an impressive military.⁵ This arrogance evolved into an aversion to foreign influence, which was capitalized on by demagogues such as Senator Joe McCarthy. He took the preexisting prejudices held by Americans that the U.S. was in danger of being tainted by communism, and used them to become a figurehead for the cleansing of the American government from communists. A majority of America seemed to support him. A Gallup Poll taken in 1954 indicated that 50% of the American people held a “favorable opinion” of him with only 29% holding an unfavorable opinion. The rest declined to state, and those with an unfavorable opinion were very unlikely to speak out due to their fear of being falsely accused. As Rovere has written, “there was a time when just about everybody who depended upon the favor of the people lived in fear of him.”⁶ Fear that standing against McCarthy’s campaign would end in being labeled a communist extended into the whole Federal Government. No authority wanted to appear soft towards liberal tendencies, or else they may be accused themselves. In relation to public universities, curriculums adapted and professors modified their syllabi to avoid controversial topics.² Unfounded accusations were made, and students feared the accusations and the effects they could have on their future. Political leaders like Senator Joe McCarthy instilled anxiety and distrust into the American public.

In the Universities, this movement of distress and panic caused intellectual restriction and sometimes suppression. Ellen Schrecker’s, in her book *No Ivory Tower*, discusses alleged Marxists and its supporters being marginalized or fired from schools. She points out that “the academy, an institution ostensibly dedicated to intellectual freedom, collaborated in curtailing that freedom” with the Federal Government. Also in this book Schrecker mentions the American

⁵ Noam Chomsky, “The Cold War and the University,” in *The Cold War & The University: Toward An Intellectual History of the Postwar Years*, 171-173.

⁶ Richard H. Rovere, *Senator Joe McCarthy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 22-24.

Youth for Democracy as a target. And although the AYD's appearance on campuses reveal that there was a left-wing alternative to the Republican political mainstream, their continued struggle to stay on campus supports Schrecker's idea that the administration wanted no communistic affiliations tied to their school. In Michigan, a university president consulted with the FBI and was told "that AYD chapters are communist youth recruiting center." Queens College rushed to get the offending organization off their campus stating "all un-American groups and the professors who tolerate them must go." Colorado ruled to ban groups like the AYD because they were "under the influence of the communist party."⁷ Any and all groups and organizations accused of being communist or "un-American" were seen as suspicious and often banned from college campuses.

Another source mentions the dismissal of alleged communists. Howard Zinn, in his essay "The Politics of History in the Era of the Cold War", writes about the Rutgers University Board of Trustees who unanimously voted to fire two professors after they were found to have liberal tendencies and were accused as communist sympathizers. The Board of Trustees' justification was that with "60 percent of the budget coming from the state, the university 'cannot offend public opinion.'"⁸

This paper will focus on the student body's response to the propagated paranoia of the Cold War, specifically at California State Polytechnic School. The Cold War spans a large era, from 1947 until the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, so this argument will only focus on the early years of the Cold War and how these prejudices emerged and affected Cal Poly. I will utilize the Cal Poly student newspaper, *El Rodeo*, to deduce how students felt towards the

⁷ Ellen Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities*, 84-86.

⁸ Howard Zinn, "The Politics of History in the Era of the Cold War," in *The Cold War & the University* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 41.

“communist threat.” I will also use the statewide dispute over controversial speakers being invited to campuses to reflect the Cal Poly administrations’ role in student life. School class catalogs will be referenced to express the desire to instill American ideologies in their students. Students and faculty on the campus of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo had several reactions to the nationwide political paranoia and fear of the era: university curriculum began focusing on American practices and history, administration and staff endeavored to avoid suspicion from the Federal government by adapting to the political climate, and the student body voiced their opinions but remained compliant in fear of having their reputations and future prospects tarnished with accusations, in reaction to this anti-Communist fear.

University Curriculum

Cal Poly San Luis Obispo’s class courses adapted due to the United States’ involvement in World War II and the nationalism that accompanied it. In 1938, before Germany had invaded Poland and Europe had not officially declared war, Cal Poly majors were required to take only one general American government class called “American Institutions.”⁹ But by 1941, four American politics classes were made into required courses to graduate for all majors. These new classes did not yet have a designated professor and were labeled “instructor to be assigned”, revealing that these were hastily instated in reaction to the changing patriotic mindset of the nation. The course descriptions include the “study of the dictatorial techniques and ideologies (...) in modern totalitarian states” and “emphasis is placed upon the American governmental approach to the solution of contemporary political and economic problems.”¹⁰ There is an obvious and sudden shift in the school’s desire to educate and instill pride in the younger

⁹ *California State Polytechnic School Curricular Information*, May 1, 1938, series 20 no. 4, California Polytechnic School, pg. 50-139.

¹⁰ *California State Polytechnic School Curricular Information*, May 1, 1940-41, series 22 no. 3, pg. 46-103

generation as the United States prepared to go to war. As well as courses being added to reflect growing nationalism as the U.S. prepared for a possible war, the Cal Poly campus accommodated a Naval Flight Preparatory School from 1943-1946.¹¹ The combination of a military mentality and the enforcement of American education ideals most likely produced a strong sense of patriotism. This pride is what would lead to the exclusion and fear of foreign influence.

On December 8, 1941, the U.S. officially declared war on Japan after the attack on Pearl Harbor and soon was involved in the entire world war when Nazi Germany and the Axis powers declared war on the United States on December 11-13, 1941.¹² The repercussions of U.S. nationalism during the war and post-war pride carried through for decades. Into the 1950's and 60's, the American government and public displayed a sense of omnipotence and harbored a distaste for foreign or unorthodox practices.¹³ The rise of a demagogue such as Senator Joe McCarthy is proof of aforesaid prejudices held by Americans. Specifically at Cal Poly University, this is revealed from a letter sent to President Julian A. McPhee from a local teacher voicing his concern over the lack of education on the differences between liberal democratic principles in the U.S. and communistic practices and how they are being implemented in modern countries. President McPhee responds by listing the general education classes on politics required by all 32 majors to take. However, the classes instated in 1941 were still in place and no new global affairs classes had been added to the curriculum. Although McPhee was attempting to prove that the University did require students to take a class concerning foreign politics, the class itself was called "United States in World Affairs", so even this class that

¹¹ Kennedy, "How to Work for the Navy on Dry Land," from *Learn By Doing*, pg 83.

¹² *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, January 29, 1016, assessed February 25, 2016, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007306>.

¹³ Ellen W. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities*.

included other political thought only did so in the context of American policies.¹⁴ The United States' nationalistic tendencies that resurged during World War II and after continued to thrive and make an appearance at the University level.

Administrative Action

Cal Poly's administration's reaction to the governmental anxiety over foreign or unconventional influence is derived from their participation in the state wide dispute concerning speakers that would be permitted on campuses. The general impression the administrative body gives during this time of suspicion and inquiry from the American public and federal government is that they wished to remain unnoticed. Cal Poly's administration did not want to call attention to the campus. As a result, there were not many radical events or disputes. Although, there were actions taken to prevent communistic associations, revealing the fear of being labeled too liberal or sympathetic to a communist cause. An example of this is when President McPhee denied a proposal from the Business Club to have James Hoffa as a speaker. In 1962, James "Jimmy" Hoffa was the President of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and had been tried in Federal Court for conspiracy. He was most known for his involvement in the mob, and as a labor union activist.¹⁵ President McPhee stated in his response that he didn't wish to have a speaker of "such questionable character" associated with Cal Poly as it could lead to "poor publicity."¹⁶ In contrast, President McPhee responded to the Young Republican's Club request for speakers with approval.¹⁷ He held no issue for the Republican speakers, including Richard Nixon who

¹⁴ Letter to John M. Malovic from Julian A. McPhee, set July 10, 1961, folder 144.02, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University.

¹⁵ "Jimmy Hoffa Biography," *The Biography.com*, Accessed March 12, 2016.
<http://www.biography.com/people/jimmy-hoffa-9341063#personal-life>

¹⁶ Response to memo from Dale Andrews, sent September 27, 1962. Accessed February 1, 2016, folder 144.02, Campus Speakers Communism, 1961-62.

¹⁷ List of all speakers to appear before a colleges events, clubs, and other formal and informal groups for both the Kellogg and San Luis Obispo Campuses during Fall Quarter, 1961.

was a supporter of Senator McCarthy¹⁸, but refused to allow the Democratic or liberal speakers' entrance. The issue of which speakers to bar from college campuses was shared by all the State Universities in California. An article in the *Evening Tribune* from San Diego, California discusses the January 19th decision by the Board of Trustees to allow each school to take measures to "prevent subversion and foster beliefs in American Institutions", in the words of Chancellor Gallagher. Also noted by the Chancellor was the Trustees' sense of duty to "build and defend America."¹⁹ The measures to prevent subversion at Cal Poly can be seen in the extensive protocol added to the Employees' Handbook for approving and admitting speakers. The original rule, 707.4, was a single sentence long and required only notification and a casual approval from the President and teacher in charge of the club. Proposed additions to this rule were two pages long and biased towards preventing liberal speakers from appearing on campus. It included an added rule, section 711.15 subsection b, that "controversial speakers such as (1) Political extremists (2) Notorious persons, e.g., persons espousing a behavior clearly out of range of the normal living pattern" will not be approved to be invited to campus.²⁰ The administration clearly desired to keep Cal Poly's student body and image away from affiliations with anything out of the norm. There was no obvious resistance, at least recorded, that occurred on campus by the administration to prevent conforming. Fear of being labeled and persecuted as a sympathizer or having liberal tendencies was extreme. Cal Poly's administration imitated the other state schools and complied with the political pressures put upon the school systems.

¹⁸ Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 131.

¹⁹ News Services, "Colleges Get Red Directive," *Evening Tribune* (San Diego, CA), June 20, 1962.

²⁰ Regulations governing visiting speakers in Employees' Handbook of policies and procedures, section 711.15 subsection b, folder 144.02, Campus Speakers Communism, 1961-62.

Student Reaction

Responses of the student body at Cal Poly in this paper are measured primarily using the school newspaper of the time, *El Rodeo*. The editor of the university newspaper in 1946, John M. Patterson, provided a weekly column on controversial events occurring on Cal Poly's campus and often about other campuses' proceedings. From these pieces, in which Patterson often expresses to the reader that all of the *El Rodeo* staff agrees with said opinion, it is possible to deduce the effects McCarthyism had on knowledgeable students at Cal Poly. In a column published in 1946, Patterson writes on his incredulity at the growing paranoia around political thoughts; writing that "you mention Russia and you're labeled a communist." Patterson goes on to describe the nature of man as being prone to discrimination and hate. "Up to a few years ago man was relatively safe from mass destruction. Now he holds the formula by which he can blow the earth to kingdom come."²¹ This rather serious and cynical article in the Cal Poly newspaper reveals the fear of the devastation nuclear weapons could cause as demonstrated in World War II. This article was written before the USSR developed their own nuclear weapon in 1949, which changed the American public's attitude from alarm of their own country's power to fear of mutually assured destruction.

The Cal Poly newspaper also commented on the unabashed discrimination and suppression of liberals on other campuses. Specifically discussing the American Youth for Democracy club, which had a presence on many college campuses nationwide. It was categorized as a communist organization despite its vehement denials that it held no communist affiliations. Patterson defends the AYD's right to free speech, including political thought, by referencing the Bill of Rights and stating that "college is the place to acquire information." He

²¹ John M. Patterson, "It's a Man's World," *El Rodeo*, February 18, 1946, 2.

clearly stated that he did not sympathize or in any way identify himself or the newspaper staff with communism or the USSR, but continued to defend the AYD's right to exist.²² This article's unbiased perspective proves that not every American student supported the anti-communist movement. However, by clearly setting the newspaper staff apart from any communistic affiliations, it demonstrated an awareness of people's tendency to attribute anyone who disagreed with the Federal government as a threat. This proved to be necessary after another piece was written by Patterson just two months later in which he described the *El Rodeo* staff's disapproval of the procedures of the Congressional Committee on Un-American Activities. The Congressional Committee had been shown conducting hearings on newsreels at the Fremont theater in San Luis Obispo. This article also expressed condemnation over Colorado University's termination of the AYD on their campus due to University President Stearn's belief that the club was a front for communist activities. Quite avidly, Patterson stated that the loss of protection over an organization's right to free speech, as set by precedent and in the constitution, was indication that "the democracy as we understand it has failed."²³ This statement, which questioned the Federal Government's means of protecting the rights of citizens, was risky at the time. And although the *El Rodeo* staff expressed themselves as being unbiased, not all of the student body shared their view. In the week following Patterson's condemning article on the loss of justice in the United States legal system, he mentioned in his weekly article that the newspaper had received negative responses. Patterson, attempted to remain neutral, and stated that "we won't complain about all the things we have been called since the article appeared."²⁴ The letters to the editor containing the opinions of these individuals were not saved; however, the

²² John M. Patterson, "Comes the Revolution," *El Rodeo*, February 27, 1947, 2.

²³ John M. Patterson, "Communism—Democracy?" *El Rodeo*, April 10, 1947, 4.

²⁴ John M. Patterson, "This and That." *El Rodeo*, April 17, 1947, 2.

implication that the staff was called derogatory names is evidence that some students openly disagreed, and felt comfortable and justified being vocal about their opinions.

In 1948, Laundry G. Hall wrote in the re-named *El Mustang* Cal Poly student newspaper on the “Red purge” that the University of Washington had experienced at the end of July that year. He used a sarcastic and incredulous tone when describing the trials held by the “state legislature all-Republican Little Un-American Activities committee.” One hundred and fifty professors were accused of “being all shades from pink to red” and many went to trial. Hall wittily warns the campus that an event like that was not outside of the realm of possibility for Cal Poly. “The liberals on campus (...) who believe in their right to free speech (...) will find that they too may be put under the klieg-lights.”²⁵ There was clearly an awareness of the dangers faced by being liberal. To bring attention to personal opinions that did not align with the Republican views of the time was to incriminate oneself. This knowledge and fear of being labeled as a “Red” is what appears to be what prevented students from formally mounting protests. The student newspaper at Cal Poly gives the impression that not all students agreed with the political mainstream of the time, but remained mostly quiet due to the fear of being persecuted for their political views.

Conclusion

At the end of the Second World War the United States was a world power, with a newfound authority in diplomacy, industry, and military. A formerly Euro-centric United States began to feel superior after Europe’s “collapse” and refocused on the American lifestyle. The U.S.S.R., an ally of the U.S. during the war, was broadcasted as a communist threat. Foreign practices, like Soviet Russian communism, were shunned and feared. With the invention of

²⁵ Laundry G. Hall, “It Could Happen Here.” *El Mustang*, August 27, 1948, 2.

nuclear weapons, political hostilities running high, and the American public's devotion to becoming purely American, the emergence of policies and politicians that utilized the panicky political climate was certain. They warped the political theory into a contagious disease that had the potential to decimate the American way of life. Demagogues and their programs targeted universities because the school system was seen as an opportunity to instill in young Americans the model for an idyllic American life. Some also found it was a potential ground zero for communism to begin and spread.

The campus of California Polytechnic School of San Luis Obispo changed curriculum due to the growing influence of U.S. nationalism, the administration attempted to comply with cultural and political norms, and the student body avoided large or public dissent towards the government.

From the fear of being dubbed communist, Cal Poly's goal was to appear amenable to government rulings and go unnoticed, and therefore remain blameless. Although many individuals did not adopt the unyielding belief that communism was an epidemic, they feared opposing it because it more than likely would lead to being labeled a sympathizer or communist activist. Classes were added to show that Cal Poly was refocusing on educating the next generation on American values. Administration did not actively suppress liberal ideas out of their own beliefs that communism was a danger to the American youth, but out of necessity to conform and comply with the government's demands. Cal Poly students only openly expressed their disapproval with the U.S. government through the student newspaper, and never held rallies, riots, or protests.

Proliferated suspicion and abhorrence of communism spurred an era of fear that lasted for decades. This fear was not only of external influences corrupting America and communist spies

hiding among the general public, but also of being suspected of communist ties. This era's pro-conformity and restrictive practices reverberated into future generations, and it can be argued still affects modern day United States.

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