

THE MCCARTHY YEARS INSIDE
THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE

By

John W. Ford *

* The writer, John W. Ford, is a retired Foreign Service Officer. Over twenty-seven years ago Mr. Ford held the position in the Department of State which today is that of Deputy Assistant Secretary for Security. Mr. Ford occupied his position at the height of the campaign of the late Senator Joseph McCarthy against alleged communists in the U. S. Government and at the time was under frequent subpoena by McCarthy, various Congressional committees and a New York Grand Jury. He was threatened by the McCarthy Committee staff with contempt of Congress for alleged interference with a Congressional witness who took to the McCarthy Committee material from security files of the Department on some of our highest-ranking Foreign Service Officers. Eventually Mr. Ford was placed on indefinite probation and removed from his position.

Few people who lived through the "McCarthy" era in the Department of State can ever forget the fear, intimidation and sense of outrage which permeated Foggy Bottom. As an officer of the Foreign Service (now retired), I found myself caught up in that political whirlwind in which reputations were placed in jeopardy, integrity questioned, and disloyalty frequently presumed rather than proven.

All that most of us had as our guide in that period were our own moral principles and convictions and above all our belief that the American people would demand fair play and due process. In the long run this guidance proved correct. In the short run though, many fine, loyal, decent, courageous officers of our domestic and foreign service suffered frightful traumas.

The public mood of the United States in the early 1950's was hostile to diplomacy generally and to diplomats specifically, a situation we tend to forget but one brought home to me with frightening suddenness on my return from Paris to Washington in late 1951. ABC Anchorman Frank Reynolds captured a part of that mood most vividly this past Foreign Service Day when he observed that his audience "needed no reminder of the painful fact that distinguished public servants, foreign service officers of great integrity, have in the past been punished and even banished from the service for daring to report to Washington what Washington did not wish to hear, and reporting with detachment and accuracy and sometimes indeed with prophesy the meaning of political and military events abroad that did not support the domestic political positions of higher officials in this country."

It was a period when Senator Joseph McCarthy had reached the height of his power and he was feared by the highest echelons of the United States Executive. "Positive loyalty" was demanded by our highest officials in the Department of State. As happened in my case and that of other colleagues, following an appearance before Senator McCarthy there was unleashed a flood of letters and postcards directed toward "unfriendly" witnesses and containing the repeated taunts of "communist", "traitor", and "red rat."

In March of 1951, I was on special assignment to the USSR in the combined interest of the British, Canadian and United States governments and their embassies in Moscow -- to search for and hopefully uncover the latest clandestine listening device being used by the Soviets -- a miniature electronic microphone, activated by a radio from some distance away. My travelling companion, Joseph Bezjian, worked for me as electronics technician. Months later he was honored by the Department of State for his fine work which lead to the discovery of an advanced miniature listening device hidden in the Great Seal of the United States -- a wooden replica hanging in Spasso House, the Ambassador's official residence.

This seal was expertly carved, and beneath the eagle's beak were barely visible pin holes made by a jeweler's drill to admit voice waves to the diaphragm of the miniature microphone. For this and other ultimately successful assignments I was "rewarded" with a Washington job -- one which today is that of Deputy Assistant Secretary for Security. Little did I realize then what a return to Washington would mean with Senator Joseph McCarthy producing random lists of alleged communists within the Department of State and the Foreign Office.

First, however, with the late "Chip" Bohlen, who would soon become a prominent target of the McCarthy campaign, and with key officials of the Department of State, I conducted briefings concerning the Moscow "find".

The most memorable of these briefings was with Secretary of State Dean Acheson who also was to become McCarthy's favorite target. Secretary Acheson spent an hour with me taking apart the miniature device about the circumference of a quarter, and of one inch thickness, with its diaphragm, piston, and small antenna. He was fascinated and he told me "I want to make sure I know how to take it apart and reassemble it so when I am with President Truman this afternoon, I can show him how skilled I am." Later on when I saw photos of Mr. Acheson in his carpentry shop at his home meticulously carving furniture, I recalled the sure hand of Secretary Acheson taking apart this small piece of Soviet electronic technology.

As I settled into the Washington job the cold war was raging in full. The laws of evidence that I had learned in law school were being totally disregarded, and replaced by massive presumption of guilt -- from personal as well as institutional associations. The portfolio of security situations which I had to confront immediately looked like this:

- Upwards of 2000 personnel on Department of State rolls, who had never been investigated other than through the use of a form letter to schools, employers and the like. This practice came to public attention following the suicide of the Department of State Officer in charge of the Finnish Desk, who using his bathrobe belt, hanged himself in his Georgetown home. A Congressional inquiry ensued and General Hershey, head of the Selective Service and I were called before a Congressional committee to review the files of the deceased and testify as to the reason for his being found unfit for military service, and the absence of a full background investigation on him by the Department of State.
- The McCarthy Committee made known it was ready to subpoena me regarding alleged American citizen communists in the United Nations Secretariat. Fortunately, I was able to have this inquiry taken over by the late Congressman Kenneth Keating, subsequently U. S. Ambassador to India and to Israel, who handled the matter with objectivity and fairness.

- The case of the high-ranking Department of State official, who with highly classified documents in the trunk of his automobile, ran into a telephone pole one evening in early 1953 on returning home from a cocktail party. With detention by the Virginia police this incident received major publicity and Secretary of State Dulles ordered a full inquiry by my office.
- A suicide note, left by a Voice of America employee who killed himself by jumping in front of a truck in New York City rather than appear before the McCarthy Committee and subject himself and his family (his suicide note said) to unproven charges of disloyalty which the hearings before the Committee would entail.
- The young officer from the Department's personnel office who was disowned by his neighbors and friends and forced to change the locale of his residence following an appearance before McCarthy.
- An anonymous letter sent to the Department containing the names of seventeen officers of the Department and the Foreign Service, alleging that they were "security risks". This letter was also sent to Drew Pearson of the Washington Merry-go-Round, and to Senator Joseph McCarthy, prompting demands for full investigations by my office.
- The case of "Chip" Bohlen, whose appointment as our Ambassador to Moscow was held up by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on grounds of loyalty and security questions in his file.

Shortly before he died, Ambassador "Chip" Bohlen sent me a letter commenting on the recollections of the McCarthy period I had forwarded to him, recollections which he said he would keep as a remembrance of "those disagreeable but nevertheless interesting times". No doubt Ambassador Bohlen found amusing my portrayal of his "clearance" procedure which took place in Secretary Dulles' office.

Senator Sparkman is the only other living witness to the Bohlen "clearance" procedure which took place in a meeting with Secretary Dulles in early 1953.

Senator Joseph McCarthy and certain other members of Congress questioned the nomination by the Eisenhower Administration of "Chip" Bohlen to be the next Ambassador to the Soviet Union. The so-called "evidence" to question his appointment took several forms: innuendoes in his security file or in FBI reports, the "raw" material which so frequently constitutes part of basic background investigations. The most highly advertised bit of "evidence" was a tape recording, allegedly containing Ambassador Bohlen's voice. This tape purportedly implicated him in activities which made him a security risk. Secretary Dulles called me to his office, where assembled on his conference table were the Security Office file and the FBI reports on Ambassador Bohlen. I was instructed to bring a tape recorder.

As I entered Secretary Dulles' office, I was introduced to Senators Taft and Sparkman, and the Secretary with a flourish instructed me to review with the Senators the files on Mr. Bohlen. The Secretary noted, however, that allowing the Senators to see these files was "without prejudice to the concept of executive privilege".

Neither Senator found anything incriminating in the files and then we proceeded with the tape recording. Unfortunately the extension cord for the recorder was too short, the quality of the tape was poor and the volume potential of the recorder was low. This meant that Senators Taft, Sparkman and I had to lay down on the floor of Secretary Dulles' office in front of his desk and listen to the voice recorded. I certified in a document that it was not Ambassador Bohlen's voice. That was also evident to all present. Shortly thereafter Ambassador Bohlen was cleared and took off for his new assignment.

Nerves were constantly on edge in the Department. This led to over-reaction whenever relatively minor incidents occurred. An illustration is the reaction of the White House over the leak of a letter President Rhee of Korea had addressed to President Eisenhower which was submitted telegraphically to the Department via our Embassy in Seoul. President Eisenhower had read the contents of the letter in the Washington press well in advance of its transmittal by the Department to the White House.

As a result, instructions handed to me by Secretary Dulles early one morning were: "by sundown today I want to know who was responsible for this leak." The usual mad scramble occurred with dozens of agents trying to interview anyone and everyone who might have had the cable cross his desk, an admittedly futile exercise.

But for once luck was with me. By five fifteen that afternoon when I was ushered into Secretary Dulles' office I was able to inform him we had solved the case. "The proximate cause of the leak was you, Mr. Secretary," I said, explaining that on receipt of the telegraphic letter from President Rhee in the Department, he called in the Korean Ambassador to discuss its contents. The Ambassador in turn had spoken to the press shortly thereafter. My gratitude remains eternal to the newspaperman who revealed to me how he got his story.

There was a general sentiment and belief in the Department during the McCarthy years that there was telephone and mail censorship. And with good reason, considering for example one of the "happenings":

A famous lock expert out of New York City was secretly introduced into a fifth-floor office of the Department of State in early 1953 at the request of the Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs. He was to practice his trade on a four-drawer combination Shaw Walker safe, whose contents evidently were of some alleged security concern. But this surreptitious break-in artist bungled the job so badly that considerable panic set in as the hours approached sunrise and the damage to the safe became impossible to hide.

Time almost ran out. A new drawer was substituted. The safe contents were never checked. Today, beneath the Potomac River in whatever is left of a diplomatic pouch bag, lies a twisted, badly-mangled drawer dumped off the 14th Street Bridge.

Department of State personnel, some of whom became key witnesses before the McCarthy Committee, charged that Department security and personnel files were being stripped or removed. Some testimony based on unproved allegations from official investigative and personnel files, was presented before the McCarthy Committee, including testimony by an agent of the Office of Security. The promotion list was held up for many months under new requirements while the loyalty of long-time officers of the Domestic and Foreign Service was subjected to so-called full-field investigations. Key officials of the Office of Security were interrogated at length, accused of removing files or covering up. As a consequence they were either transferred or left voluntarily.

I had opposed Senator McCarthy in his efforts to obtain the "raw" files of officials of the Department of State for use by his Committee. C. P. Trussell in a special edition to The New York Times recorded my bitter exchange with Senator McCarthy and the Senator's frustrated response of "I give up," in an article of February 21, 1953. I had removed from access to security files an Office of Security agent who took notes and references from those files to McCarthy. Roy Cohn of the McCarthy Committee, threatened me with contempt of Congress for intervening with a Congressional witness.

It was in July 1953 that I received a beautifully worded memorandum from the Bureau of Security and Consular Affairs giving me unsolicited "sick leave." This had followed my meeting with General Walter Bedell Smith of World War II fame, our second-in-charge in the Department of State, and Don Lourie of Quaker Oats, the then Under Secretary of State for Management. I was told by Messrs. Smith and Lourie that because I had offended a committee of the Congress (Senator McCarthy's) I would be placed on probation.

I had not intended to write this summary of my experiences within the Department of State during the McCarthy years until I was fully retired. Perhaps I, more than anyone else, can speak with considerable experience concerning what transpired in 1952-53 at a time when alleged communists in Government was a campaign theme and the Department of State the principal target. While hopefully capitulation to demagogues is behind us there seems to me to be on the horizon some warning signals worth carefully watching. A glance at newspaper articles over the past few months will help portray what I mean, the following recent quotes being a few examples:

"The American people should be informed of what the State Department is doing---American foreign policy is reducing the nation's allies and strengthening socialist and communist influences...."

"...the incredible sell-out to Communism continues..."

"Anyone that thinks that shrill, mindless anticommunism is gone forever, ought to read..."

"Back in the early and middle 50's McCarthyism was almost a way of life and the country and people in private life were afraid they could be the next victims of the McCarthy witch-hunt...no proof existed but until the matter could be cleared up the target of the charges stood accused in the public's mind. It may be that this is the price we have to pay for the open society which we enjoy. But in the case of an innocent man charged without proof, the price can be very high... if less were leaked to the media until some proof is offered, it would help."

"Following the 'loss' of a country to Communism or anarchy, Americans invariably commence a hand-wringing inquiry into who lost it. The inquiry seldom produces anything more satisfactory than a few scapegoats, but perhaps that is because it is usually held after it is too late."

The McCarthy era was an unforgettable experience. But one conclusion I came to as a result of this experience within the Department of State during the McCarthy years, was that not one single case of disloyalty to the United States surfaced during my period. Cases involving the temptations and social weaknesses to which all persons are subject, yes. But the dominant characteristics of the thousands of files I had an opportunity to review then were loyalty, devotion, and intelligence on the part of our Department of State people both domestic and foreign service.

These recollections of those unfortunate days of the McCarthy era, behoove us to recall that somehow it all began because of foreign policy reverses concerning which, only history could make an assessment. To try to preempt history may perpetuate the kind of bitter quarrels of the McCarthy years that a few of us can still remember vividly even after a quarter of a century has passed. As Winston Churchill said before the House of Commons in June 1940, during the Battle of Britain:

"If we open a quarrel between the past and present,
we shall find that we have lost the future."