

The United States in the 1950s – Anxiety, Anticommunism, Affluence, Alienation

One can use these four “A”s as a way of framing or conceptualizing American society during the “long” 1950s (1945-1960).

As presented here, each “A” led logically to the next. The key to understanding these concepts, is to be able to explain...

first, why they are significant? (Why were Americans anxious? Why were they anticommunist and how did anticommunism affect American society and culture? How did the nation become so affluent and why did it matter within the context of the Cold War? Why were some Americans alienated by the affluence of the 1950s?)

and

second, how is each “A” related to the other? In particular, how did the first “A” lead to the second which led to the third, and so on...

This set of notes covers the first of the two “A”s – Anxiety and Anticommunism.

ANXIETY

As World War II ended, many Americans felt anxious about the future. Three sources of this anxiety were especially prevalent:

1) Anxiety about the economy

At the outset of World War II, many of the unemployed had taken jobs in war industries or as soldiers. Once the war was over, they feared they would lose these jobs. Unemployment would again skyrocket and the depression would return.

As it happened, this did not occur. Americans had been doing without numerous consumer goods throughout the war – cars, refrigerators, furniture, and so on – because factories were producing war materials, not consumer goods.

The DEMAND for these products was high once the war ended, and consumers had saved up money during the war years (since there was very little to buy – even basic goods had been rationed or been sent abroad to supply the soldiers.) But it would take time to reconvert the factories from producing war materials to producing consumer goods. Therefore the SUPPLY was low. High demand for goods, coupled with low supply of said goods will drive up the prices of these goods.

The source of anxiety, then, was not unemployment, but rather inflation (higher prices). Many Americans were anxious that the cost of living was going up at the very time they were trying to find new jobs. Those that found jobs found prices rising faster than their wages. They would not be able to pay their bills or afford the consumer goods they needed.

After a relatively brief period, however, the “reconversion” to a civilian economy was complete and many Americans began to enjoy what became an extended period of prosperity, interrupted occasionally by the usual ups and downs of the business cycle.

2) Anxiety about the Soviet Union and its expansion into Eastern Europe

The U.S. Government, during World War II, had painted the Soviet Union and particularly its leader, Josef Stalin, in a very positive light. President Roosevelt did this to maintain Stalin’s trust and to insure the Soviets remained U.S. allies against the Germans. Stalin had signed a “pact” with the Nazis once already, so there was some concern that he might do so again, simply to end the fighting. It became FDR’s priority to establish good relations with the Soviets to insure the “Grand Alliance” continued until Germany surrendered.

Once the Germans were defeated and the common enemy that had brought the U.S. and the Soviets together was gone, however, relations between the U.S. and the Soviets broke down quickly. Though the Soviets were committed to preserving the alliance, they also wanted to enhance their own position and often Stalin spoke (and behaved) in ways that seemed threatening to the alliance.

Roosevelt, for his part, was willing to tolerate such bluster, confident he could “reason” with Stalin and reassure him that the U.S. meant him no harm. Roosevelt’s confidence was likely misplaced, and when he died in April 1945, the new president, Harry Truman, was less patient with the Soviets, viewing them as untrustworthy, aggressive, and threatening to liberal, democratic values.

In large part this shift in attitude toward the Soviets – both among Washington officials and everyday Americans – was due to events in Eastern Europe where the occupying Soviet army acted with brutality in Eastern Europe and in particular in the Eastern sector of Germany (raping over 1 million German women in the first few months after the war ended, for example). Stalin also consolidated Soviet power in other nations, such as Poland, where the Soviet presence was not welcomed.

From Stalin’s perspective, these Soviet actions were defensive measures necessary to protect his nation from another, future German invasion. The British and Americans saw the behavior of the Soviet army as aggressive. The peoples of Eastern Europe, on the receiving end of Soviet brutality, were even more suspicious of Moscow’s intentions.

By 1946, one year after the end of the war, many Americans were anxious that the Soviet Union might pose a threat to the U.S. similar to the one Nazi Germany had posed in 1939.

Americans with relatives in Eastern Europe – Poles, Czechs, Romanians – had heard through informal communications that the new Communist governments were oppressive and the elections that put them in place had been rigged. Moreover, the Soviets and the new Eastern European governments had restricted travel to the West, adding to the impression that Europe was dividing along ideological lines – West vs East. In fact, by 1947 it was said that a state of “cold war” existed between the two blocs.

Winston Churchill, the wartime British Prime Minister, declared during a visit to the U.S. that an “iron curtain” was now dividing Europe – democratic freedom in the west and communist tyranny in the east. This kind of rhetoric heightened the anxiety in the U.S. and many feared that the “cold war” might turn into a fighting war if the Soviets tried to expand their influence any further – into France or Italy in western Europe, for example.

3) Anxiety about the unleashing of nuclear weapons and the prospect of atomic warfare

The dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan in 1945 had not initially been a source of anxiety for the American people. Although many scientists were already expressing concern about nuclear weapons and the threat they posed to the world, most Americans were simply relieved that the war was over. Soon, however, some came to fear that it would only be a matter of time before other nations (and, in particular, the Soviet Union) were able to produce their own atomic bombs and make the U.S. mainland (for the first time in its history) immediately susceptible to enemy attack. This would seriously threaten American national security.

Still, government officials insured the American public that it would be “several years” before any other nation “unlocked” the secret of the atomic bomb.

In 1949, however, the Soviets detonated their own atomic bomb. Immediately, the U.S. government took steps to encourage civil defense measures, though realistically, most of these measures would not have had any effect. The point, however, was to ease public anxiety.

Not only was the detonation of the Soviet bomb itself an obvious source of anxiety for the American public, it soon came to light that the Soviet bomb was a near replica of the U.S. bomb. This suggested – correctly as it happened – that Americans working as Soviet spies had given classified information on the construction of the bomb to Soviet officials.

This provoked another source of anxiety – Were there Soviet spies in the U.S. government and, if there were, how did one find them and remove them?

The Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb also precipitated an arms race between the US and the Soviet Union. In reaction to the Soviets' atomic bomb, the U.S. developed a stronger, hydrogen bomb; the Soviets in turn developed their own hydrogen bomb. In time, both sides had more than enough fire power to completely destroy the other nation. This balance was referred to as "Mutual Assured Destruction" or, appropriately enough, "MAD."

In fact, the new president (and former Supreme Allied Commander), Dwight Eisenhower, believed that this new reality should produce a new U.S. foreign policy which he called "the New Look" (or "brinksmanship"). He saw nuclear weapons as deterrents that would preserve the peace. According to Eisenhower, if one made clear to the Soviets that any attempt to expand their influence through military aggression would provoke a nuclear attack on Moscow, they wouldn't take the risk. This meant that the US could spend less on conventional forces and rely instead on less expensive nuclear weapons to maintain national security. It also meant, however, that US policy was very inflexible. What if the Soviets weren't deterred by the threat of our nuclear arsenal? Would the US really launch World War III in response to even a minor Soviet attack on a non-strategic area?

By 1957, when the Soviets launched the first satellite into orbit (Sputnik), many Americans feared the U.S. was losing the arms race, and, by extension, the cold war. If the Soviets could develop a rocket so powerful as to thrust a satellite beyond the earth's gravitational pull and into orbit, then they could likely produce a rocket powerful enough to send a nuclear warhead to hit the US mainland.

These fears were largely unfounded, and, as we now know, the Soviets' nuclear arsenal was significantly smaller and far less reliable than that of the US during this period. But the launch of Sputnik was troubling nonetheless, particularly when a US effort to launch a similar satellite a few months later failed spectacularly when the rocket blew up on the pad. The cold war with the Soviets continued to be a major source of anxiety.

(As a side note to the Sputnik crisis, American educators argued that the Soviets had outpaced the Americans in science and technology because of inadequate public funding for education in the U.S. Following the old bromide of "never letting a good crisis go to waste," they used public anxiety about the U.S. "falling behind" the Soviets to make a successful plea for increased government funding for education, particularly in math and science. As a result, the generation of Americans educated in the late 1950s and early 1960s benefited from Cold War tensions in the sense that they received a more thorough (and well-funded) public education.)

As the fear of nuclear conflict grew, the government came to believe that encouraging Americans to build back yard bomb shelters might ease some of the anxiety. Nuclear

war, perhaps, could be survivable. The plan backfired, however, as many Americans who could not afford to build their own shelters expected that their neighbors would invite them into theirs. Tensions grew between neighbors over who would survive and who would not, compounding rather than alleviating anxiety (not to mention calling attention to an often ignored phenomenon during the 1950s – economic inequality). Such shelters, of course, offered little real protection and so the government backed away from the shelter initiative and other civil defense measures (duck and cover, classroom drills, etc.) These programs were later skewered in Stanley Kubrick’s biting cold war satire, *Dr. Strangelove*, indicating how much the cultural mood shifted between the 1950s and 1960s.

The level of public anxiety could also be measured in unexpected ways. Tranquilizer and alcohol use, for example, spiked during the 1950s, suggesting that many Americans were looking to tamp down these feelings by “self-medication.” Similarly, though anxiety about war and nuclear holocaust were not often discussed publicly, there is ample evidence (from reading the diaries Americans kept during these years) that many people did worry privately – perhaps accounting for the turn to “self-medication.”

Still, if it weren’t for the Soviet Union (and communism), it was said, there would not be such pervasive anxiety in the United States.

Unlike in past international crises, however, simply declaring “war” on the Soviet Union was not an option. Such a war would be unwinnable. The anti-Soviet animus had to go somewhere, so instead it got turned inward. Americans often projected their dislike for communism and the Soviets onto internal enemies – supposed (and real) Communists who lived in the United States.

Therefore, the anxiety that came about due to the Cold War against the Soviet Union led to widespread anticommunism in the United States.

ANTICOMMUNISM

Most Americans did not have an especially firm grasp on what “communism” actually was. They did know, however, that whatever it was, they didn’t like it.

Popular culture often portrayed “communists” as violent, savage gangsters or criminals. (In fact, most American Communists tended to be middle-class intellectuals, union officials, or white-collar workers who spent more time in boring meetings than out terrorizing the locals.)

THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF ANTICOMMUNISM

Recognizing the power of anticommunist sentiment, politicians jumped on the anticommunist bandwagon to win votes. An election in the early 1950s, some

politicians believed, could turn on which candidate appeared to be tougher on “communism.”

The House Committee on Un-American Activities attracted significant media attention when it investigated Communist influence in government and especially in the Hollywood-based entertainment industry.

In yet another irony in a period full of them, HUAC, the terror of liberals and radicals during the 1950s, had its origins in the 1930s when the Committee was established to root out alleged Nazi influence in government and society. At this point, the most vocal anti-fascists were liberals and radicals. In their hunt for Nazis (sometimes referred to as the “Brown Scare”) they originated many of the tactics later adopted by right-wing politicians during the Red Scare of the 1950s – false accusations, guilt by association, smears, and innuendo.

When the political winds changed after World War II and the targets shifted from right-wingers to left-wingers, many of the same people who had overreached during the 1930s to attack their political enemies on the right for being “agents of Hitler” ended up being victimized by these enemies who now accused them of being “soft on communism.” In fact, one wonders if “political payback” even more so than fear of communism fueled some of the attacks on liberals and radicals during this period.

In the realm of entertainment, movie actors, directors, writers, and producers were called before the congressional committee (and the State version of HUAC in California) to answer questions regarding their political affiliations. Some, though never members of the Communist party, had signed statements of support for the Soviet Union during World War II (when the Soviets had been a US ally) and were now accused of being “pro-Communist” for having done so. Others, however, either had been or were still Communist party members. The Party leadership ordered them not to answer the committee’s questions and so they took the Fifth Amendment (refusing to testify lest they incriminate themselves). Other non-communists also took the Fifth Amendment, declaring that the committee had no right to ask them about their political views.

In the end, many men and women lost their jobs in the entertainment industry when studio executives established the “black list” – anyone who was associated with the Communist party (or was even suspected of being associated with it) could no longer find work.

Similarly, government workers and teachers in the public schools were required to sign “loyalty oaths.” Often those who refused to sign were not Communists, but rather liberals or even radicals who believed the government was overstepping its limits by compelling people to sign such oaths. They refused to sign, not because they were not “loyal,” but because they felt the oaths violated their civil liberties.

The Communists, for their part, simply lied and signed the oaths. As a result, the entire loyalty oath program not only did not achieve its intended effect but also threatened to restrict civil liberties. Ironically, the Soviets' ignoring of civil liberties was one of the very reasons Americans said they opposed communism.

Also, "taking the Fifth" contributed to the culture of paranoia since politicians implied that anyone who was unwilling to answer questions when testifying under oath and "took the Fifth" was in fact a "Fifth amendment Communist." This false logic created a situation in which it appeared there were far more Communists (and secret Communists) than there really were. The actual membership of the American Communist Party peaked at about 100,000 people (out of a population of about 140 million), and though Communists and their supporters received a disproportionate amount of media attention, they never constituted a serious threat to the stability of the government.

When it became clear that "taking the Fifth" was creating the impression that the Communists were a powerful "invisible" force, the Communist party, not surprisingly, encouraged anyone testifying before HUAC to "take the Fifth." This was a cynical manipulation (and hardly out of character for the Party) because it meant that many non-Communists suffered for their political principles and the Party itself benefited.

More importantly, however, giving the false impression that the Communists were a more powerful influence in the US than they really were fueled the Red Scare and contributed to a culture of political paranoia. In doing so, opportunistic politicians and right-wing demagogues found themselves in strange alliance with the leadership of the American Communist Party. Yet while the politicians may have gained from such deception, the Communists ended up destroying themselves since the exaggeration of Communist influence only insured an even more potent counter-attack against the Party and its supporters.

In particular, Congressman Richard Nixon and Senator Joseph McCarthy achieved prominence by gaining reputations as hard-line opponents of communism.

Nixon dug deeply to gather evidence that Communists had served in the government during World War II. Drawing on "inside information" supplied to him by sources within the FBI and from ex-Communist agents, he meticulously put together a case against former Roosevelt administration official, Alger Hiss. As was later confirmed, Hiss was indeed a Communist agent and Nixon's successful unmasking of him helped to launch the future president's political career.

But Nixon, while directly targeting Hiss, was also leading a partisan Republican attack against liberal Democrats who had been staunch supporters of Franklin Roosevelt (often called "New Dealers"). Not only was Hiss a Communist agent, but, Nixon implied, he was able to continue operating within the upper levels of government due to the liberals' tolerance (or even support) of Communism. In this sense, anticommunism for Republican politicians like Nixon became less about hunting

down a few dozen spies and more about discrediting liberal Democrats and accusing them (unfairly) of disloyalty. These tactics earned Nixon the undying animosity of liberals, who would later exact revenge when Nixon became president at the end of the next decade.

While Nixon was thorough and meticulous, if perhaps overzealous, hyper-partisan, and off-putting, McCarthy was an irresponsible demagogue. Fast and loose with the facts, prone to making assertions without evidence, and boorish in his behavior, McCarthy nonetheless won enough support from average voters (particularly Catholics and working-class social conservatives) that the Washington establishment was reluctant to denounce him, at least at first. McCarthy's anti-elite populism was likely more of a draw than his anti-communism. Like many demagogues before and since, McCarthy awakened the anti-intellectual strain in American political culture. Anger at "communists" quickly transformed into anger at "elites," who allegedly were "soft" on communism.

Federal bureaucrats, like FBI head J. Edgar Hoover, also came to realize they could enhance their power and increase their agencies' budgets if they were seen as playing a significant role in fighting communism.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, it came to light that several Americans had been secretly supplying the Soviets with classified government documents, or, in the case of Julius Rosenberg, technological data that ended up helping the Soviets construct an atomic bomb. That these men had been "secret" communists, and that some – like Alger Hiss – looked perfectly "normal" and would never have been suspected of being communists, further fueled the Red Scare. If a neat, trim, bureaucrat in a tweed suit (like Hiss) could be a communist spy, ANYONE could be!

All of this said, however, one should not exaggerate the extent to which the politics of anticommunism influenced voters or dominated the everyday conversations of average Americans. Polls taken at the time found that the "communists in government" issue ranked well down the list of American voters' concerns. More important to the majority were bread and butter issues like the cost of living, job security, education for their children.

The anticommunist crusade was, in the final analysis, a significant overreaction to a problem that had largely been solved even before the crusade began. There had been Communists in government during World War II, but by the 1950s, they had been removed, fired, or instructed to leave their positions by Soviet spymasters who feared they would be caught. In this sense, it was not a "witch hunt" – there are no witches, but there were indeed Communists – but the resulting effects on American politics and culture were undeniably negative.

In hindsight we also see that anticommunism had more traditional elements within it that pre-dated the Cold War – overheated partisan politics, anti-elitist populism, and a visceral opposition among many Americans to anything that smacked of "radicalism"

(this included equal treatment for African Americans, the expansion of the welfare state, and an enhanced role for government in Americans' daily lives.) Nonetheless, the ongoing fear of communism – more so around the world than in the US – made it a useful issue for politicians well into the next decade.

THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF ANTICOMMUNISM

The intensity of anticommunist sentiment between 1945 and 1960 had a chilling effect on American culture as well as American politics. Indeed, the cultural impact, which is less obvious and more subtle, may actually have been more significant.

ANYONE who stood out, who seemed to disagree with those in power, or who expressed reservations about taking a “loyalty oath” risked being seen as a communist or a “communist sympathizer.”

As a result, no one wanted to “stand out” and so American society became far more conformist. (Ironically, the conformity of Soviet society had been one of the arguments against communism, but the times did not lend themselves to an appreciation of irony.)

In all walks of life, Americans expressed a patriotism grounded in anticommunism. Whatever communism stood for, loyal American patriots were expected to oppose. Whatever communists did or believed, Americans were expected to do or believe the opposite.

Since the Soviets did not value family life and sent their children to day care centers while both parents worked for the state, America should put the “nuclear family” at the center of its culture to demonstrate the stark contrast with the communists.

As a result, Americans married younger, had more children, and, outwardly at least, put great value on the quality of family life. Popular culture again played a role in disseminating the image of the “ideal” happy family on television shows such as “I Love Lucy” and “Father Knows Best.”

Since the Soviets relied on “collective farming,” the US emphasized the virtue of the independent small family farmer (even though most US farms were owned by large corporations).

Since the Soviets lived in collective public housing – large blocs of apartments – the Americans valued individual, private home ownership. (Essentially, the Soviets lived in “big boxes” while we lived in “little boxes.”)

Since the Soviets minimized gender differences, the US amplified them...

Both men and women were identified as “workers” in the Soviet Union and gender differences were downplayed, and so, almost reflexively, clearly drawn gender lines

were emphasized in the US. Women were supposed to stay at home to raise the kids while men went to work. Women who did work were expected to take “female” jobs – secretaries, teachers, receptionists. Even female movie stars came to look more unmistakably “feminine” – curves were back and the “androgynous” look was out.

(In fact, more married women were working outside the home during the 1950s, but the reality never got in the way of the idealized image.)

Male “sex symbols” were once again hyper-masculinized as “men’s men” – physically rigorous and muscular, unemotional (the “strong, silent type”). More sensitive, bookish men were considered politically suspect and gay men as likely security threats to be kept out of government jobs for fear that they would be blackmailed by Soviet spies.

(It later turned out that many of the biggest male sex symbols of the period, Rock Hudson, Tab Hunter, and even James Dean, were gay, but, again, in American culture reality exerts little influence on perception.)

To reassure those who still worried that the “bad” communists might be hard to detect, Hollywood produced a spate of movies in which it was very easy to tell the “good guys” from the “bad guys” – white hats vs black hats.

(The more critically acclaimed films, particularly those by director Alfred Hitchcock, broke from this trend, however, and often developed plot lines in which the evil character was not revealed until the end of the film. *Psycho*, for example.)

It was also well-known that communists were atheists. Accordingly, Americans came to feel they should go out of their way to show their own religious faith. During the 1950s, church attendance went up, and the government made several symbolic nods to religion (“under God” added to the Pledge of Allegiance and “In God we Trust” added to the currency). Ministers like Billy Graham became well-known and highly regarded public figures.

Some have argued persuasively that religious devotion per se did not increase in the 1950s, but rather a desire to recreate the spirit of community that was often absent in the newly developing suburbs brought people to church. Religion thus became the basis for social, rather than spiritual interaction.

Ultimately, then, the celebration of family life, the insistence on rigid gender roles, and the focus on religious faith all distinguished 1950s Americans from the communists – “We aren’t like THEM.”

BUT, this approach was largely negative.

It was believed that insisting the U.S. was NOT like the Soviet Union was not enough to convince those nations still uncommitted to one side or the other in the Cold War that they should back the U.S. and not the USSR.

The US had to have something POSITIVE to offer when making the case that its system was better.

The negative approach of ANTICOMMUNISM therefore created the need for a more positive portrayal of the nation which centered on its AFFLUENCE. In this sense, the emphasis on Anticommunism during the late 1940s and early 1950s led to the emphasis on AFFLUENCE that came to dominate the mid-1950s.