

The Menace of Globalism

Merwin K. Hart and Nationalist Conservatism, 1930–1960

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Abstract: *In the wake of the October 1929 stock market crash, conservatives formed an array of organizations and publications that aimed to resist the nation's steady embrace of New Deal liberalism. Crucial to their opposition was a group of "nationalist conservatives" whose most prominent member was the operative and propagandist Merwin K. Hart. Hart's worldview, which embraced nativism, antisemitism, anti-interventionism, and economic libertarianism, was shared by a range of figures on the right whose contributions to the emergence of the post-war conservative movement have not been studied. Hart's organization, the New York State Economic Council (later renamed the National Economic Council), played a critical function in propagating conservative ideas throughout the years of liberal political hegemony. Scholarship on conservatism has generally cast the early opponents of the New Deal as principled libertarians, unsullied by bigotry and nativism; this article challenges that picture, arguing that the nationalist conservatives were critical in shaping the ideology of the postwar right.*

Keywords: nationalism, conservatism, twentieth-century US history, intellectual history, antisemitism, nativism, Merwin K. Hart

On a cool autumn evening in November 1939, as a light rain fell across New York City, a crowd of twelve thousand gathered in Madison Square Garden for a patriotic rally. To cheering and the blare of martial music, the star guest, Texas Democratic congressman Martin Dies, mounted the rostrum at 9:30 p.m., escorted by a phalanx of American Legionnaires. Tall and broad, with thin beady eyes and boyish features, the young Dies was a gifted showman, the head of the House Un-American Activities Committee and a central architect of the anticommunist movement of the late 1930s. Dies's speech that night offered an impassioned call to arms, a stark warning of the perils facing America in a world aflame.¹

1 "Dies at Rally Here Warns U. S. to Stop its 'Aping' of Europe," *New York Times*, November 30, 1939, 1; "Dies Asks for Open Stand on Investigations," *Daily Missoulian* (Missoula, MT), November 30,

“Blessed as no other people on earth with all the conditions necessary for economic and intellectual independence,” Dies told his audience, “we hold stubbornly and stupidly to foreign ties which a sound Americanism should have dissolved in all of us.” The nation possessed an economic and political system superior to the best that Europe had to offer, he argued. But the people’s fealty to “Americanism” was under attack, menaced by New Deal measures and a flood of “alien” propaganda.² The great threat facing the nation, Dies believed, was the combination of foreign agitators and those Americans who subscribed to the basic philosophy of society that had produced Stalin and Hitler. This alien creed of bureaucratic state capitalism had its roots in Marxism, he argued, a “pagan religion of materialism” antithetical to the ideals of America’s Christian republic. But the majority of Marxists, he warned, did not belong to any organization. Instead, they masqueraded under the name of “liberals.” They denied, “with technical accuracy,” that they were communists, but the truth was that they worshiped “at the shrine of Marx” and derived their economic and political ideas from his writings.³ Only a wholesale return to the principles of conservatism, Dies believed, could overcome the threat of liberalism. The antidote for the ills of private capitalism was “more capitalism . . . a wider diffusion of private property in order that there may be a firmer foundation for personal liberty.” And the first duty of the republic must be to its own. The nation’s hands were full with the task of preserving the republic from subversive elements within; there was no reason to engage in foreign expeditions. Above all, Dies declared, looking out across the audience, “we express the firm determination of this great gathering and Americans everywhere in this closing declaration, God gave us America; the Marxists shall not take it away.”⁴

Standing in the crowd that evening, a smile of satisfaction no doubt spread across his lips, was the mastermind of the rally, a shrewd activist and propagandist named Merwin Kimball Hart. Short, with finely wrought features and large, faintly reptilian eyes, Hart was head of the New York State Economic Council, later renamed the National Economic Council, a lobby group opposed to the New Deal and the “creeping socialization” of American life. Hart’s ideology, which combined free-market

1939, 1; “Program: Mass Meeting for America,” n.d. (1939), box 1, folder 20, Merwin K. Hart Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR [hereafter MKHP]. On Dies, see, Dennis Kay McDaniel, “Martin Dies of Un-American Activities: His Life and Times,” (PhD diss., University of Houston, 1988); Kenneth O’Reilly, “The Dies Committee v. the New Deal: Real Americans and the Unending Search for Un-Americans,” in *Little ‘Red Scares’: Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921–1946*, ed. Robert Justin Goldstein (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 237–59.

2 Martin Dies, *The Insidious Wiles of Foreign Influence* (New York: Committee on Mass Meeting for America, 1939), 1–3, box 1, folder 20, MKHP.

3 Dies, 4–5.

4 Dies, 6–8.

conservatism with nativism, nationalism, anticommunism, and antisemitism, formed an influential strain of nationalist conservatism that would rise to prominence throughout the 1940s and 1950s. It was Hart who had organized to have Dies speak, and the congressman's performance thrilled him.⁵

This article examines Hart and his allies and the strain of nationalist conservatism that they represent. It argues that Hart was central, indeed indispensable, to the formation of modern American conservatism after World War II, and that Hart and his allies' revanchist ideology prefigured the rise of figures such as Willis Carto, Robert Welch, and Revilo Oliver, as well as certain conservatives of our own era, whose arguments Hart was among the first to articulate. Hart himself occupied a distinctive place in the conservative movement. A provocateur, whose tirades against the New Deal, communism, Zionism, "internationalism," and "globalism" earned him broad notoriety, Hart maintained close and varied ties with the conservative mainstream. He counted the libertarian activist Leonard Read, the prominent Christian libertarian James W. Fifield Jr., the libertarian polemicist Rose Wilder Lane, and William F. Buckley Jr., the crown prince of postwar conservatism, among his allies, and throughout the 1940s, Hart's organization played host to a string of prominent libertarians and conservatives.⁶ His council, in its various iterations, was crucial to propagating what I call "nationalist conservatism," a fusion of antistatism, and a fervent belief in the virtues of free-market capitalism, with elements of the ideology of the American far right.⁷ Central to this worldview was a tendency toward conspiracism, toward a view of social and political change as orchestrated by an insidious clique of left-wing politicians and intellectuals.

5 "Exchangites Will Hear Hart Speak," Binghamton (NY) Press, December 8, 1939, 23; Merwin K. Hart [hereafter MKH], statement, January 22, 1940, box 58, folder 6, George E. Sokolsky Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA [hereafter GESp]; MKH, Economic Council Letter [hereafter ECL], no. 134 (June 1945): 2.

6 MKH, "Memo of Talk with Leonard Read," December 6, 1946, in Hearings Before the House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, House of Representatives, pt. 4, 81st Cong., 2nd Sess. (1950) [hereafter HSCLA], 203; MKH to Buckley, October 11, 1951, box 2, folder 34, MKHP; Fifield to MKH, July 25, 1949, in HSCLA, 490.

7 The resurgence in the past eight years, frequently under the banner of "national" conservatism, of a type of nationalistic conservatism that strongly echoes the work of Hart and his allies cannot be examined in depth here. Suffice to say, much of what makes the "national" conservatives and other intellectual fellow travelers of Donald Trump distinctive can be directly traced to the nationalist conservatism of the figures I discuss in this article. I use the term "nationalist conservatism," however, to underline the racist, nativist, and anti-interventionist currents that undergirded Hart and his allies' efforts. Contemporary "national" conservatives, although hardly above appeals to race and nation, have generally approached politics from the standpoint of a critique of the free-market philosophy of Reaganism and the global neoliberal order. As we will see, Hart and his allies were much closer to the Reaganite consensus when it came to economics, although they articulated their ideas decades before that consensus had formed. Finally, the reemergence today, in the popular politics of the Trump-era GOP, of much of what made nationalist conservatism distinctive suggests that the intellectual and political antecedents of Trumpism can be traced at least to the era of the Great Depression.

Conspiracy thinking was hardly unknown among conservatives—then or now—but the nationalist conservatives embraced it fervently, grounding their thought in a racialized master narrative of American decline. Nevertheless, this conspiratorial worldview—this intense suspicion of immigrants, communists, and Jews—did not, at least initially, exclude Hart and his allies from central positions in the nascent conservative movement. As I will show, Hart’s organization functioned for thirty years as a crucial node of conservative thought and praxis, a beacon, of sorts, in the years of conservatism’s travails in the political wilderness.

Of course, nationalist ideology as such was hardly the sole property of the right. Mainstream liberals embraced a “soft” nationalism, adapting and repurposing a variety of nationalist themes throughout the Depression decade and especially after World War II. The US Communist Party, for its part, played with these same nationalist tropes, claiming, in 1938, that their revolutionary doctrine constituted “20th Century Americanism.”⁸ Farther to the right of the nationalist conservatives was an array of “native” fascists, such as William Dudley Pelley’s Silver Legion, who embraced an aggressive nationalism while eschewing the celebration of free-market capitalism. The nationalist conservatives often echoed the fascists. Both ultimately envisioned a purified national community, cleansed of the “alien” other.⁹

The nationalists’ vision of capitalism anchored their ideology, and its fusion with bigotry and extreme nationalism suggests ways in which the current scholarly view of libertarianism might be altered. Too often, movement libertarianism has been cast as antithetical to racism and nationalism, but the historical evidence suggests that this purified libertarianism has never—outside the minds of a handful of individuals—really existed.¹⁰ Hart and his allies viewed free market capitalism as the sine qua non of the American experiment, the system of economic relations by which the nation had assumed preeminent power in world affairs. Like many later libertarians, they viewed the market as a vital tool in disciplining the individual by inculcating the virtues of

8 William Z. Foster, quoted in Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 222.

9 On Pelley and other “native” fascists, see among others Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); Morris Schonbach, *Native American Fascism During the 1930s and 1940s: A Study of Its Roots, Its Growth, and Its Decline* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985); and Bradley W. Hart, *Hitler’s American Friends: The Third Reich’s Supporters in the United States* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018).

10 The basic account of libertarianism, which glosses over the racism and nationalism of many of its exponents, is Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007). Nancy MacLean, in a recent work, has suggested, implicitly, that a later generation of libertarians, headed by the economist James Buchanan, held racist views, but as she notes of Buchanan’s program, the economist “never mentioned race.” *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2017), 84.

prudence, thrift, and personal industry. Their horror of communism, and of all “alien” ideas, was in part a product of the fact that these theories tended to question or upend the “natural” hierarchy ordained by the freely working market order. That this was not incompatible with racism is clear; and a fuller understanding of the evolution of libertarianism, which this article in part provides, must investigate why bigotry—from Merwin Hart to Ron Paul and the later Murray Rothbard—was so central to libertarian ideology.¹¹

Hart’s own power stemmed from two sources: the extraordinarily wide network of correspondence he maintained with figures across the right-wing spectrum, and his intimate connection to donors, such as the Du Pont brothers—especially Irénée and Pierre S.—which enabled him to fund the operations of the council and promote his activist causes. A prominent anti-interventionist, Hart harbored an intense antipathy to the suite of intergovernmental organizations that emerged from the ashes of the Second World War. “If [the] United Nations should succeed,” he wrote to Illinois Republican congressman Leo E. Allen in 1948, “it would simply place the control of our entire economy and our entire lives in the hands of internationalists.” But Hart’s opposition to the United Nations, to Bretton Woods, to the whole web of “globalist” organizations was an article of faith among conservatives during this period. In 1955, *National Review*, hardly a redoubt of nationalism, published its first edition with a “credenda” outlining the new publication’s position on a range of issues. The seventh paragraph summed up a decade of nationalist agitation on the right. “No superstition has more effectively bewitched America’s Liberal elite than the fashionable concepts of world government, the United Nations, internationalism. . . . It would make greater sense to grant independence to each of our 50 states than to surrender U.S. sovereignty to a world organization.”¹²

Till recently, scholars had made little of the intimate connections between figures like Hart and the emerging conservative mainstream of the 1940s and 1950s. In the standard account, the antistatist activists of the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s were a fragmentary minority, committed to a purist laissez-faire vision untainted by nativism or bigotry.¹³ But an appreciation of nationalism’s place at the birth of postwar conservatism complicates this picture. As this article will make clear, conservatives of many stripes proved willing to make common cause with the racist fringe of their movement. This fact allows us to move away from the dominant scholarly picture of conservatism as a movement guided, for the most part, by high-minded devotion to libertarian and

11 On this, in a later context, see Quinn Slobodian, “Anti-’68ers and the Racist-Libertarian Alliance: How a Schism among Austrian School Neoliberals Helped Spawn the Alt Right,” *Cultural Politics* 15, no. 3 (November 2019): 372–86.

12 MKH to Allen, June 9, 1948, in HSCLA, 336; “The Magazine’s Credenda,” *National Review*, November 19, 1955, 6.

13 George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, rev. ed. (1976; repr., Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), ch. 1.

traditionalist principles and enhancing the prerogatives of corporate capital, a movement with little connection to the far-right fringe.¹⁴ A more realistic view, which this article attempts to offer in outline, is that the boundaries between mainstream conservatism and nationalist, racist conservatism did not exist in the early phases—up until 1960—of the movement. The far-right fringe of conservatism was never fully “banished” from the movement even as late as the seventies, and it would return, as virulent as ever, in the form of paleoconservatism and paleolibertarianism after the Cold War. Decades, then, before the upheavals of the civil rights era, northern and midwestern nationalist conservatives had already developed a comprehensive racialized conception of political life.¹⁵ By better understanding the contours and significance of this vision, we can more clearly grasp the historical roots of many of the political convulsions of our own time.

Jasper Crane, a central financier of the conservative movement, voiced a familiar sentiment when he wrote to Leonard Read in 1946: “If we removed all barriers to the entrance into this country . . . this country would be inundated by alien people and the values of American life destroyed.”¹⁶ And when the libertarian intellectual Frank Chodorov set about forming an American Society of Individualists in the early 1950s, he included on his short list for members some familiar figures—William F. Buckley Jr., Samuel Pettengill, George Sokolsky, Garet Garrett, and Rose Wilder Lane—as well as a number of individuals from the nationalist right: Russell Maguire, a wealthy industrialist and member of Hart’s council’s executive committee, who would transform the *American Mercury* into a white supremacist digest; Charles Coburn, the prolific actor and anticommunist activist, who was later an honorary member of the white supremacist White Citizens Council; and Verne P. Kaub, an avowed nationalist conservative and associate of Hart and Buckley, who would later collaborate with Willis Carto’s far-right Liberty Lobby. As the following analysis of the careers of Hart and his allies will show, this was hardly an isolated case.¹⁷

14 On the consensus view, see, among many others, Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*; Jonathan M. Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Donald Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Gregory Schneider, *The Conservative Century: From Reaction to Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); and Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen’s Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010). Newer works in this vein have discussed in passing the prevalence of racism among certain sections of the 1930s right. See, for instance, Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Right Out of California: The 1930s and the Big Business Roots of Modern Conservatism* (New York: New Press, 2015).

15 Cf. Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

16 Crane to Read, March 4, 1946, box 84, Jasper E. Crane Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

17 Chodorov to Alfred Kohlberg, memo, “American Society of Individualists,” September 18, 1952, box 33, Alfred Kohlberg Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA [here-

Two recent articles that discuss Hart have emphasized his prominent role in conservative circles during the 1930s and 1940s. Joseph Fronczak has noted Hart's role as a "field general" of anti-union forces in New York State and his relationship to the vigilante strike committees that combatted labor drives throughout the 1930s. Hart, Fronczak argues, was one of a number of transnational brokers of ideas who helped meld and mobilize a right-wing attack on "collectivism" that assumed global proportions.¹⁸ David Austin Walsh, in an article on Russell Maguire and the *American Mercury*, links Hart to Maguire and details, glancingly, Hart's role in an array of conservative organizations, his antisemitism, and his link with William F. Buckley Jr.¹⁹ Both articles underline Hart's importance, but neither offers a thoroughgoing analysis of the ideology and political praxis of Hart and his allies, the evolution of the organizations that Hart founded, or his links to an extraordinarily broad array of conservative activists of differing ideological hues. To understand Hart and his allies, we must situate Hart in his intellectual milieu, locating him within the cluster of right-wing intellectuals and operatives that he often presided over—that is what this article tries to do.

In addition to his work with mainstream conservatives, Hart operated as the linchpin of a group of zealous nationalist conservatives that coalesced in Chicago and New York. Among them were the businessmen Robert E. Wood and Sterling Morton, the nationalist conservative polemicist George Washington Robnett, the popular right-wing radio commentator Upton Close, and a slew of others. Inflamed by the rise of the New Deal and America's entry into the war, these men founded an array of groups intent on countering the nation's swing to the left. Central to the worldview of these men was a belief in the sanctity of the American republic, the numinous homeland of a white Christian majority menaced by foreign ideas and peoples.

The shifting relationship between Hart and his allies' brand of nationalist conservatism and the philosophy of the emerging conservative movement represented the central ideological drama on the American right during the 1940s and 1950s. At stake was the future of the conservative movement both ideologically and politically. Nevertheless, a tense peace between these groups—fostered by a common enemy—prevailed throughout the period. An embattled minority in terms of their grasp on the levers of state power, the conservatives and the nationalist conservatives found

after AKP]; HSCLA, 271; David Austin Walsh, "The Right-Wing Popular Front: The Far Right and American Conservatism in the 1950s," *Journal of American History* 107, no. 2 (September 2020): 412–32; "Citizens Council Cites Coburn," *Detroit Free Press*, June 14, 1959; George Michael, *Willis Carto and the American Far Right* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 37. Chodorov was also friendly with Merwin Hart. Chodorov to F. A. Harper, January 3, 1950, Foundation for Economic Education Archives, in storage at 1890 Briarwood Road, Atlanta, GA, 30329, uncataloged.

18 Joseph Fronczak, "The Fascist Game: Transnational Political Transmission and the Genesis of the U.S. Modern Right," *Journal of American History* 105, no. 3 (December 2018): 581, 584, 587–88.

19 Walsh, "Right-Wing Popular Front," 415, 417–18.

common cause on the great majority of issues. They collaborated extensively, working to block progressive measures in Congress, form new organizations, and propagandize for conservatism. And in time, as the memory of World War II-era anti-interventionism faded and the Cold War erupted in the Far East, their ideas, shorn for the most part of bigotry, would all but combine.

The Career of a Bigot

Born into a wealthy family in 1881, Hart was educated at Harvard, where he graduated in the same class as Franklin Delano Roosevelt. A junior progressive Republican, Hart served in the New York State Legislature for two terms before retiring in 1911 to practice law privately and found a profitable insurance firm. In 1926, the legislature, largely as a result of Hart's efforts, established the Industrial Survey Commission to monitor government expenses. Drawing on the commission's findings, Hart brought together a group of conservative businessmen and proponents of private enterprise to found the New York State Economic Council in 1930.²⁰ At first, the council, which claimed fifty thousand members, primarily waged campaigns for economy in government and relief for businessmen from the "crushing" burden of taxation. But although Hart had opposed the expansion of government throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, his "road to Damascus" moment arrived with the coming of the New Deal. Entering middle age, and now fervently committed to the principles of conservatism, he was outraged by the relief measures pouring forth from the state legislature regarding strict government retrenchment as the only solution to the crisis of the Depression. "Business men are burdened by their affairs, wearied by efforts to fight off unwise laws," he wrote in the first *Economic Council Letter*, the forum—a brief newsletter—that would play host to his views for over three decades. "It should be made absolutely clear by government that the further invasion of private business activity has been brought to a definite and permanent halt."²¹

For the bulk of the 1930s and early 1940s, Hart used the *Letter* to attack the extension of government and preach the doctrines of property rights, limited government, and individual liberty. American capitalism, he argued, was a sacrosanct system, the wellspring of the nation's extraordinary material power. "Individual initiative," he wrote of America

20 "Merwin K. Hart Clubs Unite," *Utica (NY) Daily Press*, July 31, 1908, 6; "Tawney Out of Running at Primary," *The Rock Island (NY) Argus*, September 21, 1910, 1; Gail Quentin Unruh, "Ultraconservative Distortion: Merwin K. Hart and the National Economic Council," (master's thesis, University of Oregon, 1981), 6–8, 19–25; Merwin K. Hart . . . American (New York: National Economic Council, Inc., n.d.), 1–4, box 58, folder 6, GESP.

21 "The Unexpurgated History of the New York State Economic Council," n.d., box 1, folder 19, MKHP; "A Pioneer in the Fight for Economy: The New York State Economic Council," n.d. (c. 1933), box 49, Bruce Barton Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI [hereafter BBP]; "Would Bar Ballot to All on Relief," *New York Times*, August 6, 1934, 17; MKH, ECL, no. 1 (February 1934): 1–3.

in 1942, “acting through private enterprise . . . has given to the greatest number of persons a higher standard of living than has been attained in any other nation. Never has the human spirit achieved so much for so many.”²² While Hart had begun to note the baleful effects of communism as early as 1935, the coming of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) seems to have wrought a distinct change in his thinking. That war, which he envisaged as a titanic struggle between Franco’s nationalist forces and the hydra of the Soviet East, bred in him an obsessive, vitriolic anticommunism, fueling his increasingly conspiratorial worldview. *America, Look at Spain*, a book published by Hart in 1939 based on a trip to that country, made plain his view of the civilizational stakes of the conflict. “Communism, defeated in Italy, in Germany and now in Spain, will probably make its last stand in the United States,” Hart argued. “At some time—probably during the Roosevelt administration—it is at least possible they will undertake a *coup* that if successful will reduce this country to a state of vassalage to Soviet Russia.” For Hart, like Dies, those who masqueraded as “liberals” were in fact witting or unwitting agents of Moscow, committed to planned totalitarianism and the “world-wide effort to overthrow Christian civilization.”²³

For his part, Hart’s fulminations earned him the censure of the voluble secretary of the interior Harold Ickes. In a 1940 speech, Ickes grouped him with Lawrence Dennis and Charles Lindbergh—two men Hart corresponded with—as fascist “appeasers.”²⁴ Hart’s appetite for controversy, though, was seemingly insatiable. Throughout the next two decades, from his position as head of the Economic Council, Hart held forth on the perfidies of the New Deal and the “alien” and “globalist” influences that he believed had penetrated the federal government. Conspiracy, on a grand scale, was the keynote of his thought. “The question of whether the United States will continue toward national Socialism will probably be settled in the next four years—possibly in the next 24 months,” he declared in 1945. A flood of propaganda “alien in origin and conception,” pushed by a highly organized and well-financed cabal, had corrupted national debate, he argued, opening the gates to “admit to our shores Communists and in particular, Communist Jews.” In a 1945 article, he listed seventy-nine individuals—of whom seventy-two were Jewish—who he alleged were actively attempting to undermine the “American way

22 MKH, ECL, no. 106 (November 1942): 1.

23 MKH, ECL, no. 34 (January 1936): 1; MKH, *America, Look at Spain* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1939), viii–ix, 194; MKH, ECL, no. 140 (March 1946): 3. Hart’s support for Franco led him to found the American Union for Nationalist Spain, a short-lived group aimed at countering the “Red propaganda of the Anti-Franco side.” “Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee American Union for Nationalist Spain,” February 8, 1940, box 2, folder 27, MKHP. On Hart’s role as a mouthpiece for Franco, see Neal M. Rosendorf, *Franco Sells Spain to America: Hollywood, Tourism and Public Relations as Postwar Spanish Soft Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 13. See also Michael E. Chapman, “Pro-Franco Anti-Communism: Ellery Sedgwick and the ‘Atlantic Monthly,’” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 4 (October 2006): 657–58.

24 “Ickes Names Merwin K. Hart and Lindbergh as Appeasers,” PM, December 18, 1940, 11.

of life.” “The independent American Republic,” he warned, “will be destroyed if their domination continues.”²⁵

Hart’s conspiratorial antisemitism blended with a broader nativism. “A mysterious lobby,” he declared in one *Council Letter*, “put through last spring a D.P. [displaced persons] bill which will bring over four hundred thousand aliens into this country from Europe.” This infiltration of “audacious” refugees, he argued, was poisoning the nation’s character and subverting America’s traditional form of government. Hart, possessed by visions of a teeming horde of alien subversives, viewed communism through a prism of racialized resentment. “[O]ur loose immigration laws,” he argued in 1949, “and our yielding to the weak and slap-happy policy of admitting aliens, refugees and visitors without any real discrimination, have put trained Communist agents into ten thousand key positions in every activity in the United States.” For Hart, indeed, the influx of communist agents and the propaganda efforts of their allies constituted the grandest of all threats to the survival of America’s Christian republic. The agents of this vast conspiracy were a clique of “alien communists” intent on subjecting American civilization to the tyranny of a “world superstate controlled by the Zionist-Communists.”²⁶

Hart was obsessed with the erosion, in his eyes, of American national sovereignty. The desire for sovereignty, he believed, had been the motivation of the founders of the republic, who had erected a state of sovereign liberty without parallel in world history. Yet this sovereignty, he argued, jealously guarded for one hundred and fifty years, was being steadily eroded from all sides in the postwar world. The UN and the other “internationalist” institutions, he maintained, dangerously undermined the independence of the United States. “[N]ever has a great nation so completely sold out as the UN crowd has persuaded the government of the United States to sell out,” he declared in 1948. “Today we are faced with the same choice, sovereignty and freedom or loss of sovereignty and bondage.”²⁷

Unsurprisingly, Hart came to regard the New Deal, like the majority of his fellow conservatives, as simply the first wedge of Soviet-style communism. Since 1933, he argued in 1940, Marxist philosophy had been the dominant force in the shaping of America’s domestic policy. The true purpose of the “Communist infested ‘New Deal,’” he wrote, was to redistribute the wealth of the nation from the “productive and thrifty” to the undeserving poor. As often as not, Hart advanced a philosophy indistinguishable from that of mainstream conservatives. But by the late 1940s, he had retreated into a

25 MKH, ECL, no. 132 (April 1945): 1–3; MKH, ECL, no. 209 (February 1949): 1–3; Congressional Record, 81st Cong., 2nd Sess. (March 29, 1950), A2359.

26 MKH, ECL, no. 243 (July 1950): 1; MKH, ECL, no. 209 (February 1949): 4; MKH, ECL, no. 133 (May 1945): 1; MKH, ECL, no. 211 (March 1949): 2; MKH, ECL, no. 75 (March 1940): 4; MKH, ECL, no. 145 (June 1946): 3; MKH, ECL, no. 218 (July 1949): 4.

27 MKH, ECL, no. 139 (February 1946): 2, emphasis in original; MKH, ECL, no. 196 (August 1948): 4.

conspiratorial conservatism, one that regarded the “Zionist-Communist” plot as the master narrative of social and political life.²⁸

At first glance, it would be easy to dismiss Hart as a fringe figure, an extremist preaching to a modest and inconsequential faithful. Yet his council had powerful backers among the nation’s monied elite, his newsletter reached upwards of fifty thousand individuals—with over a million copies of some numbers distributed—and his remarks were frequently inserted into the *Congressional Register* by allies in Congress.²⁹ Hart, indeed, for all his bigotry and bluster, was in many respects a kind of policy entrepreneur, fashioning a range of positions that would later rise to prominence on the right. His implacable opposition to immigration was one example, as was his antipathy toward the United Nations, the proposed International Trade Organization, and other globalist organizations. But Hart commented freely on more specific matters. In the January 1948 issue of the *Council Letter*, Hart conjured the image of a communist takeover of the United States. “We have one concrete suggestion to make to every citizen,” he wrote. “Let him possess himself of one or more guns . . . [and be sure] that he and other members of his family know how to use them, and that he has a reasonable supply of ammunition.” As usual, a note of conspiracy entered his thinking. “It is not without significance, that in recent years leftwingers have constantly pressed for passage of laws requiring a license to own a gun, or, in some instances, forbidding private citizens to have guns.” For Hart, as for later activists, the right to bear arms was sacred; any attempt to abridge it was, de facto, a product of the Zionist-communist conspiracy.³⁰

The Building of a Nationalist “Front”

In April 1943, the New York State Economic Council became the National Economic Council (NEC) as Hart and his backers, freshly infused with money from the conservative Volker Fund and the Du Pont family, began an ambitious program of expansion. Offices in Chicago, and later Detroit, were added, as well as a research bureau in Washington, DC, headed by Harry S. Barger, a lawyer and seasoned political operative. Barger, who shared Hart’s antisemitism and his nationalist conservative convictions, functioned as a lobbyist for the NEC, helping to refine opposition to policies and draft prepared

28 MKH, ECL, no. 86 (December 1940): 1; MKH, ECL, no. 210 (March 1949): 2; MKH, ECL, no. 95 (October 1941): 3; MKH, ECL, no. 217 (June 1949): 2.

29 MKH to Irénée du Pont, April 7, 1949, Acc. 22, Ser. J, box 57, Irénée du Pont Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE [hereafter IDPP]; “The Present Work of the NEC,” n.d. (c. 1944), Acc. 22, Ser. J, box 57, IDPP.

30 MKH, ECL, no. 183 (January 1948): 4, emphasis in original removed; MKH to Irénée du Pont, June 23, 1950, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP. Liberals were alarmed by Hart’s proposals. See “Arm Yourself with Guns, Advises Merwin K. Hart, Backer of Fascists,” PM, January 16, 1948, 8.

statements for congressional appearances by Hart and other council figures.³¹ In May of that year, the NEC launched its *Review of Books* under the editorship of the imperious but aging Albert Jay Nock. The recruitment of Nock, a sophisticated, acerbic, and influential libertarian essayist with broad connections to the conservative movement, was something of a coup for Hart. The activities of the NEC, Nock wrote to a friend in 1943, were “fully consistent with the convictions and principles that I have maintained in public and in private for forty years.” Nock used the platform to survey the state of conservative literature in the early 1940s, to mourn the loss of economic freedom, and to laud the small number of works that conformed to his hardnosed vision.³²

The war years were a time of frenetic activity for the NEC. “We are fighting two wars,” ran a council publication published in 1944: “a military war against the Axis powers for our survival as a nation, and a war on the home front against alien ideologies.” Although no supporter of Hitler, Hart, consumed by lurid visions of the communist conspiracy, regarded America’s entry into the war as symptomatic of the cancer that had infected the nation’s political life. “The situation of the American people at this moment is, I believe, critical in the extreme,” he wrote to the conservative publisher Frank Gannett in 1943. “There is strong evidence that they are being conditioned for Communism.” If individuals of “reputation” and “character” did not rise up and take control of the Republican Party, Hart reasoned, America would succumb to Soviet tyranny.³³

Hart’s allies during these years were not restricted to his nationalist conservative compatriots. He collaborated closely and corresponded with a range of mainstream libertarians including Rose Wilder Lane—who edited the council’s *Review of Books* after Nock’s death—the Jewish conservative columnist George Sokolsky, who was a close ally of Hart’s despite his antisemitism, Leonard Read, whom Hart visited regularly at the Foundation for Economic Education in Irvington, New York, and a host of others. The libertarian economist Orval Watts and journalist Edna Lonigan contributed to the council’s *Review of Books*, while Robert LeFevre, libertarian impresario and close ally of Lane’s, became vice president of the NEC in the mid-1950s. Hart also collaborated closely with the conservative Committee for Constitutional Government (CCG), conferring regularly with its secretary, Edward Rumely, on strategy, distributing the

31 MKH to Irénée du Pont, June 17, 1943, Irénée du Pont to MKH, June 30, 1943, and Lamot du Pont to Irénée du Pont, March 29, 1944, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP; MKH, memo, n.d. (c. 1943), Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP; HSCLA, 42; MKH to Pat McCarran, February 15, 1951, box 3, folder 7, MKHP; MKH, “Memorandum of Conversation with Harry S. Barger,” December 1948, in HSCLA, 44.

32 Nock to Mrs. Edmund C. Evans and Ellen Winsor, September 21, 1944, in *Letters from Albert Jay Nock*, ed. Frank W. Garrison (Caldwell, ID: Caxton, 1949), 206. On Nock, the best biography is Michael Wreszin, *The Superfluous Anarchist: Albert Jay Nock* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1971). See also, among others, Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas & Personalities Throughout American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 148–50.

33 NEC promotional flyer, n.d. (1944), box 58, folder 6, GESP; MKH to Gannett, October 5, 1943, box 2, folder 46, MKHP.

CCG's material, and campaigning for a constitutional amendment to limit taxation proposed by the conservative lawyer Robert Dresser, who was a director of both the CCG and the NEC.³⁴

At the same time, Hart cultivated his connections with the far right. Benjamin H. Freedman, notorious Holocaust denier and vehement antisemite, was a director of the NEC, and Hart established links throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s with an array of figures on the far-right fringe of conservatism. Hart helped finance the publication of *Common Sense*, a newsletter published by the vitriolic antisemite Conde McGinley, and numbered among his allies Gerald L. K. Smith, America's most prominent antisemite. "I have many times thought with admiration of the courage that you both have shown," Hart wrote to Smith in 1960. "And I still have confidence that what you have done and what others have done will still bear fruit." Hart shared his far-right compatriots' taste for antisemitic literature. Of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a notorious antisemitic forgery purporting to show a Jewish plot for world domination, he wrote: "I feel that what they [the *Protocols*] outline is exactly what is being worked out at the present time." Hart was also a close friend of John O. Beaty, whose *The Iron Curtain Over America* (1951)—condemned by the Anti-Defamation League as "one of the most anti-Semitic books ever published"—he strove to distribute across the nation.³⁵

Throughout these years the NEC was financed by an array of industrialists, including the chemicals tycoon Edgar Monsanto Queeny, the Du Pont brothers, the oil man and pivotal conservative financier J. Howard Pew, the salt magnate Sterling Morton, and

34 MKH to Wadsworth W. Mount, June 2, 1958, box 8, folder 22, MKHP; "Action of the Board of Directors of the NEC," June 1943, box 58, folder 6, GESP; Lane to MKH, January 4, 1961, box 5, folder 9, Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA; MKH to Charles W. Hawkins, November 10, 1947, in HSCLA, 259; C. G. Dall to Carl P. Dick, November 18, 1946, in *ibid.*, 203; Rumely to MKH, December 11, 1947, in *ibid.*, 273; Platform For a Free America (New York: National Economic Council, 1954), 7, box 130, AKP; LeFevre to MKH, May 10, 1954, and MKH to LeFevre, May 12, 1954, box 8, Robert LeFevre Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR; "Action of the Board of Directors of the National Economic Council," June 29, 1943, box 7, MKHP; MKH to James P. Selvage, January 20, 1947, in HSCLA, 205. On the CCG, see Joanne Dunnebecke, "The Crusade for Individual Liberty: The Committee for Constitutional Government, 1937–1958" (master's thesis, University of Wyoming, 1987).

35 HSCLA, 276; David B. MacDonald, *Identity Politics in the Age of Genocide: The Holocaust and Historical Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 56; Arnold Forster and Benjamin R. Epstein, *The Troublemakers: An Anti-Defamation League Report* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1952), 93–103; MKH to Pedro A. del Valle, December 21, 1949, in HSCLA, 530–31; MKH, "Memorandum of Trip to Chicago and Milwaukee, December 5–8, 1948," in *ibid.*, 375; MKH to Smith, December 29, 1960, box 52, Gerald L. K. Smith Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI; MKH to Douglas Reed, November 9, 1948, in HSCLA, 368; MKH to Freda Utley, February 27, 1952, box 9, Freda Utley Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA. ADL quote is from Don E. Carleton, *Red Scare: Right-Wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism, and Their Legacy in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 118. On Smith, see Glen Jeansonne, *Gerald L. K. Smith: Minister of Hate* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997). The best source on Beaty is Frank P. Mintz, *The Liberty Lobby and the American Right: Race, Conspiracy, and Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 51–58; see, also, Walsh, "Right-Wing Popular Front," 416–17.

Robert E. Wood, the head of Sears Roebuck. Hart, in a 1948 letter to Pew, revealed that the NEC had received support from some three thousand donors, large and small, but it was clear that the council derived most of its funding from a small group of individuals and corporations.³⁶ Hart's financial backers, in the main, shared his taste for conspiracy. Irénée du Pont, a close confidant of Hart, regularly invoked a plot by left-wing elements to sabotage American government. As he wrote to Hart in 1949: "A few weeks ago, I received from you a good, fighting letter pointing out what the real, basic, underlying trouble is in Washington—an alliance of 'pinks' with some undesirable Jewish people who seem to have seized control of the Government."³⁷

Nationalism and the Conservative Movement

On a frigid winter's night in February 1956, a capacity crowd of 3,500 massed at Carnegie Hall in New York for a "patriotic rally" celebrating George Washington's birthday. Held under the auspices of For America, a new nationalist conservative organization, the night was dominated by a fiery and combative speech from Senator Joseph McCarthy, then at low ebb from the peak of his infamy, who, in little more than a year, would die aged forty-eight. As McCarthy stood up to speak the crowd roared its approval in a ninety-second ovation. "Our long-term objective," he thundered, "must be the eradication of communism from the face of the earth." In the middle of McCarthy's speech, someone called out the name of president Eisenhower, and the crowd roundly booed. Dan Smoot, dashing former FBI agent turned anticommunist ultra, stood up to speak. "Modern liberalism and Communism," he shouted, "are the same."³⁸

The purpose of the rally, wrote the secretary of For America, was "to give public emphasis to the need for protecting our country against further internationalist and socialistic encroachments." And on the stage that night, as an "honored guest," was Merwin Hart, an American flag draped across his lap, as well as two figures who, over the next few decades, would transform the political climate of the American right: William F. Buckley Jr., the enfant terrible of the right, a skilled debater and wily and

36 "Present Work of the NEC"; Lamnot du Pont to Fellow American, December 10, 1948, and Lamnot du Pont to Pew, December 22, 1948, box 18, J. Howard Pew Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE [hereafter JHPP]; Pew to H. McAllister Griffiths, January 6, 1948, box 17, JHPP; MKH to Pew, June 23, 1948, box 18, JHPP; HSCLA, 69–70.

37 Lamnot du Pont to Irénée du Pont, March 29, 1944, and Irénée du Pont to MKH, January 7, 1948, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP; Irénée du Pont to John J. Williams, October 21, 1954, Acc. 228, Ser. J, box 105, IDPP; Irénée du Pont to MKH, July 12, 1949, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP.

38 "Thousands Hear Plea to Stand by America," *The Tablet* (Brooklyn, NY), March 3, 1956, 4; "M'Carthy Praises Role of M'Arthur," *New York Times*, February 23, 1956, 11; "Joe Likens MacArthur to George Washington in Speech at New York," *The Appleton (WI) Post-Crescent*, February 23, 1956, 2; Murray Kempton, "With Malice toward All," unattributed, n.d., clipping in box 133, Group Research Inc. Records, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, NY.

precocious magazine editor; and Clarence Manion, a radio provocateur, conservative polemicist, and key ally of Barry Goldwater.³⁹

Buckley's connections to Hart and an earlier generation of conservative activists ran, by and large, through his father. Albert Jay Nock, George Robnett, and Hart himself were close friends with Buckley senior. On October 22, 1951, young Buckley launched his first, incendiary book, *God and Man at Yale*, at the University Club in New York, at an event hosted and organized by Hart. Hart's soirées were popular affairs, and a bevy of conservatives were in the audience.⁴⁰ In an earlier letter to the textile magnate Alfred Kohlberg, Hart had lavishly praised Buckley. "Few young Americans," he wrote, "promise to be so potent a factor in opposing both Communism and Socialism as young Bill Buckley."⁴¹ Robnett was especially enamored with Buckley, writing to an acquaintance that "Buckley has one of the most brilliant minds I have ever come in contact with."⁴² Hart functioned as an early mentor for young "Billie," the pair exchanging numerous letters on Buckley's work, while Buckley sent the manuscript of *God and Man* to Hart for his approval.⁴³ Buckley was also an attentive reader of Hart's NEC literature. In *God and Man* he repeatedly cited Rose Wilder Lane's 1947 review of Lorie Tarshis's *The Elements of Economics* in the *Review of Books*.⁴⁴ In a 1953 letter to Hart, Buckley professed himself "in agreement with the overwhelming majority of your positions," and, writing to Joseph McCarthy's secretary, Buckley asserted that "90% of what has been said about him [Hart] is unjust."⁴⁵ But by the late 1950s Buckley had drifted

39 Raymond S. Richmond, memo, "To All Holders of Tickets to the Carnegie Hall Patriotic Rally," February 18, 1956, b. 18, f. 13, MKHP; "Radioman Plugs 'For America,' 'Lunatic Fringe' of Right Wing," *The Gazette and Daily* (York, PA), June 20, 1956, 2; MKH to Richmond, February 15, 1956, and February 23, 1956, MKH to Bonner Fellers, February 29, 1956, and June 1, 1955, box 8, folder 13, MKHP. On Buckley, the best account is still John B. Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988). On Manion, see Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

40 Henry Regnery to MKH, October 4, 1951, box 2, folder 34, MKHP; MKH to Buckley, October 11, 1951, box 2, folder 34, MKHP.

41 MKH to Kohlberg, October 4, 1951, box 130, AKP.

42 Robnett to James W. Clise, December 5, 1955, box 6, James W. Clise Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR.

43 MKH to Buckley, October 11, 1951, box 2, folder 34, MKHP; Sandra J. Peart and David M. Levy, "F. A. Hayek and the 'Individualists,'" in *F. A. Hayek and the Modern Economy*, ed. Sandra J. Peart and David M. Levy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 30–33.

44 William F. Buckley Jr., *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of "Academic Freedom"* (1951; repr., Washington, DC: Regnery, 2002), 64, 221.

45 Buckley to MKH, April 7, 1953, Acc. 1997–M–160, box 4, William F. Buckley Jr. Papers, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT [hereafter WFBP]; Buckley to Mary Driscoll, December 29, 1954, box 3, WFBP.

away from Hart, probably as a result of the older man's increasingly rabid antisemitism. Buckley seems, though, to have retained some confidence in Hart's abilities. In 1960, Hart became a member of the national advisory committee of Young Americans for Freedom, an influential conservative youth group that Buckley played a central role in founding. It was another link in the chain between the "old" and the "new" right.⁴⁶

Upton Close and the Evolution of Nationalism

In February 1946, the NEC began sponsoring the radio broadcasts of the widely known commentator and nationalist conservative Upton Close. Short and thin, with an unruly shock of black hair and large, drooping ears, Close fit the picture of a "rabble rouser," as his opponents dubbed him, to a tee. Born in Washington State, in 1895, as Joseph Washington Hall—he later acquired the *nom de guerre* Upton Close—he was raised on the western frontier on an Indian reservation along the Columbia River. In 1916, Close traveled to Shantung province in China, where he was placed in charge of the espionage arm of the American Legation, tasked with providing intelligence on the Japanese invasion of China. Throughout this period, and extending into the 1930s, Close served as a roving correspondent in Asia, publishing a series of well-regarded books on Chinese and Japanese social and political life and lecturing at the University of Washington. His politics in these years hewed to an internationalist liberalism. He was, above all, an adventurer, a swashbuckling correspondent who crammed his books full of vivid, picaresque episodes gleaned from his travels. Close's journalistic élan and sympathetic portraits of Asian life earned him a measure of fame, and his work was published in an array of high-profile American publications, including the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *New York Times*, which christened him "a prophet of the new order in Asia."⁴⁷

46 Herbert V. Kohler to MKH, October 13, 1960, box 8, folder 20, MKHP. On the YAF, see Gregory L. Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of the Contemporary Right* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). Buckley's early view of the nationalist right was summed up in a letter he wrote to an acquaintance about the former fascist propagandist Allan Zoll in late 1951: "I believe Allan Zoll's outfit is doing a splendid job. As for Zoll's past, I am utterly uninterested in it at the present time. . . . That is to say nothing of the fact that none of the leftist smear organizations has yet convinced me that they have stopped lying when they deal with Allan Zoll." Buckley to C. H. Huvelle, December 13, 1951, box 27, folder 2, Lucille Cardin Crain Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR.

47 "American Action Support Confronts Joseph McCarthy," *The Sheboygan (WI) Press*, October 10, 1946, 6; Irving E. Fang, *Those Radio Commentators!* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1977), 121–25; "Thrills Crowd Author's Life," *The Saskatoon (SK) Phoenix*, September 3, 1927, 21; Erna S. Tilley, "Upton Close—Joseph Washington Hall," n.d., box 1, Erna Spannagel Tilley Papers, Special Collections, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle, WA; "Brotherhoods Join in Meeting," *The Mansfield (OH) News*, January 25, 1928, 16; Dixon Wecter, "Hearing is Believing," *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1945, 55–56.

By the early 1940s, Close had swung to the right, embracing a vehement nationalist conservatism. The proximate cause of his shift seems to have been the coming of war in Europe. Although not sympathetic to Hitler, Close bitterly opposed American entry into the conflict, believing it would empower the Soviet Union and compromise America's capitalist order. Close believed, above all, in a "new and fervent American nationalism," and like Hart, he spurned the internationalist organizations that emerged from the Second World War. The United Nations, he argued, was the product of a "socialist plot," part and parcel of the Soviet design for world domination. Capitalism, he maintained, was the truly liberalizing force in human affairs. Unsurprisingly, Close regarded the New Deal as simply an "aborted" form of Marxism. The Roosevelt administration had orchestrated an all-out assault on private property. Its efforts were a prelude, he believed, to socialism in America.⁴⁸

In 1944, Close began work as a columnist for the *San Francisco Examiner*, the jewel in the crown of William Randolph Hearst's media empire. He used his column to attack the foreign policy of the Roosevelt administration and warn darkly of the red menace. The communist conspiracy, he argued in 1946, had penetrated the Truman administration, the labor unions, academia, and the churches. What was needed, he believed, was "a people's uprising" and the establishment of committees in every town and city tasked with monitoring communist propaganda and the encroaching Soviet threat. Close's vision of the communist conspiracy encompassed the totality of American political and social life. He indulged in wild imaginings, lapsing, at times, into self-parody. "How many of your friends realize that there is a close alliance between the campaign of cheap, unmoral pictures which come week after week to the theaters, and the Marxist program of revolution?" he asked in 1947. "The tie-up is found in the Communist attack on religion."⁴⁹

From 1934 to 1941, Close appeared sporadically as a radio commentator for NBC, discoursing on Asian affairs and American politics. From 1941 to 1944, he was given his own show, developing a loyal following as an expert on the Far East, a vociferous critic of liberalism, and an ardent anti-interventionist. The extension of American aid to Russia, he declared in May 1944, was being used to "support the creation of a greater

48 Upton Close, address before the Tacoma Chamber of Commerce, Tacoma, WA, October 9, 1943 (probable year), Post Presidential Individual Correspondence [hereafter PPIC], box 37, Herbert Hoover Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA [hereafter HHP]; Upton Close, "Common Sense for Americans," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 11, 1940, 3B; Close quoted in Forster and Epstein, *Troublemakers*, 21; Wecter, "Hearing is Believing," 59; L. M. Birkhead to WOR, August 22, 1946, box 1, Friends of Democracy Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC [hereafter FODR]; Upton Close, address before the North Dakota Education Association, Fargo, ND, October 24, 1946, box 1, FODR; "Close Lambasts New Deal; Labels His Opponents As 'Reds,'" *The Capital Times* (Madison, WI), October 29, 1946, 6.

49 Upton Close, "Upton Close Says," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 2, 1946, 7; Upton Close, "Upton Close Reports," *San Francisco Examiner*, January 27, 1947, 17.

totalitarian empire from which individual enterprise is barred.” The triumph of the USSR, he argued, would result in a dictatorship that encompassed all of Asia. His fans were ecstatic. A prominent conservative industrialist, writing to Close, invoked the “thrill that there is one American left who dares to say what he says—and how he says it!!!” But in October 1944, Close was dropped from the NBC lineup after he vigorously defended Tyler Kent, an American diplomat convicted of passing on information to the Axis powers about Roosevelt’s earlier efforts to draw America into the war. Close, ever ready to assume the pose of a martyr, complained that radical elements had forced him off the air. In Congress, Republican representative Roy Woodruff of Michigan denounced Close’s firing as “terrorism on the radio,” the direct result of a policy of disbaring writers and commentators who would “not bend the knee to the administration.”⁵⁰

By late 1945, a campaign was building to put Close back on the air. As Senator Albert Hawkes of New Jersey wrote to Irénée du Pont in October: “I consider the question of putting Mr. Upton Close back on the air is [*sic*] so important to all who wish to combat the evil influences of un-American commentators and publications.” The NEC, guided by Hart’s devotion to Close’s broadcasts, swung into action, swiftly raising some \$230,000 to provide a regular spot for Close’s fulminations. “[W]e are glad to sponsor Upton Close,” Hart crowed in his *Council Letter*, “because of his broad knowledge, his sterling patriotism, his righteous indignation over current attempts to wreck this great Republic by shooting into its bloodstream the virus of Communism.” Close’s broadcasts, Hart argued, would help bring about a new birth of freedom, a return to the “kind of United States we had for 150 years.”⁵¹

In February 1946, Close began broadcasting under the sponsorship of the NEC. “This is an American program, and will remain an American program,” he declared in the first broadcast. “It is for America first, it is for America last, and it is for America all the time.” He used his program to attack his enemies on the left and laud the blessings of free enterprise.⁵² For Close, American capitalism had raised the nation from an agrarian backwater to a position of unparalleled supremacy in world affairs. The Founding Fathers, he argued, had rejected European collectivism, fashioning a new

50 Fang, *Those Radio Commentators!*, 124–25; Wecter, “Hearing is Believing,” 59; Upton Close, “Close-Ups of the News,” radio transcript, May 7, 1944, 2, box 1, folder 35, American Reactionary Political Ephemera Collection, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL; Vivien Kellems to Julia and Upton Close, September 26, 1944, box 10, folder 4, Vivien Kellems Papers, Archives and Special Collections, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT; “Upton Close Lays Air Ban to ‘Red’ Pressure,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 15, 1944, 9; Upton Close, “Upton Close Reports,” *San Francisco Examiner*, October 23, 1944, 15; *Congressional Record*, 78th Cong., 2nd Sess. (December 6, 1944), 8,936.

51 Hawkes to Irénée du Pont, October 22, 1945, Acc. 228, Ser. J, box 104, IDPP; Arnold Forster, *A Measure of Freedom: An Anti-Defamation League Report* (New York: Doubleday, 1950), 50; MKH, ECL, no. 140 (March 1946): 1.

52 Upton Close, script of broadcast over the Mutual Network, February 19, 1946, 1. All copies of scripts in possession of author.

type of state premised on the liberty of the individual. The essence of this, the American experiment, was a faith in the rights of property as the keystone of individual freedom. “Private ownership is the *basic* freedom of *all* the liberty for which our fathers fought,” he declared. “Where private ownership is untrammled men get freedom in all other phases of life. Where private ownership is *destroyed* all other liberty is supplanted by the voice of the boss and slavery to government.” Yet the system of free enterprise and individual liberty, he believed, stood menaced from all sides. No compromise could be made with the enemies of America, no quarter given to socialism, for the nation could not operate “half free and half communized.” America would enter a new era of abundance and freedom if, and only if, the restrictions on free enterprise were scrapped, and the energies and ingenuity of the people liberated at last from the “paternalism” of the “pro-Russian” New Deal.⁵³

In his broadcasts, Close called for a new “nationalism,” a vigorous faith that would rest on the example of America—conceived in liberty—rather than an “internationalism” based on “the thin and *tainted* air of a pretended community of interest between *our* elective government and Russian dictatorship.” His plea apparently fell on receptive ears. By April, Close was broadcasting on more than sixty stations and receiving four and a half thousand letters a month from listeners. His broadcasts were managed by Leo F. Reardon, a former lieutenant of Father Charles Coughlin, the radio priest—and by this point virulent antisemite—who had preached to a colossal audience throughout the 1930s. Reardon, a hard-line nationalist with close ties to Hart who would later manage the broadcasts of Clarence Manion, decried the efforts of the “internationalists” to “sink the United States into One-World oblivion.” Under his influence Close’s efforts grew, throughout 1946, more and more extreme, attracting a hailstorm of criticism from the left. Yet their success was, in many respects, undeniable. By August, the NEC had secured for the broadcasts a large New York station, bringing Close’s audience to around eight million per episode. The broadcasts, Hart wrote that same month, had “stirred up fresh animosities among the reds and pinks, and this is the best possible test of our growing success.”⁵⁴

53 Close, script of broadcast, February 19, 1946, 1–2; Upton Close, script of broadcast, June 11, 1946, 2, emphasis in original; Upton Close, script of broadcast, March 19, 1946, 2; Upton Close, script of broadcast, April 16, 1946, 2; Upton Close, script of broadcast, March 26, 1946, 1; Upton Close, script of broadcast, February 4, 1947, 1; Upton Close, script of broadcast, August 6, 1946, 2.

54 Close, script of broadcast, February 4, 1947, 2, emphasis in original; Close to Friend, April 1, 1946, box 14, Charles Parsons Papers, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT; Arnold Forster and Benjamin R. Epstein, *Danger On the Right* (New York: Random House, 1964), 115–16; Reardon, open letter, n.d., box 51, Sterling Morton Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL [hereafter SMP]; “Freedom of Speech In New York (?),” *The Tablet*, August 31, 1946, 3; MKH to Sterling Morton, August 22, 1946, box 8, SMP. On Coughlin, see, among others, Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, & the Great Depression* (New York: Knopf, 1982), esp. ch. 4; and Ronald H. Carpenter, *Father Charles E. Coughlin: Surrogate Spokesman for the Disaffected* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998). According to journalist John L. Spivak, Reardon had served as Cough-

Organizing Resistance: American Action, Inc.

Close was convinced that the American republic stood at a precipice, that the fate of human liberty and private enterprise in the United States “could be settled forever” by the 1946 elections. He was not alone. In February 1945, Hart and a group of fellow conservatives began planning a new national political committee that would combat the Congress of Industrial Organization’s Political Action Committee (CIO-PAC) on its own terms.⁵⁵ Christened American Action, the organization’s purpose was to defend America against its domestic “enemies” by intervening in congressional elections in support of conservative candidates. Hart had been planning an organization that would extend into congressional districts since late 1944, but American Action was larger and more sophisticated than anything he had attempted before. Over two balmy days, in Chicago in July 1945, some forty delegates from across the nation met to adopt a statement of principles and begin preparation for the following year’s congressional elections. In attendance were a host of conservatives, including John T. Flynn, Samuel Pettengill, George Robnett, and Upton Close.⁵⁶

American Action embodied, in many ways, the midwestern anti-interventionist nationalism championed by Robert R. McCormick of the *Chicago Tribune*—not least because McCormick was a high-profile supporter. But it pointedly eschewed foreign policy for a domestic program that hewed, in its essentials, to the philosophy of the

lin’s emissary to Germany, with Reardon visiting Berlin in 1939 to convene with Hitler, among other Nazi leaders. Spivak, *The “Save the Country” Racket* (New York: New Century Publishers, 1948), 13. Spivak was much later revealed to be a KGB agent. See John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vassiliev, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 160–64.

55 The seed of the organization, seemingly, was a meeting Hart held with Robert R. McCormick in early 1944. MKH to McCormick, March 13, 1944, Business Correspondence, box 38, Robert R. McCormick Papers, Charles Deering McCormick Library, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL. Spivak, in his exposé of American Action, attributes the idea for the organization entirely to Hart. Spivak, “Save the Country,” 6, 10. Spivak also writes, “Hart discussed the idea with John T. Flynn in the East, former Congressman Samuel Pettengill in the Mid-West and Upton Close, the radio commentator, on the west coast” (8).

56 “Help to Keep Upton Close On the Air,” n.d. (1946), box 1, FODR; Close to Friend and Subscriber, January 7, 1946, box 1, FODR; MKH to Irénée du Pont, June 28, 1945, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP; Samuel Grafton, “They’ve Got Everything,” *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), October 11, 1946, 25; MKH to John T. Flynn, December 16, 1944, box 2, folder 42, MKHP; MKH to Robert Lund, December 1, 1945, box 58, folder 6, GESP; MKH to Irénée du Pont, October 15, 1945, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP; Cary McWilliams, *A Mask for Privilege: Anti-Semitism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1949), 196–97; John Roy Carlson, *The Plotters* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1946), 288–89; Walter K. Lewis, “Behind the New Action Committee,” *New Leader*, October 12, 1946, clipping in box 1, Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota Records, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN [hereafter JCRCR]. According to John Spivak, Hart and Close had by this time severed their friendship over disagreements with the financing of Close’s radio programs. Spivak, “Save the Country,” 22–28.

nationalist conservatives. Its aim was to “organize the great *majorities* of the Right more effectively than alien-minded radicals have organized the vociferous *minorities* of the Left,” to “purge” the major parties of opportunistic leadership and advance the principles of free enterprise, property rights, and individual liberty.⁵⁷ The ideology propagated by American Action fused a militant libertarianism with vitriolic anticommunism and the nativist fear of the alien other. The organization championed ruthlessly cutting federal spending, a total ban on immigration, a constitutional amendment limiting taxation, and the repeal of all laws that restricted free enterprise.⁵⁸

In December 1945, writing to Robert L. Lund, a former president of the National Association of Manufacturers, Hart noted that the preliminary organization of American Action was progressing apace. The organization’s plan was to assemble political committees in various states, distribute literature to voters, hold meetings, and systematically canvass voters district by district. American Action swiftly opened offices in Chicago and Los Angeles, and by mid-1946 the organization was actively intervening on the ground in an array of states.⁵⁹

Robert E. Wood, the head of Sears Roebuck and leader of the prewar anti-interventionist America First Committee (AFC), played a critical role in the development of American Action. A former general in the US army, he had risen to fame as the dynamic and wildly successful head of Sears. Throughout the 1930s, he supported much of the New Deal, corresponding regularly with Roosevelt and other administration figures, but the coming of war brought about a revolution in his thought. As head of the AFC, Wood channeled his energies into a campaign to stop American entry into the conflict, a cause that progressively isolated him from his erstwhile allies. In the years following Pearl Harbor and the dissolution of the AFC, he embraced a hard-line nationalist conservatism, expending a considerable portion of his fortune in support of an array of conservative groups. His worldview combined a fevered anti-interventionism and antiglobalism with a resolute belief in free-market capitalism, and he was instrumental in devising the strategy of American Action, guaranteeing that it would not be another “propaganda” outfit but one committed to direct political action in marginal congressional districts. Drawing on his extensive contacts in the US Congress,

57 Marquis Childs, “Calling Washington,” *Washington Post*, October 19, 1946, 6; Hearings Before the Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, House of Representatives [hereafter CICE], 79th Cong., 2nd Sess. (October 1946), 205; “American Action: This Light Must Never Go Out!,” n.d. (c. 1946), 3–4, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP, emphasis in original.

58 “American Action,” 5; “General Plan,” n.d. (c. 1945), 9–10, box 26, Robert E. Wood Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA [hereafter REWP]. On McCormick, see Richard Norton Smith’s superb, *The Colonel: The Life and Legend of Robert R. McCormick, 1880–1955* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997).

59 “General Plan,” 3; CICE, 218.

Wood managed to secure the blessing of the “topmost” Republican and “constitutional” Democratic leaders for the cause.⁶⁰

American Action was, in many ways, not a new venture in American politics but the product of a long period of exploratory work in the construction of a durable right-wing alliance. With its roots in the AFC, of which Hart had been a prominent member, the group drew on the energies and enmities of a representative selection of the nationalist conservative right. Salem Bader, a notorious Los Angeles nationalist, and Gertrude Coogan, a nationalist conservative polemicist, were both integral to the founding of the group, as were figures such as the libertarian Duke law professor and Committee for Constitutional Government advisory board member Malcolm McDermott. It was funded by a similar group of donors—the Du Ponts, the Pews, Robert Dresser, Frank Gannett, the heads of GM and the Volker Fund, among others—that supported the NEC, the Foundation for Economic Education, and other conservative organizations. Its leadership included several CCG trustees and top NEC figures, as well as representatives of conservative business groups, such as the National Small Business Men’s Association.⁶¹ And it included on its executive committee Robert M. Harriss, Charles Coughlin’s intimate friend and supporter, cementing American Action’s connections with the prewar far right.⁶²

In August 1946, Hart stepped down as national executive of American Action. Wood, in an earlier letter to John T. Flynn, had criticized Hart’s approach, and it seems likely that he pressured Hart to relinquish control. In retrospect, Hart’s demotion seemed to indicate that his influence on the conservative movement was beginning, slowly, to wane. Hart’s replacement, Edward A. Hayes, a former national commander of the American Legion, was a less controversial figurehead, although Hart remained

60 Justus D. Doenecke, “General Robert E. Wood: The Evolution of a Conservative,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 71, no. 3 (August 1978): 163–74; “Statement by General Robert E. Wood,” August 5, 1957, box 162, J. Bracken Lee Papers, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT; Wood to Irénée du Pont, August 15, 1946, and MKH to Irénée du Pont, October 5, 1945, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP. On the AFC, see the classic account by Wayne S. Cole, *America First: The Battle Against Intervention, 1940–1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1953).

61 Harry Wohl, “Isolationists Rally in Chicago to Kill ‘One World’ Plans,” *The St. Louis Star and Times*, July 26, 1943, 1; McWilliams, *Mask for Privilege*, 200; Walter K. Lewis, “American Action Meets in Secret,” *New Leader*, November 2, 1946, clipping in box 1, JCRCR; Eugene Segal, “Upton Close Group Called Anti-Semitic,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, March 7, 1946, 14; Carlson, *Plotters*, 145–46; CICE, 213, 242–45; “Report on Rumely Groups: Installment IV,” *Democracy’s Battle*, May 1950, 1–2; Eugene Segal, “New Nationalist Group Starts with Some Acceptable Things, Then Attack on Jews Is Launched in Meeting,” *The Knoxville (TN) News-Sentinel*, March 5, 1946, 15; “Financiers Support Hateler Coalition,” *The Propaganda Battlefield*, September 30, 1946, clipping in box 1, JCRCR.

62 Spivak, “Save the Country,” 31; “From One Hole to Another—Our Goofy Gold Game,” *On the March*, May 1939, 9–10; “Pro-Fascist Groups Unchanged by Roosevelt Proclamation,” *City Reporter*, June 3, 1941, 4. According to Spivak, Hart was pushed out because he was widely known as “pro-fascist” and the organization decided it needed a leader with a clean reputation. Spivak, “Save the Country,” 21.

a key member of the organization's executive committee. Hayes was, in many ways, an inspired choice. Drawing on his nationwide connections to "patriotic" organizations such as the American Legion, American Action was able to quickly mobilize individuals on the ground.⁶³

By October 1946, American Action was active in ten states. Although the organization was outwardly bipartisan, in practice it exclusively backed Republicans. It supported candidates in five districts in Illinois and Massachusetts, in two districts in California, and candidates in Connecticut, New Hampshire, New York, Oklahoma, Michigan, New Jersey, and Wisconsin, while aiding candidates for the Senate in a number of races. Hayes traveled the country, attending rallies in support of American Action's favored candidates, such as Fred E. Busbey, a nationalist conservative congressman who liaised regularly with the organization.⁶⁴ Ultimately, American Action spent \$114,000 on the election, about one-sixth of both the Republican National Committee budget of \$650,000 and the \$665,000 disbursed by the CIO-PAC. It was a year of Republican triumph, and the money raised by American Action was seemingly well spent. Twenty-two of the twenty-three candidates American Action backed were elected. The organization, in a twist of fate, liberally backed the senatorial candidacy of a little-known former marine from Wisconsin, Joseph R. McCarthy. Hayes was delighted with the result. American Action's efforts, he declared, "not alone measured up to expectations but surpassed them." Wood was similarly pleased, praising Hayes for his "magnificent job," while the politicians who had received support flooded Hayes with appreciative letters.⁶⁵

Wood hoped to keep American Action active for the 1948 election, convinced that the year would bring further heavy Republican gains. "[T]he Chairman of the Republican National Committee," Wood wrote to a business associate in June 1948, "is

63 Wood to Flynn, March 1, 1946, box 5, REWP; MKH to Irénée du Pont, October 15, 1945, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP; CICE, 203, 210, 256.

64 "American Action, Inc. Claims Political Activity," Portage (WI) Daily Register, October 17, 1946, 2; "General Plan," 7–8; Report of the Special Committee on Campaign Expenditures, House of Representatives [hereafter RSCCE], 79th Cong., 2nd Sess. (1947), 33; Harold T. Halfpenny to Percy Priest, October 30, 1946, in CICE, 236–37; "American Action' Group in 10 States," The Green Bay (WI) Press-Gazette, October 17, 1946, 2; "Trouble for the Republicans?," The Rhinelander (WI) Daily News, October 28, 1946, 4; Wood to Sterling Morton, October 15, 1947, box 10, SMP.

65 RSCCE, 33; Mary Spargo, "Political Expenditures Smash Record for Off-Year Election," Washington Post, November 5, 1946, 9; Hayes to Sterling Morton, July 14, 1948, box 11, SMP; Karl E. Meyer, "The Politics of Loyalty: From La Follette to McCarthy in Wisconsin, 1918–1952" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1956), 148; Edward A. Hayes, "American Action Leader Answers Leftist Smears," The Tablet, November 30, 1946, 6; Wood to R. K. Christenberry, November 15, 1946, box 26, REWP. On the letters from congressmen, see the material in box 26, REWP. McCarthy returned the favor, appearing on Close's radio program in 1950, and inserting Close's newsletters into the Congressional Record. Reportedly, the pair saw each other almost twice a day during this period, and Close seems to have ghostwritten some of McCarthy's speeches. See Charles R. Allen Jr. and Arthur J. Dugloff, "McCarthy and Anti-Semitism: A Documentary Exposé," Jewish Life, July 1953, 5–6.

very anxious to have American Action do what it can in this election.”The organization successfully backed a number of by-election candidates in 1947, drawing on finances supplied by Wood’s extensive business contacts. And evidence suggests that American Action campaigned, in a modest way, in the 1948 elections. But following Truman’s victory—a “crushing defeat,” in Hart’s words, due to “liberal” infiltration of the Republican Party—the organization was dissolved. Ultimately, the grand plan of the founders of American Action—the effort, always agonizing, to forge a durable and broad-based conservative alliance—would have to wait till the 1960s.⁶⁶

George W. Robnett and the Allure of Antisemitism

A close ally of Hart and Upton Close, the former advertising man George Washington Robnett carved out a peripatetic career as a nationalist conservative polemicist throughout 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Tall, thin, and balding, with small, quizzical eyes, jowly features, and a penchant for loud ties, Robnett was an ardent foe of liberalism with broad links to the conservative mainstream. Born in 1889, in rural Illinois, he was raised on a farm in the “backwoods” in a family shadowed by poverty. By his early twenties, he had abandoned rural life, moving to Chicago in pursuit of a career in advertising and corporate publicity. His earliest publishing forays were in success literature—giddy, bite-size essays on the principles of *Getting Ahead*. He was an early and passionate supporter of Herbert Hoover, with whom he corresponded at length. And with the coming of the New Deal and the Roosevelt “revolution,” he embraced an unyielding conservatism, aghast at the reckless “squandering” of federal funds that he regarded as the essence of the New Deal.⁶⁷

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Robnett studied the reports of congressional committees formed to counter subversive movements and began accumulating a large library of left-wing literature. His task, as he would later recall, was to “bring out into the open the nature and character and purpose of some of the main communist ‘fronts’ in this country.” Robnett believed, like many conservatives, that the origin of the communist conspiracy in America could be traced to Roosevelt’s diplomatic recognition of the USSR in 1933. “Stalin’s regime was tottering,” he declared in 1948, “and there

66 Wood to Lamar Fleming Jr., June 17, 1948, Wood, open letter, n.d. (c. December 1947), and Wood to H. R. Cullen, October 11, 1948, box 26, REWP; MKH, ECL, no. 203 (November 1948): 1.

67 “Altrusa Club’s President to Wed George W. Robnett,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 17, 1921, 15; “Notice for Publication: Department of the Interior, U.S. Land Office at Lawton, Okla., June 16, 1909,” *The Cheyenne (OK) Star*, July 1, 1909, 7; George W. Robnett, “The Power of Truth,” *The Salt Lake (UT) Telegram*, November 14, 1918, 2; M. L. Crawford, “Chicago Better Business Bureau, Inc. re: Church League of America,” July 8, 1943, box 8, JHPP; Shirley Lees, “Speaker Says Immigration Law Keeps Undesirable Aliens Out,” *The Pomona (CA) Progress Bulletin*, March 4, 1957, 9; Robnett to Hoover, July 22, 1935, PPIC, box 194, HHP; George W. Robnett, “Vote Counting Problems,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 12, 1960, 3.

were people in America who wanted to keep communism alive.” Indeed, the New Deal, he believed, was ultimately a phase in the “socialistic” revolution that had encircled the globe.⁶⁸

Robnett’s thought combined a purist libertarianism with the nativism and bigotry of the nationalist right. Free enterprise, he told an audience in 1948, “is the only true freedom,” for capitalism provided the material basis for the maintenance of American liberties. The essential human freedoms that the Founding Fathers fought for, Robnett argued in 1945, were being attacked and repudiated “*everywhere in the world.*” Capitalism, he warned, was under siege from an army of “leftists” who were “hacking away” at its foundations. The assault on free enterprise, for Robnett, was the logical product of the communist conspiracy. Robnett, like his allies, regarded the conspiracy as the animating force of all political conflict in the United States. In thrall to visions of “alien” subversives, he indulged in many of the same conspiratorial narratives that governed Hart’s thought.⁶⁹

In 1937, on a frigid March afternoon at the Union League Club in Chicago, Robnett founded the Church League of America (CLA) with Frank J. Loesch, a prominent lawyer and former head of the Chicago Crime Commission, and Henry P. Crowell, chairman of the board of Quaker Oats. The purpose of the Church League was to expose and fight “Marxian-radicalism” in American life and to champion the principles of conservatism. Robnett, the guiding force of the organization, assumed the role of executive secretary of the league’s National Laymen’s Council. Despite its name, the Church League was not really a religious organization, although it counted some six thousand clergymen as members. In its early years, it relied on affiliated pastors to propagandize for conservatism, but the voice of the organization, the newsletter *News and Views*, was edited and written by Robnett with a distinctly secular cast. Robnett, as he later admitted, was “not much of a religionist,” and he avoided, for the most part, religious themes, using *News and Views* as a vehicle for his own brand of nationalist conservatism.⁷⁰

68 Forster and Epstein, *Danger on the Right*, 144–45; Robnett to Harry Bennett, August 16, 1945, box 1, George Washington Robnett Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR [hereafter GWRPO]; “Fight for Old American Way, GOP Club Told,” *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, March 11, 1951, 8.

69 “Communists Work behind Screen, Snaring Unwary with Show of ‘Sugar-Coated’ Purposes, Church Leader Says,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 23, 1948, 2; “Communist Menace Described by Speaker,” *Hattiesburg (MS) American*, March 22, 1948, 13; George W. Robnett, *News and Views* [hereafter NV], no. 154 (January 1945): 1–3, emphasis in original; George W. Robnett, NV, no. 180 (January 1948): 1; George W. Robnett, NV, no. 188 (November 1948): 1; Lees, “Speaker Says Immigration Law,” 9.

70 *What Is the Church League of America?* (Wheaton, IL: Church League of America, n.d.), 2, 5, emphasis in original; John George and Laird Wilcox, *Nazis, Communists, Klansmen, and Others on the Fringe: Political Extremism in America* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1992), 234; Robnett to Herbert

At a meeting hosted by the CLA in 1940, the businessman Sterling Morton assailed the trend toward “mob rule” under the New Deal. The heir to a family salt empire, Morton was a militant nationalist conservative and intransigent anti-interventionist who played a central role in the America First Committee. An ally of Robnett, Garett Garrett, Merwin Hart, Jasper Crane, Upton Close, Samuel Pettengill, William F. Buckley Jr., and Robert E. Wood, Morton contributed to an array of conservative organizations, including the CLA, the Committee for Constitutional Government, Hart’s NEC, American Action, and the early 1950’s *Freeman*, the influential conservative periodical.⁷¹ Morton attacked the “lawless dictatorship” of the New Deal, which aimed, he believed, for the “complete annihilation of the freedom of action of the individual in business, [and the] complete control of all means of production by the government.” He decried the Marshall Plan and foreign aid as a prelude to socialism in America. He embodied the philosophy of many of the former anti-interventionists, Wood and Hart among them, who decried overseas military adventures but believed that the Soviets posed an existential armed threat to the United States. Such a worldview, as exemplified neatly by a letter Morton wrote to Robert McCormick in 1947, flirted with contradiction. “Either we should decide to stay home and mind our own business,” he wrote, “or we should stop them where we really can, in Moscow!”⁷² At the same meeting that hosted Morton, the CLA launched its campaign for the 1940 election. The issues of the campaign, Robnett argued, were perfectly clear. The New Dealers aimed for more federal spending, more regulation of business, and greater centralization of government power. “That program,” he wrote, “is anathema to every liberty loving citizen.”⁷³

Robnett’s letters to allies were typically long, rambling, and slightly fevered, as if written passionately at great speed. The same tone, breathless and emphatic, marked his *News and Views* bulletins. “If there is anything that truly reflects the spirit of the Divine

Hoover, December 30, 1941, PPIC, box 194, HHP; Forster and Epstein, *Danger On the Right*, 145; “New Deal Target of Church League,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1940, 13; Robnett to Kenneth W. Colegrove, October 12, 1958, box 31, Kenneth W. Colegrove Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

71 “Warns against Mob Rule Trend of New Policies,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 20, 1940, 9; “Morton, Art Patron, Dies in California,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 25, 1961, P3–11; Robnett to Morton, April 26, 1947, box 9, SMP; Morton to Garrett, August 16, 1948, box 11, SMP; Crane to Morton, July 1, 1946, box 9, SMP; Fred G. Clark to J. Howard Pew, October 27, 1941, box 211, JHPP; Morton to Human Events, August 7, 1946, box 8, SMP; Pettengill to Morton, August 23, 1950, box 12, SMP; Morton to Buckley, August 5, 1957, box 51, SMP; Morton to Wood, November 30, 1948, and Morton to Isaac Don Levine, July 27, 1949, box 11, SMP.

72 “Sterling Morton Asserts His Famed Ancestor Wouldn’t Have Been in Accord with New Deal,” *The Lincoln (NE) Star*, November 18, 1935, 4; “Another Morton Shakes the Salt,” *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, WA), May 17, 1959, 4; Morton to McCormick, March 31, 1947, box 9, SMP.

73 “Warns Against Mob Rule Trend of New Policies,” 9; “Church League Warns Pastors of Polls Crisis,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 2, 1940, 2; George W. Robnett, *NV*, no. 18 (n.d.): 4.

on earth—it is that indefinable effervescence of protoplasmic energy and expression that we call the human EGO,” he wrote in 1945. “Everything we have . . . is directly traceable to and dependent upon that irrepressible mechanism of human thought and action which certain highly organized forces now seek to sacrifice on the glorified altar of Statism.”⁷⁴ Free enterprise, for Robnett, was simply the “natural” consequence of a “free people establishing a free society in a new world,” its hierarchies the product of nature’s laws. In this vision, capitalism was not a primitive contest between capital and labor, but a world-historical agent of human emancipation.⁷⁵

By the 1950s, Robnett’s nationalist conservatism had hardened. Increasingly preoccupied by nativist fears, Robnett came to regard immigration as the central threat to the American republic. In a contribution to Hart’s *Council Letter*, Robnett unspooled the elements of his nativist thought. Throughout the nineteenth century, he argued, America had risen to economic supremacy on the back of the “Christian founders and their blood stock.” By the turn of the twentieth century, though, a new influx of “aliens” from eastern Europe had flooded the country, fundamentally altering the racial and ideological character of the nation. “[T]his mass inflow,” he argued, “brought many problems,” including a strand of “militant socialism” that would ultimately spread its tentacles across the body politic. The Immigration Act of 1924 established racial quotas, limiting the flow of immigrants from eastern Europe, but the coming of the New Deal, he argued, brought about a breakdown of restrictions. By the late 1940s, a deluge of immigrant “Jews” had been admitted into America. “Many of them—no can know how many,” he wrote, “have become taxpayer burdens.” The crisis, he maintained, was acute, the threat imminent and grave. Only an “alert citizenry,” who would force the government to revise the nation’s immigration laws, could halt the destructive flow of immigrants once and for all.⁷⁶

Robnett’s growing relationship with Hart was of a piece with the shared trajectory of their political thought. While Robnett eschewed outright antisemitism in his bulletins, by the tail end of his career he had embraced a wholly racialized conception of political and social life. “Of all human kind the Jew is the greatest enigma,” he wrote to an acquaintance in 1961, “and the super-problem of all civilization.” Robnett regarded the estimate of six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust as a “fantastic figure.” “I am trying to get together as much authentic information as I can concerning the Jews that were killed by the Nazi program,” he wrote. “The 6,000,000 myth is repeated over and over.” Hart, for his part, echoed this theme. “[I]f there were 6,000,000 Jews within reach

74 George W. Robnett, NV, no. 154 (January 1945): 1.

75 George W. Robnett, NV, no. 146 (February 1944): 1–2; George W. Robnett, NV, no. 60 (n.d.): 1; George W. Robnett, NV, no. 200 (February 1950): 1, emphasis in original removed; George W. Robnett, NV, no. 61 (n.d.): 1; George W. Robnett, NV, no. 6 (n.d.): 3; George W. Robnett, NV, no. 189 (February 1949): 1.

76 George W. Robnett, ECL, no. 444 (December 1958): 1–4.

of Hitler, which number is widely questioned, and if they have all disappeared, where are they?" he asked in 1961. "Is it not likely that many of these 6,000,000 claimed to have been killed by Hitler and Eichmann are right here in the United States and are now joining in the agitation for more and more support for the state of Israel—even if the American Republic goes down?"⁷⁷

Robnett believed that the principle strength of the conservative movement lay in the sheer variety of organizations on the right. Hart, though, was of a different mind. Obsessed by the dream of a grand coalition of conservative organizations, he sought a union of patriotic forces that could combat the tide of "socialist" legislation emanating from Washington. Hart's goal was to organize a united front of conservative groups, a nationalist coalition directed by a policy committee. "Some may say that it is too late to undertake this," he wrote in 1949. But "at the present time almost anybody will undertake to respond, if he has the slightest conception . . . of the dangers with which the Republic is confronted."⁷⁸ No coalition of this type was ever effectuated, despite Hart's efforts. And in the end, by the late 1950s, it was Hart who increasingly found himself marginalized from the conservative movement. The toxic antisemitism and virulent nativism that defined his late work were shared by few conservatives, outside of a coterie who remained wedded to his conspiratorial visions. And by the early 1960s, many of Hart's erstwhile allies, eager to expand the conservative coalition, had abandoned him.

Conclusion

In the end, the nationalist conservatism that assailed Zionists and "alien" refugees could not flourish in the postwar climate of unparalleled affluence, declining "structural" antisemitism (i.e., policies limiting the admittance and influence of Jews in areas of American public life), and minimal immigration, in which an emerging generation of conservative activists repudiated antisemitism, in particular, as politically toxic. In time, as a result in part of the exigencies of an "internationalist" confrontation with the Soviet Union, extreme Cold War anticommunism displaced nativism, antisemitism, and anti-interventionism as the dominant ideological "glue" of conservatism. Nationalism, though, stripped of many of its bigoted associations, remained a potent force on the conservative right. An antipathy toward the web of "internationalist" organizations, and

77 Robnett to Robert Donner, January 12 and February 19, 1961, and January 16, 1960, box 2, George Washington Robnett Papers, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS; "Merwin K. Hart of Birch Society," *New York Times*, December 2, 1962, 88.

78 Robnett to Verne P. Kaub, December 2, 1949, box 1, American Council of Christian Laymen Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI; MKH to Brice P. Disque, April 21, 1948, in HSCLA, 117; MKH, memo, March 8, 1949, in HSCLA, 436–38. See also MKH to Bonner Fellers, June 1, 1955, box 8, folder 13, MKHP.

a belief in the inviolable primacy of American sovereignty, remained integral elements of the philosophy of conservatism. And as conservatism began to coalesce, in the mid-1950s, into a distinct and internally coherent movement, the principles of a revised nationalism would come to animate the work of a new generation of activists and intellectuals.

What was the ultimate significance of the nationalist conservative movement? Perhaps, in a longer historical perspective, we can see its pairing of bigotry and nationalism as a central strain of conservative ideology in America, a mode displaced for forty-five years by the sui generis demands of the Cold War. The absence of wholesale xenophobia from the mainstream of Cold War conservatism, in this view, can be seen as a product of a unique historical conjuncture, which swiftly evaporated—as evidenced by the Republican primary campaigns of Pat Buchanan in 1992 and 1996—after the dissolution of the USSR. From this perspective, Hart and his allies can be better seen as carriers of a type of conservatism, first honed in the struggle with the New Deal, that lay in abeyance for forty-five years, and then reemerged, with its essential spirit intact, in our own time.