



Owen Lattimore and Integrity: A Very Interesting and Satisfying Life

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

Following World War II, American foreign policy turned intensely against communism. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union vied for influence around the world. By 1950, the communists appeared to be winning. Soviet puppet governments had been established throughout Eastern Europe. Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin had imposed a blockade of West Berlin. In 1949 the Communist faction won China's civil war, and the Soviets tested their first atomic bomb. In June 1950, the communist government of North Korea ordered an invasion of South Korea. Senator Joseph McCarthy had an explanation for all of these setbacks of U.S. foreign policy goals: communists had infiltrated the U.S. State Department and were carrying out their plans to advance their ideology around the world. McCarthy fueled a Red Scare, the wave of anti-communist hysteria that ensued.

Democratic and Republican candidates for public office throughout the U.S. competed with one another to establish their anti-communist credentials. Beginning in 1947, President Truman and both houses of Congress established investigative procedures to identify individuals who had past or current involvement in any "totalitarian, fascist, communist, or subversive" organization.

In the inquisition-like hearings, a person accused of such association could consult an attorney and present witnesses and documents in his favor, but had no right to challenge his or her accusers or even know who they were. As anti-communist fervor swept the country, people became hyper-vigilant and eager to inform on their neighbors and co-workers, leading to "evidence" of disloyalty built in many cases on unsubstantiated hearsay, mistaken identity, or an old grudge. All these investigations uncovered only a few federal employees whose loyalty could reasonably be questioned and led to no evidence of espionage or subversion. Meanwhile, rumors of communist affiliation destroyed the reputations of thousands of people.

These events set the stage for Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist crusade. In a Wheeling, West Virginia speech on February 9, 1950, he waved a piece of paper and claimed that he had a list of 205 known members of the Communist Party who worked in the State Department. Over time, McCarthy's numbers changed as he made vague accusations of subversion at the highest levels. Such serious charges led the Senate immediately to begin an investigation, and McCarthy promised to provide detailed information supporting his allegations. For hours on the floor of the U.S. Senate, McCarthy conducted a bluffing, rambling harangue. Finally, challenged to provide proof about even a single disloyal individual, McCarthy named Owen Lattimore, a Far East scholar and professor at Johns Hopkins University who wrote about issues in Asia. McCarthy called him "the top Russian espionage agent in America."

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Born in 1900 in the United States, Lattimore spent his childhood in China, where his father taught French, German, and Spanish. Educated in England and Switzerland, Owen Lattimore was a journalist and businessman who traveled widely in China during the 1920s and 1930s, becoming fluent in the Chinese, Mongolian, and Russian languages. He was an expert observer of Chinese culture and politics who served as a special representative to the government of Chiang Kai-shek during World War II and later worked in the Office of War Information. During this period, Lattimore became convinced that Chiang Kai-shek was a corrupt dictator. The United States unofficially supported Chiang Kai-shek's government during the Chinese civil war, but the communist Mao Zedong won that conflict in 1949. Lattimore wrote articles explaining that it was unwise for the U.S. to take the position that the "real" government of China was the Nationalist party government led by Chiang when Mao's government held sway over the most populous country in the world, with a population of more than half a billion.

In his writings, Lattimore maintained that the United States should recognize Mao's government and take a position of "watchful waiting" to see where the U.S. could leverage a civil relationship with China against the goals of an expansionist Soviet Union. Lattimore wrote in 1945, for example, "We need political stability and economic prosperity in China so that we can invest our capital there safely and sell our products in an expanding market." Some in the U.S. thought Mao Zedong was a communist puppet of the Soviet Union. Lattimore, however, believed it was important for the United States to respect the cultural influences that led to Mao's popularity there. If the U.S. maintained a friendly and respectful relationship with the Mao regime, Lattimore reasoned, we might be able to steer Mao away from cooperation with Russia.

A fiercely autonomous thinker, Lattimore wrote in 1945, "My comments and interpretations have always been so independent that I have in my time been criticized by Chinese, Japanese, Germans, Russians, and Mongols, as well as by intemperate Americans...The criticisms run all the way from calling me an arch-imperialist to calling me a Red [communist]." These were the "pro-communist" sentiments that McCarthy hoped would lead to evidence of Lattimore's disloyalty.

In April of 1950, the Senate investigating committee chaired by Maryland's Senator Millard Tydings opened the Lattimore case. Lattimore, represented by attorney Abe Fortas, testified that McCarthy's accusations of espionage for the Soviets were "base and contemptible lies." Lattimore boldly told McCarthy that his behavior was "reckless, careless, and irresponsible." In response to questions about Asia policy, Lattimore determinedly reiterated his conviction that China was not a puppet of Soviet communism and could not be controlled by outside powers. In these hearings, the Tydings committee (with the exception of McCarthy himself) treated the professor with courtesy and respect. He was tough, resourceful, and brilliant, calling his accusers "crackpots, professional informers, hysterics and ex-Communists." Responding to the question of his affiliation with communism, the professor stated, "I was not a Communist [in 1936]; I was not and have not been a Communist at any other time, and I am not a Communist now."

The FBI had investigated Lattimore for more than a year during which time they followed him and tapped his phone. More than 2000 hours were spent on the Lattimore case, without

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producing a shred of evidence regarding espionage or subversion of any kind. In July, the committee released the report of its investigation, stating that McCarthy's charges were "perhaps the most nefarious campaign of half-truths and untruth in the history of this Republic." Examining each of the claims against Lattimore and finding them to be baseless, the report completely repudiated McCarthy's accusation, cleared Lattimore, and stated that McCarthy's tactics had "seriously impair[ed]" government efforts against subversion. Later in 1950, Lattimore wrote *Ordeal by Slander*, in which he warned of the dangers that demagoguery poses to free inquiry and expression. In Round 1 of McCarthy vs. Lattimore, Lattimore was victorious. Round 2 would follow close behind and would be lengthier and costlier.

As was his habit, McCarthy called his critics "liars, crooks, or traitors," and immediately attacked them as communist sympathizers. McCarthy alleged that the Tydings Committee report was a "signal to the traitors, Communists, and fellow travelers in our Government that they need have no fear of exposure from this Administration." While most Republicans saw McCarthy's tactics as irresponsible and fraudulent, it was politically dangerous to oppose him. Tydings lost his bid for reelection to the Senate. McCarthy's popularity, fueled by communist North Korea's invasion of South Korea in June, only grew as he continued his crusade against the evils of communism. The Senate Internal Security Subcommittee conducted additional investigations and heard further testimony (later proven to be false) against Lattimore.

Frustrated and angry at the continued assaults on his character, in 1951 Lattimore asked for a hearing before the Senate to clear his name. In the twelve-day grilling of the professor that began in February 1952, Lattimore accused his interrogators of instituting a "reign of terror." The committee hoped to find evidence that Lattimore had perjured himself in the earlier hearings. Both Lattimore and the committee's members were antagonistic, rude, and sarcastic to one another. Lattimore's demeanor was described as arrogant, and the committee members were said to have badgered the witness, seeking to trap him by catching him in a mistake that they could call perjury. Asking him questions about events, writings, and conversations extending back to the 1930s, the committee found that he had criticized western imperialism and approved of some of Stalin's policies. Responding to charges related to events of so long ago, Lattimore was a little less self-assured than he had been in the Tydings hearings but no less angry. Eugene Sekulow, a Johns Hopkins graduate student at the time, said, "Lattimore answered stupid questions by indicating that he thought they were stupid. He did not tolerate fools in his class. Why should he tolerate them in Congress?" The committee caught the defiant professor in several errors of memory, determined that he was a communist sympathizer, and secured a federal indictment against him for perjury.

Throughout the committee hearings and the legal battle that followed, Lattimore was on paid leave from Johns Hopkins University, whose motto is "The truth will set you free." After a long and costly legal battle, the charges against Lattimore were finally dropped in 1955 for lack of evidence. However, his prestige, influence, and reputation never recovered. Though he gratefully returned to the university as a lecturer, some of the university's donors canceled their gifts and academic freedom, even at Johns Hopkins, was chilled. A courageous man with vast knowledge of the Far East and the boldness to give his honest opinion even when it was not popular, his expertise was lost to future policymakers in America.

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Dismayed at the threat to academic freedom in America, Lattimore was invited to develop a department of Chinese Studies at the University of Leeds in England, where he taught from 1963 until his retirement in the 1970s. When asked in a 1979 interview, Lattimore said, “The McCarthy episode, in which I was exonerated, was but a small chapter in my life, which has been very interesting and satisfying as a scholar, teacher, and writer.” Even if the hearings were just a “small chapter,” Lattimore’s character in the face of accusations serves as a model of integrity for all to follow.