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One Year Later: Reflections on Black Friday

by Michael Tigar

Fulton Lewis III mentioned to me recently that the film "Operation Abolition" had produced what he regards as some "healthy debate" in the year since assorted students and others were washed, slid, and thrown down the staircase at City Hall in San Francisco. He cited some "conservative" student activity as evidence, notably a pro-Polaris picket planned for Newport, Rhode Island, and the pro-HUAC picketers in Washington last January 2.

I am not as heartened by the "healthy debate" as Mr. Lewis seems to be. On the contrary, the debate about "Operation Abolition" may be a kind of obscurantism, in which some live issues are lost. For most of us in California, this is not an obvious proposition. Most Berkeleyans, at least, debating about what happened at City Hall, have succeeded in placing their thoughts within a context of opposition to the Committee and of concern about free speech generally. Elsewhere, the discussion about the film, pro or con, has contributed to the kind of 'residual McCarthyism' of which Urban Whitaker spoke in his recent article in The liberal democrat.

For example, liberal editors around the country have carried articles which present "the students' side" of City Hall. Many of these editors choose to match, jot for jot, the anti-Communist invectives of their right-wing opponents, then go on to add that the 'sensible' students would never allow themselves to engage in politics with Communists or fellow travelers, let alone storm the barricades with them at City Hall. Robert Smith, editor of the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, is typical. He asked me, "Well, is this fellow Wachter really a Commie?" When I replied that I didn't make it my business to know these things, and what difference did it make whether he was or is, Mr. Smith replied that if he was going to criticize the film in Minneapolis, he would have to know, because he didn't want any Commies on his side.

The logic is obvious. The way to find out whether "Operation Abolition" is a true film, or the Hoover Report "Communist Target--Youth" is a true report, is to find out who is a Communist and who isn't. We have a Committee on Un-American Activities and an FBI for this purpose. But these are institutions that snoop for bad reasons, as opposed to legitimate liberal groups, which ask the same questions for good reasons, namely because they are "interested in ideas, not in individuals." I say nuts. The fact is that to the extent that "Communist-inspired versus non-Communist-inspired" remains the point at issue, to that extent the underlying questions about "why free speech?" and "why abolish the HCUA?" are obscured.

In trying to establish the inaccuracy of the remarks made by the right wing about City Hall, some students have chosen to prove themselves "legitimate", and have accepted the right-wing (which is to say, societal) definition of legitimacy. Proofs of "legitimacy" may bring members into a student political organization, the group in question having proved itself "safe" to join. But increasing the membership doesn't do anything to make radical politics legitimate. The question is whether the group works to make every man's opinion not only legal, but listened to without preju-

dice or name-calling? Sure, these organizations, though cleansed by self-absolution, are for free speech. It is a free speech, however, which asserts that it is all right for students to hear Archie Brown because they are so well-trained that they will never believe any of that stuff. To me, that is not free speech, but a mockery of it.

My concern is not only that the discussion of the truth of the film may help make radical politics illegitimate; it is also that the discussion generates as its right-wing antithesis, not a genuine dialogue on free speech, but red-baiting. The only logical reply to the naked assertion that the film is bad because Communists didn't influence the students is that Communists not only influenced, but led.

The student who is genuinely concerned with free speech and the HUAC, and not with who the Communists are, may justly say, "A plague on both your houses", and look elsewhere for groups to work in.

During the past year, too, and surely influenced by the "Operation Abolition" debate, new pressures have been brought to bear on the student movement in general. The tendency, seen in the debate about the film, to overlook the real issues of City Hall in favor of exercises in political absolution, is accelerated by pressures from not only the right but portions of the left. Students must prove that they are entitled to be political. The proof consists in a kind of symbolic casting out of devils, and a disclaiming of "illegitimate" currents of political thought. From the right, the demand for proof is expected. However, it seems a bit out of place that on the "libertarian" left those who point to ideological pluralism as healthy in society cannot tolerate it in political organizations. The left-winger, of course, is a bit more subtle in his approach to the situation, and devises thumbnail legitimacy tests. If the organization is concerned with the HUAC, the test is contained in the answer to the question, "What about Hungary?" If the concern is peace, his test is, "Aren't the U.S. and the USSR equally responsible for the arms race?" Hungary involves some valid questions, but it does not follow that these questions must be answered by all those present, and answered "correctly", before one can sit down and talk about the HUAC--or peace.

Thus, in the year since May 13, I have sensed a creeping unfreedom among student (and other) organizations, a semantical tyranny in which "Communist" is the magic word. Now, the right-wing promoters of this unfreedom are difficult enough to battle, for they have more and more at their disposal the mass media and the machinery of bureaucratized snooper. What shall we do when those who well and faithfully participated in politics before the hoses--and the heat--were turned on, now seek to buy their own tickets to heaven, in order that they will be saved on the second coming of McCarthy, when the Young Americans for Freedom, the Birch Society, the White Citizens and the Un-Americans join hands in a last long rapture of exorcism?

It is all made more ironic when we discover that those who think "Operation Abolition" is true are not precise in their identifications of who are the Communists, who the dupes, and who the anti-Communists. These pro-film worthies are for a vigorous, if brutal,

campaign for "Americanism" and can't be bothered with silly details.

I think that the discussion around the demonstrations of May 12, 13 and 14 continues to miss the point. The vote for the continuation of the HCUA was 412 to 6. Certain congressmen said that they wanted to vote against the Committee but feared to do so. What hope for these congressmen and their six braver compatriots do the events of the past year hold? None, I fear, unless we, both students and onlookers, can escape from our own fear and admit that we have joined the battle against the Committee, joined with fellow travelers and card-carrying, non-card-carrying, past, present, and future members of the Communist Party, and what's it to you all anyway?

The debate of the last year lacks content. It is a waste of time to discuss what label one ought properly to apply to a given individual or event; it is doubly damnable when such time might be spent discussing the tyranny of labeling, and how labeling ought not to substitute for debate of the issues. The debate around and about the City Hall incident, over most of the country, is carried on by those concerned primarily with labels, not with the dangers to civil liberties

posed by the HUAC, and the manner in which "Operation Abolition" is not just untrue, but flagrantly irrelevant.

The points which I raise are not new ones in the dialogue in California; they are simply the most worrisome as I turn in my mind the events of the year since May 13, 1960. The intent of the Committee on Un-American Activities in producing the film about City Hall was not to help put the Communist party out of business; it was to put us all out of business by getting us to admit the validity of certain dichotomies and stereotypes which those inquisitors would have us accept. As the year plays out and the film is given distribution to an expectant and credulous public whose stereotypes we, in response, acquiesce in, the question about "Operation Abolition" becomes "Who shall abolish whom, anyway?"

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