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Americanism with a Vengeance: Civil Liberties and Dalton Trumbo

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The recent controversy over the lifetime academy award to Elia Kazan brought back into political use the name of once-blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo. For anti-Kazan partisans, Trumbo's name was cited to rebuke Kazan for his informer role during the blacklist period. "Trumbo was the brave one," actor Nick Nolte stated, "for refusing to comply with the House Un-American Activities Committee." "Trumbo should be given the lifetime achievement award, not Kazan," wrote one editor of a Colorado newspaper. The *Nation* magazine, never one to let the blacklist era go unremembered, reprinted Trumbo's condemnation of Kazan as "one deserving of utter contempt." What is striking about this episode is not so much the power the blacklist period still has to divide pundits, but that the majority of those who attack the period were too young to have personally experienced it.

This use of Trumbo as a standard by which to measure those of anti-Communists is a relatively young phenomenon, one that shows the peculiar historical attitudes of baby boomers. Once blacklisted and denounced as a Stalinist, Trumbo, within the last thirty years, has undergone a cultural rehabilitation that at times has verged on celebration. The political winds shifting from right to left, from the anti-communist 50s to the countercultural 60s, recast the Trumbo image in a more favorable light. The New Left had always needed heroes (Fidel Castro, Mao Tse Tung, Ho Chi Minh) and martyrs (Huey Newton, Angela Davis); Trumbo provided both. He was both a figure who stood up to HUAC and a figure denied work for over a decade for his political beliefs. But more than this was involved in the Trumbo image. New Left pundits transformed him from Stalinist "hack" (Murray Kempton's phrase) to a figure worthy to stand beside Clarence Darrow in his advocacy of freedom for all. He was now, in a biographical blurb for the 1972 edition of *Johnny Got His Gun*, "a fighter against censorship." Literary critic Robert Kirsch called him "a principled actor against repression and thought control." A Colorado newspaper editor called him the true symbol of freedom in the 1950s. A Hollywood Organization, The Fund for the First Amendment, recently gave testament to Trumbo's heroic image at a film retrospective recalling the blacklist period. When Trumbo came on screen (during his 1947 testimony before Congress) the audience cheered; when a HUAC congressman next appeared the audience booted.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the validity of the New Left's portrayal of Trumbo as a civil libertarian. Fortunately, we do not have to rely on Trumbo's film scripts as a means to measure against the image (scripts are a dubious source at best since a film usually is the result of collaborative contributions and hence its political statements cannot be traced to one single person). Instead we have a number of pamphlets Trumbo wrote throughout his life on a variety of political topics. This journey through the land of Trumbo pamphlets reveals that the Trumbo image did not originate with the New Left, but began with Trumbo himself. As a pamphleteer, Trumbo used concepts of Anglo-Saxon justice, fifth amendments, rights of free speech, and the tradition of parliamentary democracy to defend communist causes. His guise in these writings was that of a civil libertarian defending democracy against the encroachments of the state. Hence, designations by writers such as Studs Terkel for Trumbo as a "defender of freedom" were merely echoes of Trumbo's self-definition begun decades before the New Left.

The free-thinking communist

Most of these rehabilitators have had to contend with Trumbo's 1943-1948 membership in the American Communist Party. Most have done so by portraying Trumbo as a free-thinker, whose membership in an organization known for its demands of orthodoxy and loyalty from its members did not compromise his individuality. Robert Kirsch, admitting Trumbo's membership in the Communist Party, qualified this admission by stating that its "dogma and discipline went against his nature." But an examination of Trumbo's stances even before his membership shows a disciple adhering to Moscow's various ideological shifts at every step. In 1940, during the period of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, he was in sync with the Party Line, arguing against American involvement in the European conflict. That same year he supported the Soviet Invasion of Finland, even parroting Stalin's justifications for it when he argued that Finland was fascist and

therefore a threat to Russia. During the Grand Alliance period, with Russia attacked by Germany, Trumbo became violently pro-war; now attacking those he once supported, such as America First, as pro-fascist. Thus, his ideological gestures and rationalizations parallel those of the most hard-line Party member in the period: Earl Browder, Michael Gold.

"An upholder of a free screen"

But the rehabilitation still holds to some extent. Although the free thinker label has been compromised, all this proves is that Trumbo supported the stances of another country. Trumbo's defenders could argue that he was more worried about reforming his own country; he was not concerned with foreign policy, but making democracy a reality at home. And he did this by his scrupulous attention to civil liberties and domestic freedom.

Was Trumbo a defender of a free screen as some many of his latter-day celebrators such as Alec Baldwin have proclaimed? During his investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947, Trumbo wrote a polemic arguing that HUAC were that it was trying to subvert the freedom of the screen, to create, in effect, a "slave screen." But Trumbo's own earlier actions contradicted this stance. He did not subscribe to a free screen anymore than HUAC did. In a wartime letter to a Party newspaper, he bragged that he was able to keep from making it to the screen such "untrue" and "reactionary" works as Trotsky's "so-called biography" of Stalin and Arthur Koestler's *Yogi and the Commissar*. Thus, Trumbo's "free screen" was a qualified one—with anti-Stalinist works not eligible.

"A Voltarian figure"

What of his image as a fighter for free expression? Let us for a moment fast-forward to 1960. Trumbo, once blacklisted, now has his byline appearing on screen. He is no longer a party member. Before an audience, he sounds like Voltaire in his defense of civil liberties. He articulates his philosophy as

The Right to express ideas, good ideas, bad ideas, wicked ideas, crazy ideas, impossible ideas—this is the most precious right the individual can have. And the interesting thing is that in the course of securing for himself these rights he must also guarantee it to his enemy. Otherwise there can be no freedom for anyone."

In 1945, Trumbo must have believed that wicked and crazy ideas were not eligible for free expression. As editor of a journal, he rejected an anti-Communist writer's submission on the following grounds:

It is difficult to support your belief in "the inalienable right of man's mind to be exposed to any thought whatever, however intolerable that thought might be to anyone else. Frequently such a right encroaches upon the right of others to their lives. It was this "inalienable right in Fascist countries which directly resulted in the slaughter of five million Jews."

The message is clear: the toleration of free speech leads to the gas chamber. Never mind that its practice might have prevented the Holocaust, but that is not really the point. The point is that Trumbo practiced in one era what he denounced in another. Crazy and wicked ideas were not permissible in 1945, but they were so in 1960 when Trumbo's were numbered among them.

An argument could still be offered that although Trumbo's qualified stance on civil liberties while a Party members certainly calls into question part of his image as a civil libertarian, it only does so for the period when he was a communist. One could argue that once having left the Party, once having experienced government repression firsthand, Trumbo had a conversion experience and became an unqualified supporter of civil liberties for all.

But such an argument would be false. Blacklisted in 1947, unable to find work, forced to relocate to another country, Trumbo still did not exhibit any new appreciation of civil liberties for all. He still made the same qualifications as an ideological pariah as he did when he was a force to be reckoned with in Hollywood. In 1956, he saw the Smith Act, which gave the government the power to prosecute political dissent deemed harmful to national security, as necessary in 1940 and bemoaned that it had not been applied to the right. In short, it would have been acceptable for the government to crack down on fascists (which could have included a wide political spectrum in the Trumbo dictionary). And as late as 1959, he argued that it would have been permissible for the government during the World War Two period to have banned his anti-war novel, *Johnny Got his Gun*, in the interests of the "public good."

Which brings us to an important question: why after experiencing government repression, did he still qualify civil liberties? The answer is that Trumbo was continuing to operate in the mental universe of Stalinism. Even though he had left the Party in 1948, all of the ideological baggage of Stalinism stayed with him. One year later, the standard enemy of the Stalinist was still his: the Trotskyites, who in one letter he accused of picket-line violence and illegal activities. That same year, he listed Stalin as one of the leaders of "the democratic forces of the world" and proclaimed that anti-semitism did not exist in the Soviet Union. The passage of seven years did little to damage his view of Stalin; in 1956, he was still citing him as an authority on democratic socialism. It is only in 1965, do we find any criticism of Stalin and even then it is to score propaganda points against the blacklist... "Taking from Russia a tip that drowned an entire generation in blood, we have made politics a religion."

But more than just choosing fellow traveling over formal party membership is at stake here. For *when* Trumbo joined the party, 1943, is important for ascertaining the type of mental universe he was still operating in as late as 1960. Consider what it meant to be a Stalinist in wartime. Film-critic Pauline Kael offers the best assessment of the atmosphere of that period for Hollywood Communists when she charges them with excessive patriotism. Tess Schlesinger, a Hollywood Party member, has written, without apologies, that to be a communist member in this period was the ultimate expression of patriotism. But Stalinists' support of the war effort made them take reactionary stances. Party members were in the forefront of endorsing the government's no strike demand from labor, and demanding that blacks suspend their civil rights quest until after the war. Their support of the war effort led them into stances that would have resulted in expulsion a decade earlier. Earl Browder, the CPUSA head, in 1944 urged members to avoid talk of class conflict, to cease criticizing free enterprise as an economic system and instead work effectively to ensure peaceful co-existence between it and socialism in the postwar period.

With blatant patriotism came righteous war fervor. A perusal of Hollywood Stalinists' phrases in this period makes them sound like Patton in their martial passion. Indeed, the homicidal phrases of leftists in that period against the Axis leaves them little ground to stand upon when they denounced Cold Warriors for equally homicidal rhetoric in later years. Claudia Jones, the editor of the *Young Communist Weekly*, advised readers in 1943 that "to hate the enemy is to love one's country." Marc Blitzlein, a Party member and composer, expressed his enthusiasm for strategic bombing and the Grand Alliance all in one stanza: "Open up that second front! Open up that Second front! We will bomb a tyrant's smile, and from his throat his insane Heil... We will bomb him, bomb him from the earth." Woody Guthrie had written on his guitar, "this machine kills fascists." In a screenplay, Dashiell Hammett had an antifascist take a Nazi sympathizer into a garage and kill him gangland style, all to the tune of stirring, patriotic music.

This atmosphere of ideologically incorrect stances, of excusable hate, of combat, of government crackdowns is clearly the one Trumbo was influenced by and participated in. Trumbo even joined the Party in this period for reasons of combat: to aid his friends in the "coming battle with American fascism in the postwar period." All of the things Trumbo complained about during the Cold War—the smears, the hateful investigations by the FBI, the government-sponsored bills outlawing repression—were activities he himself tried to participate in or supported during the war. In 1941, he supported the government's Smith Act prosecution of American Trotskyites—a government crackdown on dissent. As befitting the atmosphere of combat associated with wartime Stalinism, Trumbo attempted to use the government to suppress his political enemies, all in the name of the Grand Alliance. In 1943, he urged the government to ban the Hollywood conservative group, the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals. In 1944, he urged the FBI to investigate and interrogate correspondents critical of the U.S war effort (even supplying the agency with a list of questions to ask them)—quite a contradiction from his later view of the FBI during the Cold War as "a hateful shadow preying upon the citizenry."

He has dragged this atmosphere of World War II Stalinism into the post-war years. In a written statement to HUAC, he accused the committee of launching "direct attack upon the constitutional rights of property and of management and of that system which we call private enterprise." Trumbo is advocating a Party Line that has since been denounced as that of a "class enemy." Browder was expelled from the Party for such statements in 1945 ("progressive free enterprise") and replaced by William Z. Foster, who advocated a class war with American imperialism. By the Party standards of 1947, Trumbo's statement before HUAC makes him a Browderist, an ideological leper. But what is most revealing is that Trumbo is still using the tactics of the wartime period rather than the current party line. In 1956, he continued to operate from a World War Two mindset when he defended the Smith Act as "a necessary war measure"—the same language used by the *New Masses* in 1944 to justify the Smith Act.

In this period, his enemies are liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr who have abandoned the wartime alliance with Russia. This more than anything else is indicative of his continuing affection for the either/or, enemy/ally universe of World War Two Stalinism. Schlesinger's vital center is anti-Communist; therefore,

in Trumbo's estimation, he is not anti-fascist. To be anti-Communist is to be "right of center." Clearly Trumbo is operating from a World War Two script: there are just two categories: fascist (anti-Communist) and anti-fascist (pro-Communist), enemies and allies. Schlesinger is the former since he is no longer supporting the Grand Alliance—an alliance clearly dissolved by 1949, the time of his attack on Schlesinger. But the Alliance still exists in Trumbo's mind, as evidenced by his equation of anti-fascism with pro-Stalinism and fascism with anti-Stalinism. He is reverting to 1944 rather than observing the realities of 1949, to a period when Party Head Earl Browder separated true Americans from the Un-Americans based on whether they were "for or against Tehran."

Consider also the time frame that Trumbo still defends. In postwar writings, he constructs a historical dividing line for when freedom existed and when it became a perishable commodity: the World War Two era—the era of the Trotskyite repression, Japanese-American relocation, the banning of *Johnny Got his Gun*. But it was not an era of repression for the political faction Trumbo represented. His Hollywood Comrade John Howard Lawson was on the board of the Democratic Party committee. Trumbo himself wrote speeches for Henry Wallace and United Nations Representative Edward Stettinius. But by Trumbo's timetable this period of domestic freedom ends oddly enough when communist influence wanes: after 1945. Clearly Trumbo has a different definition of freedom and repression than those who see freedom as a commodity for all or none.

But after all was not everyone in the World War II period forgetful of civil liberties? Had not political pundits, non-communist as well as communist, put civil liberties on the backburner in the interests of prosecuting the war? Hardly. Dwight MacDonald denounced the relocation of the Japanese, the government crackdown on Trotskyites, the martial passion of George Patton, the atmosphere of righteous violence, Hiroshima—all matters Trumbo was silent about during World War II as was the American Communist Party. George Orwell's hostility toward communists did not conflict with his commitment to civil liberties during wartime. In 1943, he denounced *the* government's banning of the *Daily Worker*, the newspaper of a party quite critical of him. At the same time, he avoided patriotic blinders when he refused the Duchess of Atholl's offer to join an anti-totalitarian organization because it said nothing about British imperialism.

Why did these men keep their commitment to civil liberties intact? How were they able to withstand the atmosphere of the period and Trumbo was not? The answer lies in all three men's ideological resume. MacDonald and Orwell did not belong to a political faction that demanded ideological correctness rather than commitment to freedom; Trumbo did. Orwell and MacDonald's refusal to support any party line gave them a mental freedom to criticize any country, including their own. Both men criticized Stalin and Hitler, but also Roosevelt and Churchill. But Trumbo trained his sights on one enemy, the "fascists," which was anyone who opposed Stalin. His prism was the Grand Alliance and remained so even in the postwar period.

In a postwar novel about Nazi Germany, Trumbo constructed a possibly self-revealing perspective on German history. For once, his subconscious might have slipped past his ideological defense mechanisms. He argued that Germany's celebration of maleness acted as a shield to the penetrating civil libertarian ideas of the Enlightenment. Based on our awareness of Trumbo, he may have been describing himself and his Stalinist mindset. In a sense, he was this "Germany." His mental allegiance to wartime Stalinism acted as a shield through which no blanket support of civil liberties could pass and remained impervious even after he left the Party. He simply could not justify civil liberties for his political enemies because he still saw them through a Stalinist lens. Pauline Kael has written that screenwriting has never recovered from hyper-patriotic Stalinism.

This comment should be extended to Trumbo's view of civil liberties. He never recovered from his hyper-patriotic Stalinism, never embraced freedom for all even when he himself experienced government repression. Civil liberties were for him and his political compatriots alone since his "enemies" were fascists and hence not worthy of these protections ("We Defend the Bill of Rights for those people who use the Bill of Rights," Party member Robert Minor, 1942). That is why he could write about fifth amendments, Anglo-Saxon concepts, and parliamentary democracy and yet not see that they were for everyone because he wrote about these matters from a Stalinist cocoon. This cocoon limited his capacity for ideological growth, for rethinking previous positions. Trumbo exhibited (in print anyway) none of the guilt feelings that other Party members such as Paul Jarrico did about the war period: "yes, we were patriotic. We were so fucking patriotic we said nothing about the Trotskyites being tried under the Smith Act, the Japanese being relocated." Alvah Bessie, one of the Hollywood Ten and considered by many in the Party to be one of the most hardline of Stalinists, now regrets the behavior of the Party during wartime. Another wartime Party member, Steve Nelson, faults the Party for supporting wartime actions and fervor that would later be turned against them in the Cold War. Even the most vociferous defender of the Hollywood Ten, Victor

Navasky, finds their behavior during the Smith Act prosecution of Trotskyites hypocritical. But Trumbo did not become one of the second thoughts. Although highly critical of the U.S actions during the 1930s and the Cold War period, Trumbo's criticism halts before the 1941-45 period. There is nothing in his writings criticizing the 1941 Smith Act prosecution of Trotskyites, the relocation of the Japanese, or use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

For a culture so weaned on cinematic images as Hollywood, it is fitting that film should provide the best lesson for Hollywood pundits regarding the Trumbo image. In the 1943 film "Keeper of the Flame," a character played by Spencer Tracy discovers that the deceased idol of American schoolboys everywhere was, in reality, a fascist sympathizer. In short, the image did not jibe with the reality. Rather than let the image remain, Tracy's character exposed the idol for what he was, arguing that "truth is more important than propaganda." The same standard should be applied to Trumbo. If we are to get beyond Cold War propaganda, we have to move beyond images that rely on either/or hero/villain simplicities and examine the possibility that neither Trumbo nor HUAC were civil libertarians. Both used their own version of Americanism as a weapon to deny civil liberties to their political enemies.