

# The Climate of Fear

William Van Til

PASSING PROFESSOR AMERICUS' abandoned desk, his colleague noticed some sheets protruding from a pigeonhole. Hoping he was unobserved, he pulled out Professor Americus' last manuscript and began to read:

"I don't know exactly when the horrid suspicion first came to me that the Communist Party in America, rebuffed by left-of-center organizations, had successfully infiltrated highly conservative rightwing organizations. By the summer of 1949, intent newspaper reading convinced me that there could be no other reasonable explanation of what was happening. Unsuccessful in their energetic bid to dominate the American left, the communists apparently had changed the party line again. Communists and their fellow travelers were now instructed to take over the key positions in the most respectable, patriotic, 100% conservative groups. They had developed a diabolic new tactic and they were rapidly gaining control of patriotic societies, the right-wing press, and antisubversive committees of Congress and the state legislatures!

"I must confess that, up until the time of my horrid realization, I had always considered American communists to be singularly dim-witted and ludicrous dunderheads. With each reversal of party strategy, they skidded like burlesque comedians. Each new inanity was cloaked in pretentious, pseudo-scientific jargon. Their fronts were as transparent as Macy's display windows; a moderately intelligent seven-year-old could see through them. To put it in American folk language, to me the communists just didn't seem real bright.

"Until late in the nineteen-forties, it appeared that in America their curious religion would remain the exclusive property of their small disputatious sect. They fought a losing battle in the CIO; their intellectuals jumped off the train at particularly tortuous turnings of the party line; their shenanigans with parliamentary rules were fathomed and overcome; their endorsement was the kiss of death for national political candidates. Direct attempts to teach Americans to accept communist principles and techniques were farcical failures save in a few isolated precincts of New York City. But then, alas!, some unknown, sinister, brilliant comrade developed the fiendishly simple tactic that is now working.

"The diabolic tactic was to teach Americans to adopt communist principles and approaches in fighting communism. While apparently combating communists in this country, Americans would learn to accept communist techniques. For instance, basic to communist policies and practices and repugnant to democracy are suppression of minority political parties when there is no clear and present danger, accusations of

disloyalty without adequate opportunity for defense, past as well as present political orthodoxy as a condition of all employment, creation of confusion as to who really believes what. So, naturally, a first step in the diabolic new tactic was to apply these communist ways to American conditions in an attempt to create the climate of fear so characteristic of the communist state. When democratic-minded men protested these communist methods, they could be accused of communist sympathies, discredited, and removed from responsible positions. Eventually all loyalty to democratic principles and methods would be suspected as communistic. An unconsciously communist America could readily shift to conscious communism through communists in key positions in the conservative anti-communist crusade.

"I know it seems completely fantastic and unthinkable to believe that the communists are disguising themselves as conservatives in groups that have always asserted the highest patriotism, Americanism, loyalty, and anti-communism. I know it is completely incredible to believe that commie conservatives are spreading communist principles and techniques in the name of anti-communism in order to establish communism here! But how else can we explain the recent attacks on education?"

"Censorship of textbooks is advocated so that our boys and girls will not learn about countries wicked and stupid enough to censor textbooks. Is this not a trick to establish the Soviet doctrine that textbooks should be censored?"

"We are urged to ban and bar and drop from reading lists and libraries a variety of publications, ranging from non-communist liberal materials to the tedious classics of the Marxist ideology, in order to protect ourselves from a police state education that bans and bars and drops from reading lists and libraries a variety of publications. Is this not a sly trick to establish the Soviet doctrine of contempt for the method of intelligence?"

"Legislative enforcement in one great American state contemplates having teachers 'report' on organizations and activities of colleagues while others report on the reporters. This is advocated to defend us from ever living in a spy state like the Soviet Union where teachers report others for suspected heresies. Another trick?"

"Pressure groups caution administrators and teachers against full and free discussion of certain controversial issues for the pressure groups fear such discussion will lead to that undemocratic day when controversial issues will not be freely and fully discussed.

"What American would propose such policies and methods as these save communists, fellow travelers, or their innocent dupes? The guilt by association of the sponsors of these and many other allied steps seems inescapable.

"The result is the spread of the climate of fear. As in the totalitarian state, educators think to themselves, 'You can't be too careful, you know'. . . ."

Here the manuscript of Professor Americus broke off suddenly, unfinished. Apparently he was in the midst of writing when he was brought up before the board of trustees on charges of subversive activities. Testimony brought out the facts that he had a foreign-sounding name, that he had once spoken critically of a member of the United States Senate (the late Huey P. Long), and that his wife occasionally dined with a woman whose sister was said to have contributed to an ambulance fund for the Spanish Loyalists. Currently Professor Americus is too busy for further writing as he attempts, so far without success, to find a post following his dismissal. His colleague looked about, frowned, and carefully tore Professor Americus' last manuscript into a thousand pieces. If someone had been watching, his own attitude toward the eccentric and unreliable Professor Americus was thus made unmistakably clear. Thought Professor Americus' colleague--*you can't be too careful, you know.*

*Educational Leadership, 1949*