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Mr. Beran reviews G. Edward White's book *Alger Hiss's Looking-Glass Wars*. In doing so, he also compares Whittaker Chambers' and Alger Hiss's books as well.



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And do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead expose them. Ephesians 5:11

America's Reds

by William A. Rusher

From about 1955 to 1995, the dominant opinion in the United States held that the American Communist Party (CPUSA), founded in 1919 in the wake of the Communist revolution in Russia, was a small collection of admirers of the Soviet Union that never amounted to much. In the 1930s (so the story went) they mobilized a number of "popular fronts" to oppose fascism and promote various leftist causes. In the 1940s, a few Communists—probably Julius Rosenberg and (arguably) Alger Hiss—went so far as to commit acts of espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union. But Rosenberg was executed, and Hiss went to prison; so why all the fuss about domestic Communism?

Far worse than such rare cases of misplaced loyalty (in this view) was the damage wrought by opportunistic politicians who seized on the existence and supposed misdeeds of the CPUSA to alarm American public opinion and ruin the reputations of innocent liberals. One of the earliest such persecutors was Congressman Martin Dies, a Texas Democrat who in 1937 persuaded the House of Representatives to create a Special Committee on Un-American Activities, which became a standing committee in 1945 and lasted for 30 years, hounding Hollywood actors and many other victims.

But by far the greatest villain among Red-hunting politicians was, of course, Wisconsin's Republican senator Joseph McCarthy, who raised the issue of Communists in government in February 1950 and rode it triumphantly for four-and-a-half-years, acquiring an immense popular following, until the Senate itself voted to "censure" him in December 1954. He died of liver failure induced by alcoholism in May 1957 at the age of 48. By the 1960s the CPUSA, reduced to a few thousand members, had been almost wholly superseded by the New Left, and barely survived to see the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

That was the story of American Communism and its foes, as successfully propagated by the nation's dominant liberals, and it remained, as we have noted, the conventional wisdom for forty years. Indeed, it is in some ways the conventional wisdom even today, for younger generations (including many conservatives) have never heard any other version of the facts.

But the year 1995 was an epochal one for the study of American Communism. For in that year, thanks to the insistence of the late Democratic Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York, who had long specialized in intelligence matters, some 2,900 documents collectively known as "the Venona papers" (a deliberately meaningless code phrase) were de-classified and published. These were radio messages from the top KGB agents in Washington and New York to their superiors in Moscow from approximately 1943 to 1948. They had been recorded at the time by the U.S. Army Signal Corps, but they were, of course, in code, and their decoding was an immensely arduous job carried out by a number of heroic government cryptanalysts over the period from 1945 to 1980.

"Dwell on the past and you'll lose an eye; forget the past and you'll lose both eyes." Old Russian Proverb

A second new source of information on the American Communist Party was the archives in Moscow of the defunct Soviet Union, which began to be partially accessible to American investigators in the early 1990s, during the Yeltsin years.

The Venona papers, together with these archives, made it absolutely clear that the American Communist Party was from its beginning the willing agent of Soviet intelligence, obedient to its orders, financed by its contributions, and serving not only as a propaganda organ for Soviet policies but as a generous source for the recruitment of agents who would thereupon influence American policy and gladly commit espionage as well. It is now plain that by 1945 every important branch of the American government, from the White House itself to the State Department, the Treasury Department, the Justice Department, the Defense Department, the Office of Strategic Services (predecessor to the CIA), and the Office of War Information, to name only a few, was infested with Communists busily doing the work of the Soviet Union.

Moreover, it is obvious that a penetration so complete would have been impossible if the Communists had not been able to depend on the blindness or indifference of many of the far larger number of ordinary liberals who dominated the Roosevelt Administration. As early as the late 1930s, even known Communists in government were often regarded by their colleagues as merely “liberals in a hurry.” And during the war, of course, they could be excused as simply enthusiasts for America’s doughty ally, “good old Joe.”

Small wonder, then, that liberals after the onset of the Cold War with the Soviet Union in 1946, dreaded so profoundly the disclosure of the appalling degree of governmental penetration that they now began to suspect the Communists had achieved on their watch in the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s. For the Republicans, of course, the situation was reversed: revelation of the facts was in their highest political interest, and (not incidentally) in the security interest of the nation itself. The fragments of information on the subject that began to surface in the late 1940s—notably through the confessions of two Communist espionage couriers, Whittaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley—shocked public opinion to its core, and set the stage for a genuinely titanic battle over the truth.

This is the long and fascinating story that Ted Morgan sets out to tell in *Reds*. Morgan is the pen name of the French-born writer Sanche de Gramont (“Ted Morgan” is an acronym of “de Gramont”). In the first 324 pages of *Reds*, he recounts the history of the American Communist Party up to 1950, as illuminated by the Venona papers and the Soviet archives, and in general does it very well. This part of the book is going to come as an ugly surprise to a lot of liberals who comforted themselves until 1995 with the aforementioned

canonical claptrap about the unimportance of domestic Communism and have managed to ignore the Venona papers and the Soviet archives ever since.

In his account of the Communist Party’s early years, Morgan tells us some important but long-unfamiliar truths: “One of the party’s principal activities from the start was to recruit spies and agents for the Communist International, or Comintern.” Again: “We now know, thanks to the Soviet archives, that the American Communist Party, though small in numbers and isolated from the mainstream, was busily establishing a subculture that acted in hidden ways. . . [This] subculture flourished and gained the self-sufficiency of a state within a state, with its own unions, housing projects, insurance company, legal defense system, and youth organizations.” And again: Roosevelt’s diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union in 1933 “gave the Communist Party a kind of legitimacy that ushered in the Red Decade. With the opening of an embassy and several consulates, the espionage hives were soon buzzing and spy rings in Washington penetrated government agencies.”

The very title of Morgan’s next chapter, “Welcome Soviet Spies!,” sums up the story he then tells about the decade of the ’30s. We learn about the “illegals”—agents inserted into the United States without a legal cover. (They “would have been lost without the American Communist Party, which provided from its ranks assistants who acted as guides, couriers, handlers, and all-around gofers.”) We are told about the Harold Ware cell, Whittaker Chambers’ role as a spy courier, the treachery of Noel Field and Lawrence Duggan, and much else. The following chapter continues the story, describing the “popular front” groups that enabled “the Communist Party. . . to take advantage of New Deal legislation to become a force in the American labor movement,” and the Party’s prostitution of the Spanish Civil War to Communist propaganda purposes.

On the subject of Martin Dies, Morgan has no use for the man himself (“a Southern racist” with “a crude and blustering manner, a venal nature, and a second-rate mind”), but states flatly that “the Dies Committee uncovered a wealth of important information on front groups and Communists in government, creating a database for its successors. Its systematic vilification by the Left was a backhanded homage to its exposure of party activities.” And he goes on to spell out many of its achievements in detail.

But the climax of the party’s saga still lay ahead. In a chapter entitled “World War II and the Soviet Invasion of America,” Morgan is blunt: “In their scope and effectiveness, the Soviet espionage operations in wartime America were without historical precedent. Never did one country steal so many political, diplomatic, scientific, and military secrets from

another. It was analogous, in espionage terms, to the looting of European artworks by the Nazis. Except that in the friendly, cooperative spirit of the times, we invited them in.”

Morgan is lavish with details. He tells in depth the story of the Communist courier Elizabeth Bentley, including her work with the Perlo and Silvermaster groups. And he notes that “Venona corroborated Bentley’s accusation that Currie was a Soviet spy.” This was Lauchlin Currie, “an administrative aide who worked directly for the President... a powerful Washington insider with access to every top official from FDR on down.” (In 1950 Currie fled to Colombia; he died there in 1993 without ever returning to the United States.)

Then there is Harry Dexter White, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for all foreign matters, who was a member of the spy ring serviced by Chambers. “More classified information came across [White’s] desk than that of any other government official, including the President.” White engineered the Treasury’s fatal delay in providing a promised loan to support the currency of Nationalist China, then in its epochal struggle with the Chinese Communists. As Morgan remarks, “Failure to receive the loan in time was only part of the cause of Chiang Kai-shek’s downfall, but it counted.” (Who lost China?)

The final chapter in this first half of *Reds* details Harry Truman’s moves to cope with the problem, or at least the public perception of Soviet penetration of the government. The most important was his creation of a program to administer loyalty checks to more than two million federal employees. Only a tiny number—102—were actually dismissed (“there were far more resignations than there were dismissals”), but Truman undercut his own credibility on the subject when he subsequently poo-hooed the entire Congressional investigation into the Chambers and Bentley spy rings as “a red herring.” Very little about the subject was known to the public at the time (1948), but what was known (or reasonably suspected) was by no means trivial, and could certainly not be dismissed as simply “a red herring.”

If Morgan had ended his book at this point, it would have been one of the first on the shelves to incorporate the astonishing information in the Venona Papers in a chronological account of American Communism, and as such a valuable contribution to the literature. But, having forced the liberals who will read it to swallow huge gulps of disagreeable information, Morgan is not about to abandon them. Their chosen villain—their Dr. Moriarty—has always been Joe McCarthy, and Morgan devotes almost the entire second half of the book to arguing that McCarthy was just as villainous as the liberals have always alleged.

How does he accomplish this, in the teeth of the massive evidence he himself adduces to show that American Commu-

nism was everything McCarthy accused it of being, and that the American government had been more thoroughly riddled with Soviet spies than even McCarthy suspected?

Very simply. According to Morgan, the Chambers and Bentley disclosures in the 1940s essentially destroyed Moscow’s espionage apparatus in America; the federal loyalty program cleansed the government of its remaining Communists; and the American Communist Party itself was knocked galley-west by the prosecution of its leaders under the Smith Act in 1949. In short, by the time Joe McCarthy rose to make his famous speech to the Republican Women of Wheeling, West Virginia, in February 1950, America had no “Communist problem” to speak of. The threat had once been real—very real indeed; but it was over! McCarthy put the country through five agonizing years, smearing innocent liberals as Communists, for nothing—or rather, and even worse, for his own political benefit.

But this is nonsense. In 1956-57, when I was serving as associate counsel of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (the committee charged by the Senate with oversight of all matters involving national security; McCarthy’s Government Operations Committee was confined to oversight of the government only), the Communist Party fully deserved the attention it was still receiving. Hearings we conducted in Hawaii established that the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen’s Union, headed by the Communist Harry Bridges, was well positioned to disrupt sea traffic to and from the Hawaiian islands in the event of war with the Soviet Union. (The Speaker of the Hawaiian House of Representatives, Charles Kauhane, had presented a complimentary gavel to Bridges as a token of respect!) And our investigation of a white-collar cell of the Party then active in New Orleans established that its members included such influential pillars of the community as the program director of New Orleans’ largest TV station, WDSU-TV, and the national legislative representative of the Louisiana State Parent-Teachers’ Association. The entire cell was under the leadership of a black bus-boy at the Holsum Cafeteria in New Orleans named Hunter Pitts (“Jack”) O’Dell, and the federal marshals who called at his room to serve our subpoena on him found there—not O’Dell; he had fled—but enough Party documents to establish that O’Dell was in fact the district organizer of the Communist Party in New Orleans.

O’Dell surfaced again in the early 1960s as Southeastern Director of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and still later as the chief foreign affairs advisor to the Rev. Jesse Jackson, whom he accompanied on trips to the Middle East and South Africa.

Morgan is well aware of the O’Dell story and devotes many pages to the Party’s efforts, through him and others, to

filtrate and dominate the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Morgan even dutifully acknowledges that Moscow paid the CPUSA its “first million-dollar subsidy” in 1965. But these and many other evidences of the Party’s continued activity and influence in later decades fail to shake Morgan’s conviction that the battle had ended by 1950, and that anyone, such as McCarthy, who insisted on waging it thereafter was simply a political opportunist. That is preposterous.

In the second place, while it is quite true that the 1930s and (even more) the first half of the 1940s were the Glory Days of the American Communist Party, it should be borne in mind that the American public knew nothing of all this at the time. It was not until 1948 that Whittaker Chambers publicly identified Alger Hiss, at a hearing of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, as having been a member of the Communist Party, and later added that Hiss had committed espionage for the Soviet Union.

Hiss was, at the moment of his exposure, the urbane president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and during the war had served as Director of the State Department’s Office of Special Political Affairs. In 1945 he had accompanied FDR to Yalta, and not long after his return, as a mark of special favor, had been given the honor of carrying America’s copy of the United Nations Charter from the founding conference in San Francisco to Washington.

The impact of such a juxtaposition on American public opinion was immense. Indeed, many people simply refused to believe Chambers, even after Hiss was convicted of perjury and sent to prison. It was not until the publication of the Venona papers in 1995, including a radio dispatch to Moscow describing an agent’s conversation with Hiss in 1945, that his guilt became indisputable.

Presumably Morgan would argue that Hiss’s espionage activities were old news by 1948. But they weren’t old news to the American people, who understandably wondered what other secrets might lie beneath the placid surface of Washington as the 1940s gave way to the 1950s. Chamber’s charges were supplemented by those of his fellow courier, Elizabeth Bentley, and in addition a handful of former Communists came forward to name others they had known. But had the surface only been scratched? The whole subject cried out for a thoroughgoing investigation.

Morgan admits that the publication of the Venona papers in the late 1940s would have lanced the boil and pre-

vented the whole savage battle of the early 1950s that is subsumed under the name of “McCarthyism”: “The release of [the Venona papers] would have nipped McCarthyism in the bud, for the true facts about real spies would have made wild accusations about imaginary [sic] spies irrelevant. Only in the absence of Venona could McCarthy feed on collective fears regarding immense conspiracies and treacherous leaders. Venona would have revealed unstinted spying, abetted by the American [Communist] Party. It would have led to the prosecution of disloyal public servants. It would have stifled the outcry that Communists were the innocent victims of Red-baiting and witch-hunts, and shown that McCarthy was inconsequential to the issue he rode to fame.”

Why, then, was the existence of the Venona papers concealed until 1995? Here we have come upon one of the deepest mysteries in the entire history of American Communism. Morgan accepts without analysis or criticism the story that Harry Truman was never told of the existence of the Venona papers. The explanation for this (which Morgan doesn’t even bother to mention) is supposedly that General Omar Bradley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, took personal responsibility in 1949 for insisting that Truman not be told. But why he would have done such a thing is hard to imagine. In any case, if this version of the facts is true, America has Bradley (who of course, like Truman, is dead) to thank for the whole wrenching era named for McCarthy.

But recently columnist Robert Novak tracked down a retired Army cryptanalyst named Oliver Kirby, who asserts that his superior, Brig. Gen. Carter Clarke, met with President Truman in the Oval Office on June 4, 1945—less than eight weeks after Truman took office—and told him (at the urging of Gen. George Marshall) of the Venona decryptions then under way.

Truman, however, was unimpressed. He didn’t understand the decoding process, and told Clarke the whole thing sounded like “a fairy story.” As late as 1948, when Bradley (according to Kirby) informed Truman of new Venona discoveries, the president told Defense Secretary James Forrestal there were “too many unknowns” in the dispatches, and that “even if part of this is true, it would open up the whole red panic again.” Even in 1950, when Bradley allegedly told Truman that Alger Hiss and Harry Dexter White were confirmed by Venona as Soviet spies, Truman kept his eyes firmly shut: “That g———stuff. Every time it bumps into us it gets

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igger and bigger. It's likely to take us down."

So the struggle over domestic Communism blazed into a conflagration, and Harry Truman, who (according to this account) knew the truth and could have ended the battle by killing it, kept the information deeply buried—apparently for purely partisan reasons. A new (and Republican) administration took over in 1953, but how much it was told about the Venona papers is unknown. Presumably the handful of intelligence officials who knew about them assumed that Truman's decision to conceal them was still in effect.

Much of this account depends, of course, on the veracity of Oliver Kirby, whose versions of these various conversations are impossible to check. But White House records confirm that Gen. Clarke did talk with Harry Truman in the Oval Office on June 4, 1945, just as Kirby asserts.

What's more, even Morgan concedes that Truman was "ambivalent about the new security measures" he ordered in 1947. In a private letter, Truman referred dismissively to "the Communist 'bugaboo'." Indeed, Morgan says, Truman "had been planning to recommend the dissolution of the House Un-American Activities Committee after his reelection [in 1948], but he had to abandon his plan after Hiss was indicted for perjury in 1949."

In any case, it is noteworthy that McCarthy's February 1950 speech in Wheeling, which launched his crusade on the subject of Communism in government, took place just three weeks after Alger Hiss's conviction. As Morgan admits, there was "a feeling in the population at large that the government was awash in treachery, which it had been, though it no longer was. This lag in perception made McCarthyism possible."

Morgan's subsequent lengthy account of McCarthy's life and the controversy that ultimately engulfed him is a journalistic disgrace after the frank and comprehensive job he has done on the subject of Communist espionage in the first half of the book. He charges that McCarthy was motivated solely by greed for power and money, though it is a curious fact that McCarthy never even wrote a book about the battle, which would have made him millions. It is true that McCarthy was far from the ablest investigator of domestic Communism, but most people who knew him (and I was one of them) recognized that his detestation of Communism was perfectly sincere, that he never really understood why the liberals were giving him such a hard time, and that his greatest flaw was that he simply lacked the average politician's instinct to drop an issue when it ceased to pay dividends.

So we are dragged yet again through those episodes of the McCarthy saga that liberals have long enjoyed recounting. Morgan plays the usual game with the supposedly conflicting figures McCarthy cited, at Wheeling and later, con-

cerning the number of security risks still in the State Department, and he almost invariably places the most innocent possible interpretation on the actions of the people named by McCarthy, many of whom (like the lifelong Soviet sympathizer Owen Lattimore) had served the Soviet Union valiantly by their deeds and policy recommendations. Yet he does not even mention, let alone refute, *McCarthy and His Enemies*, the book published by William F. Buckley, Jr., and L. Brent Bozell in 1954, which (for example) devotes ten thoroughgoing pages to the post-Wheeling numbers game, and meticulously analyzes the actual records of the people McCarthy named.

Finally, in a strained effort to argue that "McCarthyism" outlived its alleged originator and still afflicts America today, Morgan treats us to wholly gratuitous excursions into the supposed misdeed of J. Edgar Hoover and Richard Nixon in the 1960s and 1970s, and ends with an analysis of George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq so tendentious that it could be copied verbatim into John Kerry's briefing book.

To sum up, then, the first half of *Reds* is a top-notch account of the American Communist Party from its foundation in 1919 to the arrival of Joe McCarthy on the scene in 1950, in the light of the opening of the Soviet archives in the early 1990s and, even more important, the de-classification of the Venona papers in 1995. It will enlighten almost everyone who reads it—both conservatives, who will be amazed to learn that Communist penetration of the American government was even greater than they realized, and liberals, who will find the book's disclosures positively hair-raising.

As for the book's second half, it is simply a foolish attempt to console America's liberals, after the bad news Morgan has given them in the first half, by assuring them that they nonetheless deserved to win their historic battle with Joe McCarthy. It will serve, at least, to remind both groups of the state of play in the early 1950s, when conservatives fought desperately to pursue an investigation of domestic Communism and liberals managed, with ultimate success (and an indispensable assist from Harry Truman), to prevent it. With the help of the media, the whole battle was transformed into an argument over the tactics of one stubborn would-be investigator, whose dominant opinion (in both parties) ultimately isolated, condemned, and destroyed.

But, as it turned out, that was not the end of the story. In the words of the 19th century British poet Coventry Patmore,

"For want of me the world's course will not fail:

When all its work is done, the lie shall rot;

The truth is great, and shall prevail,

When none cares whether it prevail or not."

—*Claremont Review of Books*, Fall 2004, pp. 39ff