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# COMMIES, H-BOMBS, AND THE NATIONAL SECURITY STATE:

## THE COLD WAR IN THE COMICS

ANTHONY A. HARKINS

In the era of Ronald Reagan and Newt Gingrich, some look back upon the 1950s as "a golden age of innocence and simplicity" (Miller and Nowak 5). It was a decade marked in America by astounding economic growth and prosperity; strong family values; and clear racial, gender, and political distinctions—a time when many people's greatest concern was staying abreast of the latest fads of hula hoops and coonskin caps or stuffing as many people as possible into telephone booths. Yet as numerous historians have shown, the 1950s was more an era of fear than fun. It was a decade dominated by the cold war and Americans' palpable fears about the spread of Communism (particularly in Asia), nuclear bombs (and later missiles) and the associated issue of radioactivity, and the threat of domestic Communist subversion in the government and in society at large. This essay examines both the direct and the more subtle references to each of these three issues in the comic strips of the early 1950s and to what extent these strips reflected the general atmosphere of fear and suspicion.<sup>1</sup>

The cold war and the dangers associated with it did not dominate the comic pages; most strips with domestic settings included only occasional passing references to the topic. This general absence of cold war themes is not surprising given the syndicate and newspaper editors' strict policy of avoiding any controversial or political issues in the comic strips, best exemplified by the 1949 King Features Syndicate's code, which upheld the normal American family as the ideal.<sup>2</sup> However, what is striking is not how few references to the cold war the comics of the early 1950s contained, but how many, and in what strange ways the issues associated with the cold war crept into the story lines of comic strips.

# 1. THE COLD WAR ATMOSPHERE

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the U.S. government put into place the key components of what later historians would dub the "national security state." The National Security Act of 1947 established a Department of Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Council. The secret "NSC-68" document of 1950 advocated the development of the hydrogen bomb, the rapid buildup of conventional forces, a worldwide system of alliances with anti-Communist governments, and the unprecedented mobilization of American society. That document became a blueprint for waging the cold war over the next twenty years. These years also saw the passage of the McCarran Internal Security Act (requiring all Communist organizations and their members to register with the government) and the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy and his virulent but unsubstantiated charges of Communists in the federal government.

## 1.1 FOREIGN SETTINGS AND THE KOREAN WAR

Not surprisingly, this new cold war atmosphere was most evident in the adventure strips with foreign settings (predominantly in Asia). The story lines of strips such as George Wunder's *Terry and the Pirates* and Milton Caniff's *Steve Canyon* had long been tied to current political events, and their episodes during the early 1950s were no exception.<sup>3</sup> Because both Terry Lee and Steve Canyon are Air Force pilots, these two strips featured both the most literal and most consistent portrayals of the American fight against international Communism. *Terry and the Pirates* had been based in China since it first appeared in 1935. Almost from its inception, the heroes of the strip supported the Nationalist forces under Chiang Kai-shek against the Japanese invaders. With the victory of Mao Tse-tung Communists in 1949, Terry and his cohorts maintain their support for Nationalist forces, but their enemy switches from the Japanese to the Communist "usurpers" (April 23, 1950). Terry routinely undertakes dangerous missions on behalf of the Dragon Lady, a wealthy and seductive woman who runs a shadowy anti-Communist network throughout China. In one episode, he helps retrieve a large quantity of gold captured by Communist forces. In another, Terry helps discover the secret Communist military plan known as "Operation Twice Fortunate Dragon" (April 25, 1950). Steve Canyon, too, fights the cold war in

Asia, and Caniff portrayed his hero spying on both sides of the Pacific. In a 1950 series, Canyon is disguised as a Soviet agent trying to infiltrate a Russian spy ring in Shanghai (April 1–30, 1950). In another episode, he is sent to Hong Kong to find a Soviet “red woman submarine expert” who he believes is “sizing up the island for use as a sub base in case the chinese [*sic*] reds try to take it!” (April 9, 1951). Still another story sends him to the Aleutian Islands to examine an American weather station that is really an intelligence gathering post. “That close to the Russian coast line?” marvels Steve. “Even the wind must be pink around there!” (April 13, 1952).

Of course, the major U.S. military involvement during the early 1950s was the Korean War. Both Caniff and Wunder had their characters serve in that conflict. Despite the fact that the war dragged on for over three years (from June 1950 to July 1953), however, relatively few of the episodes in these two strips focus on the war itself. Instead, most of the story lines deal with internal conflicts at Army and Air Force bases and the romantic relations between the heroes and an ever-changing collection of beautiful women. Furthermore, the few episodes that do depict actual battles focus on the sophisticated technology of modern weaponry and never show dead or wounded American or enemy soldiers or Korean civilians<sup>4</sup> (see, e.g., *Terry and the Pirates*, April 6, 1951).

Undoubtedly, syndicate opposition to the portrayal of death or maiming in the strips was primarily responsible for the lack of battle scenes and depiction of the human cost of war. The sanitized depiction of the war also points to its unpopularity and the syndicate and newspaper editors’ desire to avoid such a controversial subject. The Korean War has often been called America’s “Forgotten War,” but even this label does not reveal how little press coverage the war received even while it was under way. The newspapers I examined gave surprisingly little coverage to the events of the war and related stories. Only when American prisoners of war began returning home did the newspapers devote substantial attention to the war and feature large photo spreads of soldiers and their families. Thus, the adventure strips’ antiseptic portrayal of the fighting and the relatively few plots directly pertaining to the war itself reflected society’s discomfort with this conflict fought in an unfamiliar and distant land and characterized by vague and changing objectives and the absence of visible progress toward rolling back Communism. The cartoonists were also well aware of Americans’ ambivalence toward the Korean War. Later in his career, Caniff admitted he had been reluctant to send Steve Canyon to Korea because “it was an unpopular

war—not as unpopular as Vietnam, but there was the same sense of it just not going anywhere” (Rifas 48).

The lack of attention to the Korean War in the comics was most apparent in the domestic strips. Only *Dixie Dugan* even acknowledged the existence of the war and only from the relative safety of 1954. Despite the fact that the war had been safely over nearly an entire year, McEvoy and Striebel, the strip’s creators, broached the subject delicately. After Dixie’s friend tells her that her husband “has been overseas for over two years,” Dixie asks hesitantly, “the Korean Conflict?” The woman quietly answers in the affirmative (April 14, 1954). An episode a few days later involving the same characters also has a military theme and suggests the enormous personal toll the war has taken on American families. Although these strips hint at societal tensions relating to the Korean War, they never address the issue directly, and the war is never mentioned again in the *Dixie Dugan* episodes I examined. Clearly, syndicate editors and comic strip artists and writers sensed the public’s ambivalence toward the war; and, like most Americans, most were undoubtedly pleased to see the war end even if not in a clear-cut American victory.

## 1.2 PROMOTION OF U.S. ARMED FORCES

Analyzing U.S. foreign policy over the first half of the twentieth century, Emily Rosenberg has made a compelling case for the importance of what she has called “chosen instruments,” by which she means “a governmentally favored private company, informally designated to carry out national security functions” (105). I submit that *Steve Canyon* filled a similar role in the comics pages; it became the chosen instrument of the military and those who supported the expansion of the military industrial complex. Of all the adventure strip creators, Milton Caniff most vociferously promoted American military policies in Asia and most consistently maintained “the Cold War scenario of an enemy totally committed to the absolute destruction of ‘the free world’” (Mintz 676). A typical episode in 1952 shows the strip’s portrayal of the enormity of the Soviet threat to world peace and security. Asked by a commanding officer what he thinks is “the overall red military plan,” Steve grimly replies: “First to drive us out of Asia, Europe, and Africa...if we’re backed onto the North and South American Continents, they’ll use guided missiles fired from subs to neutralize coastal cities...”

(April 6, 1952). Caniff's commitment to this view of geopolitics and his unfaltering promotion of the U.S. armed forces and particularly the Air Force won him the repeated praise and admiration of both the Air Force and members of Congress. In 1950, the governor of Colorado (the home state of both the U.S. Air Force Academy and the NORAD air defense complex) renamed a canyon outside of Denver "Steve Canyon," and a statue was erected at the site in the character's honor (McMaster, "Steve Canyon's Statue" 36). In 1955, the Air Force Vice-Chief of Staff called Caniff "'the greatest single contributor'...to better public understanding of the Air Force" (Collings, "Greatest Contributor" 58). In 1957, the Air Force awarded the artist the Exceptional Service Award, and every general in the service sent Caniff a letter of congratulations—over four hundred in all (Caniff 47). Congressman Eugene J. Keogh also lauded Caniff for making clear the need for a strong military and included an excerpt from *Steve Canyon* in the *Congressional Record*.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Caniff also gained special privileges from the Air Force that none of his colleagues and few other civilians enjoyed. For example, *Steve Canyon* was given an official rank and serial number (McMaster 44), and the Air Force allowed Caniff a sneak preview of their new airplanes well in advance of most members of the press (Collings 54). Caniff and his comic strip thus played an important and quasi-official role in developing and maintaining public support for the rapidly expanding national security state and the enormous military budgets needed to fund it.

### 1.3 ANTI-COMMUNIST RHETORIC

Although *Steve Canyon* was the strip that most routinely promoted a steadfast cold war ideology, Caniff was far from the only cartoonist who used the comic strips to denounce Communist beliefs and practices and to praise American economic and political values. More than once *Terry and the Pirates* condemned the lack of justice in the Soviet Union and China. In a 1950 episode, a Communist thug who has captured a female double agent mockingly comments on Soviet justice: "Perhaps we can persuade her to remain," he says devilishly. "After all, the defendants in our treason trials are noted for their spirit of cooperation" (April 2, 1950). In a different episode later that same month, yet another Communist commander, who has captured the strip's heroes Terry and Charles, tells the Americans they will be killed but "only, of course, after all Asia has seen you humbly confess your sins before

one of our merciful tribunals" (April 27, 1950).

Al Capp's *Li'l Abner* also included anti-Communist rhetoric. In his famous series of episodes on the shmoos, Capp portrayed these characters as harmless little creatures, so overflowing with the desire to please humankind that they actually want to be eaten and will turn into any kind of food one wishes. Because the shmoos provide everything one could possibly want and thus take away people's incentive to work, the Americans in the strip try to exterminate the shmoos. Trying to protect these defenseless creatures, Li'l Abner takes them to Lower Slobbovia, a frozen land under the rule of evil and dictatorial "crummunists." Unfortunately for the shmoos, the crummunists also want to kill them because they "wants folks to have nothin' so they'll hate America fo' havin' sumpthin!!" According to Li'l Abner, what both the crummunists and Americans who tried to exterminate the shmoos fail to realize is that "the whole earth is kinda-like one great big shmoo—ready t'give us all we needs if only we'd stop a-fightin' each other, long 'nuff to let it!!" (April 28, 1954). Urged on by Li'l Abner's speech, the people of Lower Slobbovia rebel and drive out their "crummunist" overlords, thereby learning the value of hard work and self-determination. The story ends with a schmaltzy poem about the "Hamerican Way" that summarizes the superiority of American capitalism over Soviet Communism.

The most vitriolic denunciation of Communism in the comics, however, was in Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie*. His character Daddy Warbucks again and again condemns the ruthlessness of the Soviet Union's Communist government (usually referred to simply as "Ivan") and the failures of its economic and political systems. For example, describing the benefits of his life in the United States over the living conditions he faced in a Siberian labor camp where he was held prisoner, Warbucks comments grimly, "It beats trying to survive with five hundred clawing slaves in one pit in the frozen ground—the five year plan...or till you starve to death!" (April 9, 1950). Warbucks repeatedly gives long speeches about the dangers of Soviet expansionism and insists that the salvation of the world depends on the willingness of the United States to maintain a massive arsenal and be prepared to use it against Communist aggression. Indeed, Gray portrays Warbucks as the personification of the United States, and his everlasting struggle against Ivan is clearly intended to be an allegorical representation of the cold war. One historian even argued that Warbucks was meant to represent President Eisenhower, since both were all-American military heroes and millionaires (and both bald!) (Berger 85). Regardless of the validity of this

claim, Warbucks's attitude certainly mirrors the policies of massive retaliation and brinkmanship pursued by Eisenhower and his secretary of state John Foster Dulles during the 1950s. Warbucks views the cold war in strictly black and white terms, believing that the United States must at all times be ready to meet the Soviet military threat (both conventional and nuclear) with equal if not greater U.S. firepower. "It all sure is involved isn't it 'Daddy'?" asks Annie, referring to the issues at stake in the cold war. "Hm'm," he replies, reading a newspaper with the large headline "WE MUST DISARM ONLY WAY TO PEACE SAYS SAVANT," "not nearly as involved as double-talking world-savers like to make it, Annie...." Warbucks then explains how wrong-headed the approach advocated by the newspaper headline would be. "Look, Annie...A hoodlum has a gun... he's a big shot...among unarmed people...but he's not so big against a tough law-abiding, decent guy who is quicker on the draw...that, Annie, is the only argument our pal Ivan can understand...." The strip concludes in the usual way with Annie accepting unquestionably Warbucks's viewpoint: "Why can't Ivan see how wrong he is?" she laments (April 20, 1950).

#### 1.4 SUPPORT FOR THE NATIONAL SECURITY STATE

Although only a handful of comic strips in the early 1950s included direct attacks on Communist governments and their policies, many more promoted the need for a strong defense and for active support of the armed forces. Zack Mosley's *Smilin' Jack* often featured drawings of the latest U.S. fighter planes and descriptions of how they operated. One scene of a roadway even includes a large billboard that reads, "Airmen—Join Air Force Reserves Now!" (April 19, 1950). A 1952 *Terry and the Pirates* episode incorporates a pitch for Americans to give blood to ensure an adequate blood supply for soldiers. The strip's message that "the GI's with the purple ribbons are still losing blood" must also have served as a reminder that Americans were still being wounded and dying in Korea even though the war had been a virtual stalemate for nearly a year (April 20, 1952). An episode of *Dixie Dugan* also makes the case that Americans should support their government (and, by extension, its military policies). Dixie explains to her father why she has decided to invest \$7,000 in U.S. Treasury bonds after talking to Jake Mogelever, an official at the Treasury Department. "Maybe it was the way he put it to me—about investing in our country's future—our liberty," she



explains, looking heavenward; "I don't know, Pa, but Jake made me sort of fall in love with my country all over again." Her father is also persuaded to buy government bonds, for he too wants to "re-ring that ole liberty bell" (April 26, 1950). Perhaps the strip that most explicitly promoted and showcased American military might was *Smilin' Jack*. Mosley repeatedly shows jet fighters flying overhead, regardless of the story's location (from northeastern cities to the wilderness of Alaska) and totally unconnected to the strip's current story line (April 22, 1951; April 6, 1952). The image of the scope and sophistication of the American military is made all the more powerful because the characters never refer to the planes, but instead seem to implicitly recognize their presence. Continuously overhead, day and night, the omnipresent fighter plane serves as a constant reminder of the need for vigilance, the existence of the new national security state, and its unstated but clearly understood ability to protect the country from external attack and internal subversion.

## 1.5 PORTRAYAL OF COMMUNISTS

The comic strips thus portrayed a consistent vision of the cold war as a life-and-death struggle with a ruthless enemy that could be won only by maintaining a massive arsenal and a constant status of combat readiness. At the same time, many comic strip artists recognized the terror of such an apocalyptic portrait and tried to ease tensions, limit the frightening aspects of the cold war, and assure their audience that America would be victorious over its Communist enemies. Their method was to portray the cold war as humorous and the Communists as doltish buffoons.

Although their missions often thrust Terry Lee and Steve Canyon into extremely dangerous confrontations with their Communist adversaries, neither ever seem concerned about their predicament but rather see these meetings as comedic opportunities. In a 1950 episode of *Steve Canyon*, for example, the hero is disguised as a Cossack and pretends to be the husband of a beautiful Soviet agent. Because he speaks no Russian, when she addresses him in their native tongue, he first answers her in pig latin! Of course, his response makes her wary, and she suspects he must be American because, as she explains, no other country's secret agents would be foolish enough to pose as Cossacks without being able to speak Russian. But even her suspicions do not faze Steve, who replies sarcastically, "I knew there was

something I meant to do...! I must tie a string around my beard the next time I spy!" (April 26, 1950). Terry Lee is portrayed as equally undaunted; an advertisement for the strip stressed his relaxed attitude in spite of the dangers he faced daily: "All the Reds in China hold no terror for Terry Lee...who daily cuts communist Commissars down to size...carries on a private war in the exotic East, thrives on turmoil and intrigue...and still has an eye for a good-looker or a good gag..." ("All the Reds" 40). Such descriptions and portrayals of the heroes of adventure strips were meant to convey these characters' coolness under fire and their ability to deftly escape dangerous situations. But they also suggested to the audience that the cold war was not really all that dangerous and that American soldiers and secret agents were more than a match for any Communist opponent.

Cartoonists included foreigners in their strips primarily for comic relief, and Communist adversaries were no exception. Both Caniff and Wunder depicted most Chinese Communists as either slow-witted thugs or comical caricatures. A series of episodes in *Steve Canyon* revolves around a young American girl who is kidnapped by Chinese Communists and held for ransom. The child proves to be too much for her heavysset and droopy-eyed guard as she urges him to forget about "that silly ol' party discipline" and escape to the Philippines or some other pro-Western country where he can become fabulously wealthy. When his commander asks him what is wrong with him, the man replies, obviously perplexed, "t-that female is t-trying to brainwash me!" (April 1, 1955). A 1950 episode features a similar portrayal of Chinese Communists. The size differential between the fat and thin guards is clearly reminiscent of former and current American comedy teams such as Laurel and Hardy and Abbott and Costello, and the thin guard's buck teeth and thick glasses add to the comedic effect and make him resemble Jerry Lewis.

The Chinese were not the only Communists that cartoonists drew in a humorous manner. In a 1954 *Joe Palooka* episode, Ham Fisher depicts two Soviet characters who are eager to capture Humphrey Pennyworth, a close friend of the strip's hero, in East Berlin. Crudely caricatured and comically emotional, the Russians bear a striking (and perhaps not simply coincidental) resemblance to Leon Trotsky and Nikita Khrushchev (April 23, 1954). The plot of this and the next few episodes involves Humphrey accidentally driving his "Humphreymobile" (a bicycle attached to a building that resembles an outhouse) into the "Rooshun Zone" of Berlin, where he is held prisoner by Soviet soldiers (April 27, 1954). Fisher clearly intended his audience to laugh

at this absurd story line rather than to see the Soviets in the strip as terrifyingly real.

Comic strip writers also used the dialogue of Communist characters, especially the Chinese, for comedic effect. The language of the Chinese Communists portrayed in *Steve Canyon* and *Terry and the Pirates* is often highly metaphorical and resembles proverbs by Confucius (or at least in the manner his teachings were commonly expressed in America).<sup>6</sup> For example, when a Chinese tank commander realizes the American transport plane he is attacking is protected by fighter planes, he shouts, "A thousand devils! Our fat pheasant is guarded by falcons..." (April 5, 1950). A Communist commander in another episode uses similar language as he invites Terry to land at an air base where Terry thinks he is supposed to pick up Chinese allies (but which, unbeknownst to Terry, the Communists have taken over). "So happy for eyes to behold rescuing wings, honored friends," the commander says over the radio; "please to accept hospitality by immediate landing" (April 23, 1950). Their Confucian dialogue not only made these characters humorous, it also helped establish an image of them as an antiquated people, incapable of matching the thoroughly modern personnel and weaponry of the Americans they confronted.

## 1.6 ROMANTICISM AND REALISM

The comic strips' portrayal of cold war confrontations was therefore rarely very realistic. The cartoonists usually stressed the excitement and adventure of American encounters with Communists in China, Korea, and other exotic locales and placed much less emphasis on the real dangers involved in such meetings or the financial and human cost of the cold war to both sides. Furthermore, the cartoons never addressed the reasons for the rise of Communism in these countries. Neither *Steve Canyon* nor *Terry and the Pirates* nor any other strip I examined discussed the history of imperialism in China, Korea, or any of the other countries where the strips took place. There was no mention of the enormous economic inequalities between the few wealthy landowners and the masses of poor peasants, both root causes for the development and growth of Communism in Asia and elsewhere in the Third World. Instead, the comic strip artists used their cold war settings primarily as backgrounds for adventure and comedy and for what Ham Fisher himself called "anti-Communist propaganda" (48). They depicted the enemy as

potentially dangerous but at the same time stressed the humor in the enemy's physical appearance and manner of speaking.

For all of their deliberate romanticization of the cold war, however, the comic strips were sometimes able to portray the confrontations in the cold war at a very personal level that newspapers and even television could not match. For instance, at the same time that the United States and China were threatening each other with nuclear war over the islands of Quemoy and Matsu in the Formosa Straits, a *Steve Canyon* episode depicted a showdown in the same body of water between a U.S. fighter plane, a junk manned by Chinese Communists towing a smaller boat peopled by Chinese nationalists, and a Soviet submarine. The scene was a perfect microcosm of the entire cold war and accurately reflected the military and political conflict being played out on the front pages of the same newspaper in which the strip appeared (April 16, 1955).

The comic strips also proved at times to be remarkably prescient, although this fact may be apparent only from a late-twentieth-century vantage point. At a time when most Americans and even many in the government believed the Chinese Communist leaders were mere puppets of the Soviet Union, *Terry and the Pirates* repeatedly portrayed the relations between the Soviets and the Chinese as strained, hinting that the Chinese and Russian soldiers were something less than willing allies. In light of America's future involvement in Vietnam, the most ironic (although again perhaps only in hindsight) statement comes from an officer who addresses *Steve Canyon* as he prepares to return to America. "Tell the people you see back home they have nothing to worry about in Indo-China!" he tells Steve. "What chance have a few million Chinese commie troops have against our red-blooded Air Force mechanics and technicians?!" (April 30, 1954).

## 2. NUCLEAR WEAPONRY

Although most domestic comic strips rarely mentioned Communists or America's role in international conflicts, they frequently included other subjects pertaining to the cold war, particularly the growth of nuclear weaponry. By 1950, the initial wonder and horror Americans felt toward the atomic bomb were beginning to dissipate. By this time, the campaign by atomic scientists and peace activists for international control of atomic energy had largely failed; the early hopes that atomic power would become a

panacea for medical, energy, and other human problems had dissolved; and Americans were left with only "fear—muted, throbbing, only half acknowledged—and a dull sense of grim inevitability..." (Boyer 350). The government tried to use this fear to maintain support for its cold war policies and massive arms buildup and, at the same time, worked to make the bomb and atomic energy seem benign and even friendly. As Miller and Nowak have argued, the "whole thrust [of the official nuclear policy of the United States] was to convince people both to trust the bomb and to be in terror of it...fear Soviet bombs, while trusting American ones" (46).

## 2.1 NUCLEAR BOMBS DANGEROUS BUT COMMONPLACE

The comic strips of the early 1950s reflected this strangely contradictory attitude. On the one hand, they recognized the danger and power of nuclear weapons. In one *Dixie Dugan* episode Mr. Dugan explains to Dixie why he chose to purchase war bonds. "I've invested this as an insurance against A-Bombs, H-Bombs, or any other alphabetic bombs blastin' us," he tells his daughter as she looks on proudly (April 27, 1950). A line in *Joe Palooka* also reveals recognition of the tremendous power of nuclear bombs. Discussing the boxing ability of a fighter, a character reports "th' guy packs a sock like one of them new atomic weepens [sic]!" (April 17, 1952). Yet this reference, which describes the bomb's capacity in human terms, also reflects a view of the bomb as commonplace and strips the horror from the term. The comics' association of nuclear power with ordinary people and objects mirrored the use of similar nuclear metaphors elsewhere in early 1950s newspapers. For example, a 1950 advertisement for *Pageant* magazine described it as "the mighty atom\* among all American magazines." The caption next to the asterisk read: "with new power to entertain and inform you that is like atomic energy compared with old-type forces" (*Chicago Tribune*, Sunday supplement, April 11, 1950, 3).

The *Joe Palooka* episode thus reveals the role the comic strips played in the drive in the mass media of the early 1950s to make nuclear bombs "both everyday and palatable" (Miller and Nowak 47). For example, General Leslie Groves, the head of the project to develop the atomic bomb, personally chose Dagwood Bumstead of *Blondie* to star in a comic book campaign to promote the peaceful uses of atomic energy (Boyer 296–297).

The comic strips also helped promote the idea that nuclear war was

survivable. A *Dixie Dugan* episode argues that nuclear war is not much more damaging than natural disasters. Trying to impress a wealthy glass baron with his knowledge of the industry, Mr. Dugan argues more use should be made of laminated glass in the event of storms—earthquakes—or atomic attacks” (April 15, 1953).<sup>7</sup> This vision of the ordinariness of nuclear bombs was also advanced in the newspapers I studied. The papers ran repeated stories on nuclear tests, with large photographs of mushroom clouds. These tests were usually discussed in terms with language that would better suit a description of a fashion designer’s latest line of clothing. For instance, an A-bomb test in Nevada was described as “the most brilliant and spectacular of the spring series” (*Washington Post*, April 19, 1953, 6M). A similar story about an artificial town built to test the effect of a nuclear blast included a photograph of two female mannequins, one sitting in an easy chair, the other lying in bed in a typical suburban house (*Washington Post*, April 26, 1953, 18). The image reinforced the contradictory messages about the atomic bomb carried in the comic strips and other mass media, for it portrayed the bomb as both a familiar component of everyday life in America and as something with the capacity to instantaneously wipe out human existence.<sup>8</sup>

The comic strips also participated in this effort to domesticate the atomic bomb. One of the cartoonists’ main methods was making the bomb into an object of humor by creating their own “alphabet bombs.” For example, *Brenda Starr* describes the portrayal of an energetic baby swinging from a broom resting on two chairs as “the testing grounds of the mighty B-Bomb” (April 22, 1951). Walt Kelly’s *Pogo* refers to an “E-Bomb” which is a bee-hive inside a box (April 3, 1950). Unlike most other comic strips that referred to the bomb only in positive or humorous ways, *Pogo* uses an allegory about a character (Uncle Willy) who tried to protect himself with an alligator, in order to show the dangers implicit in the nuclear arms build-up by both sides in the cold war. After revealing that Uncle Willy was eaten by the very alligator he had thought ensured his safety, *Pogo* explains the moral of the story: “Yep if you protects yourself with them ‘gators, son—it don’t make no difference whose’ gator eats you” (April 5, 1950).

Of the artists I studied, Kelly was the only cartoonist to comment directly on how American nuclear arsenal made the United States less, not more, safe; most comic strip artists tried to portray the bomb in the best possible light. Nonetheless, the fact that the issue of atomic weapons appeared repeatedly in the comics and other forms of mass media, although in various guises, reveals the degree to which the threat of nuclear war hung over

America. By the early 1950s, the atomic bomb was an omnipresent and "integral part of American culture" (Miller and Nowak 43). No amount of soothing rhetoric about the survivability of an atomic attack or humorous atomic metaphors could eliminate completely the fear of an apocalyptic future made all too real by the cold war and the subsequent arms race.

## 2.2 URANIUM--ITS NOVELTY AND BENEFITS

Another subject related to the nuclear bomb that showed up in the comic strips of the early 1950s pertained to the uranium used in atomic energy and, on one occasion in the strips I studied, the radioactivity produced by that material. Because very little was yet known (at least by the general public) about the negative side effects of radioactivity, the *Dick Tracy* episodes that introduce the topic of radiation focus primarily on the novelty of the condition and the modern technology used to detect its presence. Chester Gould shows Tracy using a Geiger counter to examine the victim of accidental irradiation. The machine is clearly the star of the story, and the artist takes great care to show how it works, drawing zap rays around it and writing in ticking sounds. Just to make sure the audience understands the new equipment, a scientist with Tracy explains that "the Geiger counter shows radioactivity, and how!" (April 3 and 19, 1953). Although the strip gives some indication of potential danger (the subject is isolated in a solitary room with walls lined with lead), the emphasis is on the technology used to detect radiation; the strip does not suggest that the victim's condition is exceedingly grave.

Uranium was a prominent topic in 1955 comic strips and was the focus of three story lines simultaneously. But none of these comic strips ever mentioned the mineral's radioactivity. Instead, all three centered on the economic benefits of uranium. Two of the strips, *Smilin' Jack* and *Gasoline Alley*, depict characters searching for uranium in the Southwest as part of a "get rich quick scheme." These story lines mirrored an evidently widespread view of the product as the means to financial security, best exemplified by an article in the Sunday paper entitled "How the janitor hit the URANIUM JACKPOT" (Hosokawa 7). Unlike this lucky janitor, the characters in the strips are not so fortunate. As Corky of *Gasoline Alley* explains, "The uranium rush is over...the lure is off." He and his wife Hope decide that although "their uranium dreams are exploded," nonetheless, they are now "safely back to earth" and "it isn't so bad down here after all" (April 25, 1955). The writer's choice of

dialogue gives only the slightest hint of the product's destructive capacity and includes no mention whatsoever of radioactivity.

A final example shows that uranium could also turn up in comic strips in ways that were both totally unexpected and dreadfully contrived. In *Dixie Dugan*, the Dugan family purchase a castle they believe to be an authentic Irish castle from the Middle Ages, although they soon learn it is a fake. An expert examining the walls, however, discovers that the stones are loaded with pitchblende, which just happens to be "the most important source of radium and uranium!" (April 8, 1955). Rather than worrying about radiation as a later generation's characters surely would have, the Dugans are excited by the good news. Once again, uranium is viewed as financially beneficial. Any possible dangers are simply not discussed. Thus, as in their portrayal of the nuclear bomb, the comics depicted uranium and radioactivity almost exclusively in a positive light. Discovering uranium was a means of becoming wealthy overnight. Radioactivity was little more than an interesting phenomenon that could showcase the wonders of modern science.

### **3. THE THREAT OF DOMESTIC SUBVERSION**

Along with battles against Soviet and Chinese Communists and discussions of atomic bombs and uranium, the comic strips of the early 1950s reflected a third aspect of cold war America: the domestic Red Scare and the establishment of the national security state. Fear of subversives and foreign agents hoping to undermine the United States; mistrust of other members of society, any one of whom might be a Communist or Communist sympathizer; willingness to adopt a mob mentality and brand any person who was in any way different from the norm as a potential security risk; the unquestioned need for both individual Americans and the U.S. military to maintain eternal vigilance against the omnipresent threat of international Communism and to be willing to act at a moment's notice against this threat, regardless of what form it took: all of these attitudes marked American society in the early 1950s, and all were reflected in the comic strips of the time.

#### **3.1 SPIES AND SYMPATHIZERS**

The comic strip that best illustrated this new atmosphere was Jack



Mosley's *Smilin' Jack*. Mosley consistently portrayed his hero engaged in undercover and dangerous missions for a secret division of the U.S. government. His job generally involves uncovering enemy spy rings or covert activities. The strip emphasizes the cloak-and-dagger aspects of Jack's work and depicts a society where no one can be trusted. In a 1951 episode, Jack is ordered to active duty in the U.S. Air Force and given the position of technical inspector at a jet training base. This job is simply meant to provide cover, however, for his real task will be "to help trap subversive agents." His superior explains to him the gravity of the situation: "We are facing an insidious enemy who tries to operate in many insidious ways...th' main type of subversive elements and agents that you are to ferret out are as follows...Bzzzzzz." Jack replies with grim determination: "Gulp...I had no idea that they would try to work in such vicious, subtle ways!" (April 22, 1951). The basic premise of the strip changed hardly at all over the five years of my study. In an episode in 1955, Jack is still receiving coded messages ordering him to "be on the lookout for any possible security leaks and spies..." (April 26, 1955). Jack carefully destroys the message lest it fall into enemy hands.

Mosley suggested that in order to defeat the menace of Communist subversion, all members of society—and not only the men on the front lines of the battle—must be prepared to sacrifice. For instance, Jack's wife Sable expresses concern about Jack's dangerous work, but she recognizes that "in times like these, wives have to try to understand and keep their chins up!" (April 23, 1951). In a later episode, she asks anxiously, "Jack, why can't you stay home like other husbands?" His response cannot be refuted: "It's that secret branch of the government I work for! When they call, I must go!" (April 15, 1955). The portrayal of spying, mistrust, and lawbreaking in the strip extended well beyond the protagonist. One episode depicts people secretly listening in on someone else's phone conversation and planning a clandestine elopement (April 5, 1953). Another revolves around a daughter (named Chinchilla) who learns her father is a fur racketeer and is secretly smuggling Siberian sables into the United States even though "last January, luxury furs from red countries were banned from being shipped to America" (April 6, 1952).

*Smilin' Jack* was not the only comic strip that portrayed the suspicion and distrust of these years. *Little Orphan Annie* clearly reflected the fear of domestic subversion by Communist sympathizers. In one episode, Punjab tells Daddy Warbucks his concerns about Michail, a scientist that works for

Warbucks. "That 'Michail' was once Michailovitch, Sahib...he shall be watched very carefully," Punjab assures his employer. Sure enough, the scientist is caught trying to sell secrets to a foreign agent, and Punjab causes him to vanish! The message of suspicion is driven home by Warbucks's closing comments after Punjab tells him what has happened: "Hm'm...I wouldn't have believed it of Mike...I guess it's getting dangerous to trust anyone these days..." (April 21-24, 1950). An earlier episode spells out the tremendous danger the United States would face if any of Ivan's collaborators in America were to succeed in their mission. Daddy Warbucks counsels Annie that "it takes only one well-meaning ass to make life horrible for millions, for a thousand years..." (April 5, 1950). In order to make sure such a disaster is avoided, the strip repeatedly stressed the importance of being prepared to act militarily. One highly revealing episode features Warbucks and Annie walking the grounds of his estate. After Annie comments on its beauty, Daddy explains that although it looks natural on the surface, there is a huge subterranean bomb shelter with tunnels leading to the landing "just in case we have to get out in a hurry...and alive..." "Leapin' Lizards!" exclaims Annie, "I'd never guess it! D'you mean we aren't safe even here?" "Ho Ho! Safe as anywhere," chuckles Daddy, then comments that the path to safety lies in being able to outguess and outtalk "the other boys...or out-draw 'em, if it ever comes to that!" When Annie protests that we must never start a war, Daddy drives home his point by recounting a story about a sheriff who was so quick on the draw his wife sewed his holster shut slightly just so that he would never draw first in a gun fight. "What was their name?" Annie asks innocently. Casually lighting his cigar, Warbucks replies, "Why, for some years past her name has been the widow Smith..." (April 30, 1950).

### 3.2 A CLIMATE OF DISTRUST

These examples from *Smilin' Jack* and *Little Orphan Annie* unquestionably reflect Americans' suspicions and fears of domestic Communist subversion. But the Red Scare also manifested itself in the comics of the early 1950s in more subtle ways. I do not argue that all the following examples can be interpreted only as examples of domestic anti-Communism. However, in light of the tremendous power and breadth of the Red Scare and the widespread suspicions and fears exhibited in the comic strips cited above, images and story lines that at first glance seem to have little to do with these attitudes

must be reassessed. For instance, plots involving mistrust and deceit in marriage and of women secretly battling each other for the love of a man are common in many 1950s domestic comic strips.<sup>9</sup> The prevalence of these themes can be seen as reflections of an overall atmosphere of suspicion (or at least as preexisting gender norms that were heightened and made more credible by a social and political climate of distrust and fear). One may posit that a *Winnie Winkle* panel where Aunt Bessie worries about Val "being such a two-faced sneak" may have struck 1950s readers as a comment on the impossibility of trusting other people. Such an interpretation is reinforced by the prominent image of a scowling and apprehensive policeman (April 10, 1953). Even comic strips about children could have cold war overtones. Although the idea that the episode refers to Communism may seem far-fetched, it is certainly not out of the question, given the political mood of the time and the fact that the word *red* is always in bold print. Likewise, a *Dick Tracy* episode about a man who is murdered, stuffed in a base drum, and then set on fire appears to have nothing to do with the cold war. The reader later learns, however, that the body was secretly removed before the drum was set ablaze and the drum was filled with books instead (April 16, 1954). Why did Gould choose to use these particular objects as a substitute for the body? Was he in any way influenced by well-publicized campaigns to uncover and destroy (by fire) subversive books and comic books in public libraries or in United States Information Agency libraries overseas? The connection is at least plausible if not irrefutable.

Other strips exhibited the potential dangers of living in a society conditioned by fear and secrecy. A series of episodes in *Rex Morgan, M.D.*, revolve around the community's ostracism of a family who have contracted leprosy. Dr. Morgan's is the sole voice of reason as residents throw bricks through the Hartleys' windows in the middle of the night and the children are forced out of school. Clearly, the main point of Dr. N. P. Dallis (the writer of the strip as well as a psychiatrist) was to educate his audience about the misperceptions about leprosy and its communicability. The strip, however, also comments on the dangers of mob mentality and fearing someone simply because that person is different in some way. Even if the writer did not intend his story line as a commentary on the effect of the Red Scare on people's attitudes, Dr. Morgan's words nonetheless are directly applicable to this issue, for he states somberly, "When fear and ignorance join hands, the end result is distortion...and sometimes panic!" (April 1, 1954).

*Steve Canyon* offered a more direct example of the danger of

Americans adopting a mob mentality as a result of the ubiquitous fear of Communism. The story focuses on a false air raid warning on a small town near an Air Force base. The strip recounts that although the townspeople have been instructed how to act in case of such an attack, "the people do exactly what they have been warned not to do" and panic (April 17, 1953). Told by a disgruntled businessman (with whom Steve's longtime girlfriend Summer Olsen has just refused to do business) that Summer is a Communist collaborator who is responsible for the Soviet attack, the townspeople form a lynch mob and descend upon the hotel where she is hiding. Naturally, Steve Canyon is able to rescue Summer and calm down the crowd. But no other episode better exemplified the potential for insurgency or the intensity of Americans' fears of both internal Communist subversion and a direct Soviet attack.

### 3.3 MCCARTHYISM

One of the major factors responsible for making these fears so intense and for creating the atmosphere of suspicion that enveloped both the comic strips and American society in the early 1950s was the anti-Communist crusade of Senator Joseph McCarthy and his fallacious charges of large numbers of Communists in the federal government. At the height of his power from 1952 to 1954, very few Americans had the courage to challenge McCarthy. Cartoonists were no exception. Indeed, only one comic strip artist, Walt Kelly, even mentioned McCarthy, and even he did so indirectly (although there was never any doubt who his subject was). *Pogo* stood out in these years as the single comic strip that criticized the McCarthyite tactics of guilt by association, the repeating of a lie often enough that people believe it to be true, and the censorship of free expression. Kelly portrayed McCarthy as the bobcat Simple J. Malarkey who, along with his henchmen Mole and some cowbirds, take over the Audible Boy Bird Watchers Society (a surrogate for McCarthy's Government Operations Committee) and try to bring absolute order to the Okefenokee Swamp community. Malarkey's incessant demand "What kind of bird is you?" (Mishkin 684) and his insistence that any creature that he deems to be a bird (regardless of whether the animal actually is one) needs to be carefully watched are references to McCarthy's assertion that Communists were everywhere and to his persistent call for security precautions.

Obviously the characteristics of these particular animals (the savagery of a bobcat and the blindness of a mole) were not lost on Kelly, who excelled at depicting politicians with the appropriate animal likeness.<sup>10</sup> "Owl say it don't pay to be a Bird now that Mole is watching 'em," laments Pogo in one episode. His friend Churchy replies, "It don't pay to be nothin...if you ain't a bird he say you is" (April 14, 1953). In a later episode, a hound dog insists he is not a bird. Malarkey replies sinisterly to the Mole, "Oh, we can fix that...we'll jes' git some feathers an' some...boilin' tar, an' with a little judicious application we can make the child into any bird we chooses...all nice and neat..." (Mishkin 684).

Kelly also mocked Americans' unwillingness to stand up to McCarthy's bullying: "A little prudent tippy-toein' will in all prolibility git you by un-noticed," says the noble dog as he cravenly sneaks away from Mole (April 28, 1953). Finally, Kelly frequently commented on McCarthyite justice and the abandonment of the ideals of innocent until proven guilty and the right of the accused to face his accusers. A classic example of these themes pertains to the disappearance of pup dog. The wise old Owl reports to Pogo and Porky Pine how the investigation is progressing: "we've dis-cussed, re-cussed...all was give a fair chance to talk an' dee-fend Mole...but we ended up suspectin' him fair an' square...." When Porky Pine asks him whether he has had time to think, Owl supplies the punch line (and Kelly's commentary on how emotionalism was overwhelming reason): "All in good time...we ain't the sloppy kind what tries to do two things at once" (April 3, 1954). In the shrill cacophony of messages in the comic strips of the early 1950s and in the society at large concerning the threat of international Communism, the power of nuclear bombs, the danger of internal subversion, the need to be ready to go to war at a moment's notice, and suspicion of all who did not conform to accepted norms of behavior and appearance, *Pogo* was and remains a refreshing voice of reason calling out in the wilderness of fear and mistrust.

#### **4. CONCLUSION: SECURITY THROUGH CONFORMITY**

Although this essay has shown the diverse ways the cold war entered into and was portrayed in the comic strips of the early 1950s in America, I have not meant to imply that the struggle against Communism at home and abroad utterly dominated all the comic strips of these years. The majority of

domestic strips and even many of the adventure strips rarely, if ever, explicitly mentioned the cold war or the related issues of nuclear bombs or domestic subversion. This does not mean, however, that the atmosphere of fear and suspicion that the cold war generated did not have a significant impact on these comic strips. Anxieties about nuclear war and the Communist menace in 1950s America were simply inescapable, creating a political and social environment that placed a tremendous premium on security through conformity. This lack of explicit commentary/conformist ideal had a chilling effect on both the cartoonists and the work they produced, often in ways that were subtle and not immediately apparent. Although a handful of artists (including Capp, Caniff, and Kelly) had the personal conviction and mass appeal that allowed them to "get away with" including explicit political commentary in their work, most comic strip artists and writers found that the safest and most successful approach was to follow the path of least resistance and avoid cold war politics.

The priority placed on security and conformity also helps explain the rigid uniformity of the comic strips' vision of race, class, and gender norms and relations. Because everyone in society was a potential security risk, comic strip artists needed to portray all characters as sharing the appearance, status, and values of the "normal American family" upheld as the ideal in the King Features Syndicate's comics code. All characters who did not meet these standards (including foreigners, Americans of non-Anglo Saxon ancestry, and women who were not primarily homemakers) had to be shown either as actively striving to become more like the norm or as unsympathetic figures who were unmistakably outside the parameters of American society. Finally, the comics' consistent portrayal of distrust and deceit (particularly in marriage) can be seen as yet another example of the prevailing mood of suspicion and anxiety that permeated America in the early 1950s. Thus, although the comic strips contained relatively few direct references to the cold war, they nonetheless reveal a great deal about its profound impact on American culture and society.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Unless otherwise noted, citations of *Terry and the Pirates*, *Dick Tracy*, *Smilin' Jack*, and *Little Orphan Annie* are from the *Chicago Tribune*; citations of *Steve Canyon*, *Dixie Dugan*, *Li'l Abner*, *Rex Morgan, M.D.*, *Joe Palooka*, and *Gasoline Alley* are from the *Washington Post*; and citations of *Pogo* are from the *Wisconsin State Journal*. The ellipses, hyphens, underlines, and bold print are reproduced from the originals.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This essay is a reworking of one chapter of my master's thesis entitled "The Comics Stripped: What the Comic Strips Reveal about Cold War America, 1950-1955" (University of Wisconsin, 1992). This paper was based on a close reading of seventeen mass-circulation comic strips in three American newspapers: the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the (*Madison*) *Wisconsin State Journal*. (Because I was looking exclusively at comic strips with national circulations, it was not important for my purposes to look at any particular papers, and I thus confined my research to these three papers that included all the strips in my survey). My methodological approach was to carefully examine all episodes of each strip for the same month (April) of each year 1950 to 1955. The comic strips I examined were as follows (by category): Family/Comic: *Gasoline Alley*, *Moon Mullins*, *Blondie*, *Penny*; Comic/Other: *Peanuts*, *Pogo*, *Li'l Abner*, *Joe Palooka*; Career Girl: *Winnie Winkle*, *Dixie Dugan*, *Brenda Starr*; Adventure: *Little Orphan Annie*, *Dick Tracy*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Steve Canyon*, *Smilin' Jack*; Soap Opera: *Mary Worth* and *Rex Morgan, M.D.* Although this is far from an exhaustive list of all the comic strips published during these years, I concluded that it was a diverse enough sample to constitute a reasonably accurate overview of the nationally syndicated comic strips of the time and offered the greatest potential for portraying the social and political dynamics of the society.

<sup>2</sup> This nonofficial but nonetheless strictly enforced policy is best spelled out in the 1949 *Catalog of Famous Artists and Writers* published by the King Features Syndicate (see Reitberger and Fuchs 146).

We have a "code of the Comics." No blood, no torture, no horror, no controversial subjects such as religion, politics and race. Above all, is

the important matter of good taste. The comics must be clean. No suggestive posturing and no indecent costumes. The figures must be natural and lifelike. In other words, "Blondie," for example, is the daily doings in humorous form of a normal American family.

<sup>3</sup> *Terry and the Pirates* was begun by Milton Caniff in 1934 but was taken over by George Wunder when Caniff launched *Steve Canyon* in 1947.

<sup>4</sup> In sharp contrast, the comic books about the Korean War heavily emphasized the casualties on both sides and repeatedly portrayed violent hand-to-hand fighting. Again unlike the comic strips that generally portrayed their heroes as unfazed by the carnage, American soldiers in comic books were full of doubts about their mission and were often depicted as neurotic. See Savage (65).

<sup>5</sup> The excerpt reads "why are you just plain proud? Because the Army in Korea has proved that Americans will die to halt any threat to freedom in 1951—as they have done since 1776" ("Congressman Pays Tribute" 46).

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that the *Chicago Tribune* during the early 1950s ran a daily front-page feature entitled "Ching Chow" that depicted a caricature of a Chinese man with a pig tail and a Mandarin silk jacket who provided Confucius-like aphorisms.

<sup>7</sup> The message of the strip is the same as that of a newspaper photograph of an American soldier in a foxhole in Korea reading a book entitled *How to Survive an Atomic Bomb* with the attached caption "They Aren't Going to Catch Him Unprepared" (*Wisconsin State Journal*, April 5, 1951, 1).

<sup>8</sup> The caption for this photograph, "'Ladies-in-Waiting' for Atomic Blast," has bizarre sexual overtones and points to the connections between female sexuality and nuclear (and conventional) weapons. This fascinating issue is explored in detail by May (92–113).

<sup>9</sup> These themes are common in many of the strips I examined, including *Blondie*, *Moon Mullins*, *Penny*, *Dixie Dugan*, *Brenda Starr*, *Winnie Winkle*, and *Mary Worth*.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly later depicted Nikita Khrushchev as a pig and Fidel Castro as a goat.



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