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Dennis K. McDaniel

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**THE C.I.O. POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE AND  
CONGRESSMAN MARTIN DIES' DEPARTURE  
FROM CONGRESS:  
LABOR'S INFLATED CLAIMS**

*by Dennis K. McDaniel*

Congressman Martin Dies of Orange, Texas, in 1938 founded and was named chairman of the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities, first known in popular parlance as the Dies Committee, later as HUAC. This conservative congressman from the Southeast Texas oil-refining region was amply anti-union. Thus, the left side of the labor movement (largely the CIO) was delighted when, contrary to all expectations, this seven-term congressman suddenly announced on May 12, 1944 that he would not stand for reelection that year, and that he was leaving Congress and politics. Dies' decision puzzled political observers, while journalists generally accepted the CIO claim that it had scared Dies out.

The scholarly record accumulated in the intervening years shows that the historians followed the journalists' lead in misinterpreting the event. Here we will try to demonstrate how Dies' retirement in 1944 was misconstrued when it occurred, and how it has remained misunderstood virtually until today.

The miscomprehension began when the labor movement – the CIO and its Political Action Committee in particular – immediately took credit in 1944 for pushing Dies out of Congress. At that time the CIO badly wanted to get rid of Dies, and just weeks before his surprise withdrawal columnist Drew Pearson had repeated CIO claims that the union was getting into position in Texas' Second Congressional District to vote Dies out. The fortuitous timing of Pearson's column made the CIO claim immediately plausible when Dies quit a few weeks later. The CIO and its Political Action Committee reinforced the belief by crowing over the accomplishment.

From the time Dies withdrew, the CIO victory claim spread through much of the media, was repeated endlessly, and finally became so ingrained that every scholar who discussed labor in this period invariably credited the CIO and its Political Action Committee with victory over the Texas reactionary. The reality was more mundane.

In 1984 a graduate student at the University of Houston, Patience Evans, in a master's thesis that was a first-class piece of historical analysis, showed that Pearson and the CIO were entirely wrong in 1944, and that had Dies stayed in the election he unquestionably would have retained his seat. Building on Evans' discoveries, I found evidence in Dies' letters written early in 1944 that he was confident he would win if he ran.

Evans provided evidence for her conclusion by examining the Texas electoral system, and also by looking at Dies' successful electoral record, his district's demography, and the poll taxes paid there in 1944. She found that the CIO's claimed influx of new union voters (some 70,000) in the district – registered, paid up, and ready to throw Dies out – was nonexistent.<sup>1</sup>

Evans located the origin of the myth in Pearson's "Washington Merry-Go-Round" column of April 1, 1944, a piece which made its appearance a providential six weeks before Dies' withdrawal. Pearson apparently got his information about the 70,000 voters from Sidney Hillman or CIO sources, and the canard that the CIO could drive Dies out started its long life. As recently as 1989, respected labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein repeated the fable, and not long before, in 1987, the aged battler George Seldes, who claimed to have had a role in the Dies dismissal at *In Fact* magazine, repeated the yarn with particularly gratuitous exaggerations. And they were not alone.<sup>2</sup>

Surprisingly, Evans found that the error actually had been uncovered immediately in 1944. The arch-conservative Dallas *Morning News* studied Pearson's report, looked at the paid-up poll taxes in Dies' District, and reported that there had been no massive influx of union member voters. But that revelation was not widely disseminated.<sup>3</sup>

While the Dallas *Morning News* did not explain how voting and non-voting then worked in Texas, we can do so: the electoral laws in effect in 1944 aimed to prevent voting. The law required lengthy residency before registration: one year in the state, six months in the county, and ninety days in the precinct. Moreover, a poll tax had to be paid, and it had to be paid in person in January – before potential voters knew if there was going to be a contest that might make voting worthwhile that year. This meant simply that the legislature had erected many barriers against voting; poll tax payments had to be repeated every year and many residents were ineligible to register because of recent changes of residence. The potential voter had to have a decisive interest to hop all the hurdles.

Moreover, the Democratic Party primary – the real election in Texas at the time – was white only until the Supreme Court struck down the race rule in 1944. In the spring of 1944 essentially no blacks were registered in the Democratic Party in Dies' District.<sup>4</sup>

No huge influx of new white voters could be found, either. The poll tax records showed 66,295 paid in the district in 1940, 61,009 in 1942, and 75,924 in 1944. The net increase from 1940 was only about 10,000, and the percentage increase from 1942 about twenty-four percent, a substantial increase but not nearly enough to dent Dies' impressive incumbency position. And this was true even though approximately fifty-seven percent of all voters in the district were in the two industrialized counties of Jefferson and Orange (and presumably, therefore, more open to labor's appeals).<sup>5</sup>

Dies was electorally strong in the district before 1944, and strong long

afterward. In the Senate race in 1941 he garnered fifty-seven percent of the vote against W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel (the winner), Lyndon Johnson, and others. When Dies returned to politics in 1952 he got sixty-four percent of the district's vote in a large primary field for the Texas at-large House seat.<sup>6</sup>

In 1944 the relatively few and new shipyard and refinery workers registered in Dies' district did not necessarily favor change, and did not necessarily oppose Dies. While a majority usually voted for CIO union certification at the shipyard or refinery, a substantial minority opposed the union. The new arrivals were not class-conscious workers relocated from the industrial Northeast; most were educationally deprived men and women from farms and little towns in the South who believed the usual conservative shibboleths. They might vote for the union to raise pay, but at the polls they were capable of choosing almost anyone because they did not understand the most ordinary left-right distinctions; and they maintained traditional racism. No case can be made that they were progressives.<sup>7</sup>

When Dies made his announcement in May 1944, people who knew Lone Star politics – the Texas delegation in the House of Representatives, for example – understood that he could not be defeated in his district. They dismissed as improbable his stories about ill-health and desire not to turn into a professional politician, and tried to figure out the "real" reason for his departure. They could not ask him because he stayed in Texas, as he had been in the habit of doing after March 1944. The Texas delegation gossiped and concluded that someone must have evidence of a Dies peccadillo, and was holding the information over his head to force him out. The Texans could think of no explanation but blackmail for Dies' departure. They had no evidence for such speculation; it evolved simply because Dies' stated reasons were incredible to them. Here Dies was done an injustice insofar as the gossip turned on sexual innuendo. Dies apparently took money during his career as HUAC chairman, but that was not known to his House colleagues among whom Dies always had the reputation of being fiscally honest; inasmuch as the congressional gossips sought an explanation in a hidden sex escapade, they were almost certainly wrong. Dies had a weakness for money, not women.<sup>8</sup>

Congressman Martin Dies' son, Judge Martin Dies, provided a straightforward explanation for Dies' withdrawal announcement in May 1944: he said his father thought he had cancer of the throat and was going to die. This in part confirms Dies' statement in the *New York Times* in 1944 that he was under the care of Dr. Frederick Fowler for a "throat disorder ... which ... may require a serious operation."<sup>9</sup> Dies, a heavy cigar smoker, was frightened, for he apparently did for a brief time think he had throat cancer.

Of greater importance, however, was the fact that he was discouraged because his political career was going nowhere. For him that meant he was not heading for the Senate anytime soon, and maybe never. He had been

trounced badly in most of Texas in his Senate effort in 1941, and that had discouraged him profoundly. His premonition in 1944 that he might never get to the Senate turned out to be true, though he did try one more time, in 1957.

Another factor favoring Dies' decision was that he had become financially comfortable by 1944. His oil leases, real estate, bond holdings, and congressional earnings, added to the money he had accepted under the table to influence his behavior as chairman of HUAC, amounted to tidy sums of income and accumulation. He felt that he could live the rest of his life without working. Insofar as financial need was concerned, that was probably true. When he did go back to lawyering a year or so later, and when he reentered politics in 1952, he did not do so for money, but in order to have something to do, and to try one last time to get to the Senate.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, in the years after his Senate-race defeat Dies had been by turns ready to quit, or willing to go on, depending upon his moon. There is evidence that as early as the Spring of 1942 he was considering buying a house in Lufkin and retiring there. And right after his withdrawal he let slip in a private letter that "to retire to private life ... is really what I have wanted to do for a long time."<sup>11</sup>

As it happened, the early months of 1944 had been one of his liveliest periods since the Senate-race disaster in 1941. He shook some of the lethargy of the intervening years, and temporarily regained the enthusiasm for politics that he had exhibited until 1941. In January 1944 he began to work on his congressional reelection campaign, studying means to head off potential problems – as he had always done in the 1930s. But in 1944 there were no problems. In January, for example, he easily obtained the promise of an endorsement from AFL President William Green, who presumably saw it as a way to take a whack at the CIO. Green offered to mail his endorsement of Dies either directly to the congressman or to the local labor council. Dies opted for the latter course, and Green sent the letter to the Beaumont Trades and Labor Assembly. But Green either mishandled the mailing or sought intentionally to railroad the local council, for he sent it to the Beaumont *Enterprise* in advance, with the result that Green's letter appeared on the paper's front page on February 1, 1944, *before* the nominal labor-group addressees had received their copy. That made them angry, and they passed a huffy resolution aimed at the Beaumont *Enterprise*, which printed a story about it on February 3. It was pointless for the labor leaders to attack the *Enterprise* or even Dies when it was William Green who was at fault. This teapot typhoon, insignificant in itself, showed how close Dies was to Green and how powerless local labor assemblies were in relation to their national leadership. It also showed how reliably the biggest newspaper in the district, the Beaumont *Enterprise*, kept Dies informed and how it served as his regional mouthpiece.<sup>12</sup>

At this point Dies was less worried about his re-election than was his

ever-analytical Port Arthur political advisor, Postmaster Stewart Martin.<sup>13</sup> The latter sent Dies unusually complete intelligence reports on local attitudes while Dies in turn mailed a steady stream of material to the cooperative *Enterprise*. Dies' confidence grew daily, and by late March he wrote that "a group of my friends made a very careful survey of the district and advised me that the comments of 75 percent of the people were very strong in my favor. In fact, my friends believe that I am stronger today than ever before." Dies' friends were absolutely correct.<sup>14</sup>

That is the last of Dies' cheery optimism. On Sunday, April 23, 1944, Dies traveled to Dallas by car, but became ill en route and turned back to Jasper, Texas, where one of his two Texas homes was located. Shortly afterward he went to Galveston or Houston (the record is contradictory) for a medical examination and learned about the possible cancer. With that, the rush of memory of his Senate-race humiliation, and the surge of fear drove him to throw in the towel. Illness, discouragement, wealth, laziness, and a political broken heart drove Dies back to Texas; it was not the CIO or the Communists that got him, as he later claimed. Until the psychological excuse that the ill-health assessment provided, he had been confident that he could beat them.<sup>15</sup>

Dies learned almost immediately that nothing imminent threatened his health. Within four days of his withdrawal he wrote matter-of-factly to Evalyn Walsh McLean, the Washington socialite who had long befriended him and Mrs. Dies, that he was returning to Houston "next week for a final check-up" and expressing the belief that "rest and freedom from the strain under which I have lived and worked so long will do more than medical science." Considering his record of frequently absenting himself from the House of Representatives for months on end, it was hard to see that he had been under much strain in the later years.

Dies also tried to convince Mrs. McLean that he "was unable to conduct a campaign, and [he] could not afford to submit [this] case to the people without being heard." This was untrue; he would have won whether the Texas Second District heard his case or not. Dies was simply making excuses to cover his desire, evergrowing since 1941, to indulge himself.<sup>16</sup>

As of May 13, 1944, the only thing the world knew was that Martin Dies, founder and chairman of the feared House Special Committee on Un-American Activities, was leaving Congress. Labor thought, or claimed to think, that it had scared him out. Insiders believed that he must have been framed or blackmailed. But the real reasons were personal – political disappointment, a touch of laziness, and a health scare.

For several years, no one talked much about Martin Dies and his departure. He was out of politics and Joe McCarthy did not appear until six years afterward as a significant public figure who might be compared to him, and there the matter rested until Dies again won election to the House of Representatives in 1952, this time as Texas' Congressman-at-Large.

Beginning with this campaign, Dies, paradoxically, but for his own reasons, helped propound the myth that the CIO and Communists had driven him out of public life in 1944. As he reentered politics in 1952 he had to account for his earlier premature retirement. Since the actual reasons largely were ignoble, hardly amounting to more than laziness and a brief – though admittedly frightening – touch of ill-health, he needed to invent a larger explanation, and the Communists and the CIO were it – thus his claim that they had gone after him viciously in 1944. In 1952 he said that “I quit public life before [in 1944] because the communists had plagued me, harassed me, poisoned the minds of my friends and other people about me ... [so] that I just felt I had to quit.”<sup>17</sup> And as Dies made clear elsewhere, he considered the CIO to be virtually synonymous with the Communist Party in the United States at that time.

Some labor leaders, too, helped promote the legend in later years in the sense that they claimed that Dies had not been such a big fish to land, that he had not been as imposing in the early 1940s as some people claimed. Southeast Texas labor leader and former oil-refinery organizer, Morris Akin, claimed in an interview in 1971 that Dies actually had helped union organization in Southeast Texas because the wild charges he made against the CIO rebounded against him and made workers want to join the union. But that view represented an inaccurate memory of a past seen through rose-colored spectacles; it was made in a period when labor still deceived itself in the belief that it was strong politically. In that context, Akin may have thought that reaction to Dies had assisted CIO organizing in Jefferson County, but in 1942 the state CIO, and in 1944 the national CIO, had certainly not felt that way. They had understood that Dies was a powerful threat, and they wanted to get rid of him. In 1942 the Texas CIO convention resolved to work for Dies’ “retirement,” and two years later Sidney Hillman’s CIO Political Action Committee very much wanted to defeat Dies although, as has been indicated, they were quite incapable of doing it.<sup>18</sup>

Any consideration of Martin Dies’ career inevitably elicits a comparison with that of Senator Joseph McCarthy. This has long been true, and in 1953 such comparisons came with special frequency; Dies was again prominent in the public eye as he returned to Congress after an eight-year hiatus, while McCarthy had become famous in the interim, and was then riding high – his downfall still almost two years in the future. McCarthy was the name on everyone’s lips. The newspapers backing him were those whose support Dies had enjoyed in the days of his own eminence – McCormick, Hearst, and the innumerable small-city, right-wing papers that are such a persistent feature of North American life. In 1953, a typical McCormick editorial stated that “they are ganging up on Sen. McCarthy these days exactly as they ganged up on Rep. Dies.”<sup>19</sup> During the McCarthy years, 1950-1955, newspapers reiterated a version of that claim: not only had “they” ganged up on Dies, but he had been silenced. Examples of this

(among many) appeared in Giddings, Texas; Prescott, Arizona; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Houston newspapers.<sup>20</sup>

Dies had not been forced out of Congress in 1944, but had left under his own power for genuinely personal reasons. Furthermore, he was not afterward “silenced,” but spoke often with at least good coverage in Texas from 1945 until his return to Congress. The Hearst comparison of Dies and McCarthy was spurious when written. And although McCarthy was more-or-less silenced in 1955, the “they” who did it certainly covered a wide bipartisan range.

Probably the best proof of all this is that as late as 1959 the John Birch magazine was writing in a review/reminder of Dies’ old book, *The Trojan Horse* (1940), that “Martin Dies paid for his shrewd insight with his political life.... [T]he New Deal – Fair Deal Establishment systematically destroyed the health and political career of Martin Dies.”<sup>21</sup> That is pure fantasy.

The belief that Dies had been “silenced” and driven out of public life, which was earlier CIO propaganda staple, by the 1950s had become a myth of the ultra-right. A look at the dates of the sources suggest that the tale received its widest acceptance after 1950, implying that the CIO had not been as effective in propagating the Dies fiction in 1944-1953 as the right was with its disinformation campaign after 1952. Paradoxically, the CIO Political Action Committee was granted more legendary power by the right than it had ever won for itself; the reason was that the right exploited the legend as part of the anti-communist frenzy which it so successfully generated in those years.

Happily, humor may be found in the midst of the right-ring hysteria of the 1950s. When Martin Dies travelled to Jackson, Mississippi, in 1957 to present an anti-civil rights speech in the municipal auditorium, a history-creating Southern columnist, Florence Sillers Ogden, confessed in a local paper that in 1944 she had “grieved when thousands of outside workers were sent down to his district in Texas and stayed there long enough to vote and defeat Mr. Dies for Congress.”<sup>22</sup> This was totally absurd, as we have seen, yet it shows the effectiveness of the right’s campaign, for this lady had embellished the Dies story in her own mind to the point where Dies had not withdrawn before the primary, but actually had run and been defeated by the CIO.

The facts were that the CIO had never been close to defeating Martin Dies in Southeast Texas or anywhere else. And the only reason that anyone today thinks that it could have must be credited to the propaganda campaign that the right-wing parties have forwarded since the 1950s.

#### NOTES

<sup>20</sup>Patience Evans, “A Political Mystery: Martin Dies’ Withdrawal from the 1944 Texas Democratic Party” (M.A. thesis, University of Houston, 1984). summary, pp. 1-8.



<sup>1</sup>Nelson Lichtenstein, "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining," in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 135; George Seldes, *Witness to a Century* (New York: Ballantine, 1987), Chap. 46, "How We Defeated Martin Dies," pp. 353-356. Other examples: Matthew Josephson, *Sidney Hillman: Statesman of American Labor* (Garden City, NY, 1952), pp. 608-611; Murray Kempton, who wrote that Dies was "scared of defeat," *Part of Our Time: Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties* (New York, 1955), p. 174; Sarah McClendon, *Port Arthur News*, March 15, 1956; George Norris Green ("Dies was hounded into withdrawing") *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-1957* (Westport, CT, 1979), p. 56; Thomas C. Reeves, *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy: A Biography* (New York, 1982), p. 657; and James C. Foster, *The Union Politic: The CIO Political Action Committee* (Columbia, MO, 1975), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>Dallas *Morning News*, April 3, 1944.

<sup>3</sup>Poll-tax exemptions existed for the elderly who, presumably, would vote right. The Supreme Court decision was in *Smith vs. Allright*, April 4, 1944. The Texas Attorney General stalled implementation for several years, so it had no effect in 1944. Evans, "A Political Mystery," p. 68.

<sup>4</sup>Evans, "A Political Mystery," Appendix, Table 4.

<sup>5</sup>Evans, "A Political Mystery," Appendix, Tables 8 and 9.

<sup>6</sup>Beaumont even had a small race riot in 1943 – two dead, eleven injured, and subsequent National Guard occupation. George Lipsitz, *Class and Culture in Cold War America: A Rainbow at Midnight* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1981), p. 25.

<sup>7</sup>Evans interviewed William F. Thomason, son of Texas Congressman Thomason. Both father and son had been in Washington in May 1944. ("A Political Mystery," p. 94). For evidence of the pay-offs Dies apparently took, see Chapter 9, "The Chairman Makes Money, 1938-1940," in Dennis K. McDaniel, "Martin Dies of Un-American Activities: His Life and Times" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Houston, 1988).

<sup>8</sup>Judge Martin Dies interview, June 1, 1987; *New York Times*, May 13, 1944.

<sup>9</sup>Text of Dies' statement, *New York Times*, May 13, 1944, pp. 1, 10. For cancer see Martin Dies, "Treason," *American Opinion*, 7:5 (May 1964), p. 67. For details on Dies' 1941 Senate-race defeat, see Chap. 13, "The Elusive Senate, 1935-1957," in Dennis K. McDaniel, "Martin Dies of Un-American Activities: His Life and Times" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Houston, 1988).

<sup>10</sup>Dies (Jasper) to his secretary (Washington), April 30, 1942, folder #11 Dist. Bus. 1942, Drwr. J; Austin C. Hatchell (Longview) to Dies (Jasper), June 23, 1942, and answer (from Washington), July 3, 1942, folder #11, Dist. Bus. 1942, Drwr. J, Dies Papers (Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center, Liberty, Texas; cited hereafter as Sam Houston Library). Dies (Jasper) to Evalyn Walsh McLean (Washington), May 15 or 16, 1944, Container 6, McLean Papers, Manuscript Div. (Library of Congress).

<sup>11</sup>Beaumont *Enterprise*, February 1, 3, 1944; E.C. Davis, Vice Pres. & Bus. Mgr., *Enterprise*, to Dies (Washington), February 5, 1944 with enclosure (letter from E.B. Gross, Scty, Beaumont Trades and Labor Assembly, to Davis, *Enterprise*, February 4, 1944); Dies to Davis, February 10, 1944, folder #10, Dist. Bus. 1944, Drwr. K, Dies Papers (Sam Houston Library).

<sup>12</sup>Martin, Postmaster, as well as lumber company owner, had for years shrewdly advised Dies on the political situation in the city. Dies Papers (Sam Houston Library).

<sup>13</sup>Letters between Dies (Washington) and Martin: E.C. Davis, Beaumont *Enterprise* vice-president; and W.C. Ross, Sr. (Beaumont), February 5, 29; March 2, 10, 28, 29, 1944, folders #1, #3, #10, Dist. Bus. 1944, Drwr. K, Dies Papers. (Sam Houston Library). Quotation in letter to Ross.

<sup>14</sup>Dallas *Morning News*, April 24, 1944, Dies scrapbook 1941-1954 (Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas, Austin).

<sup>16</sup>Dies to McLean, May 15 or 16, 1944, McLean Papers, Manuscript Div. (Library of Congress).

<sup>17</sup>Quoted by Sarah McClendon, Washington correspondent, in Beaumont *Enterprise*, December 30, 1952. Dies File (Texas Labor Archives, University of Texas – Arlington).

<sup>18</sup>George Norris Green interview with Akin (Texas Labor Archives, University of Texas – Arlington). Port Arthur *News*, April 22, 1942, unmarked scrapbook, Dies Papers (Sam Houston Library). New York *Times*, May 13, 1944, pp. 1, 10.

<sup>19</sup>Editorial, Washington *Times-Herald* [McCormick], July 24, 1953, Scrapbook 53, Dies Papers (Sam Houston Library).

<sup>20</sup>Giddings *News*, May 26, 1950; Prescott *Evening Courier*, October 22, 1954; Tulsa *Tribune*, April 23, 1955; Houston *Chronicle*, November 13-19, 1955, all in Scrapbooks, Boxes 3 and 4; also letter, Robert J. Wilkinson, owner, *The Bay City (Texas) News* to Dies, July 17, 1954, describing Senator McCarthy as “that great American” and Senator Flanders (who led the attack on McCarthy) as “that asinine old fool.” Folder Newspaper Corres., Box 7, all Dies Papers (Sam Houston Library).

<sup>21</sup>“Old Books and New Reviews,” *American Opinion*, 2:1 (January 1959), pp. 14-15. Though listed as author, Dies had not written *The Trojan Horse*: J.B. Matthews did.

<sup>22</sup>*Clarion-Ledger and Jackson Daily News*, November 10, 1957.