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Report From Britain, 25 February 1950

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REPORT FROM BRITAIN
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Aberdeen, Scotland
February 25, 1950

Several friends have suggested lately that I refrain from writing about controversial subjects inasmuch as some people back home may misinterpret my words. I try to appreciate that point of view, but I'm inclined to believe that a few will see "red" even in the most serious attempt at objectivity. The implication seems to be that if you write or talk about movements or creeds where differences of opinion exist that you must necessarily support or at least be sympathetic with them.

My simple answer is that in the twenty years I have been teaching history I have occasionally touched upon Know-Nothingism, anarchism, fascism, feminism, and gangsterism without ever having the slightest desire to embrace the faith. Lest you suggest that these are now outdated and therefore not pertinent, I hasten to suggest that I have also discussed vegetarianism, prohibition, anti-vivisectionism, agrarianism, and pacifism, and never once have I raised my voice in clarion call for a crusade. Most people with energy enough to read a newspaper prefer not to stick their heads in the sand while a storm courses through the world.

All of us would like to think that our present mighty conflict with Russia will not end in a shooting war. But if it does and we are fortunate enough to win, we shall then be trying to convert the defeated enemy to our way of life, as in western Germany today. In the meantime, we are spending billions of hard-earned cash to make as many friends as possible. It makes sense, then, to study closely the Russians and what they are telling the people we would like to have on our side.

I'm convinced that not enough Americans have concrete, first-hand knowledge of the teachings of communism and its propaganda techniques. We know that we abhor the Marxian doctrine and that we can be worked into a blind rage in denouncing it. We are also aware that it has been used as a red herring for so long in Southern politics that when our tempers have cooled we are hard put to decide where truth leaves off and prejudice begins. An honest statement on what British communists are telling the voters over here, while not necessarily bringing anything new, may help to clarify our thinking.

In such a frame of mind, I attended the final communist rally in support of Bob Cooney, candidate for Parliament for North Aberdeen. The profusely decorated auditorium carried the red flag to the exclusion of the Union Jack. Six or seven hundred left-wingers, at least half of them women, listened attentively to the well-delivered and emotional appeal of 73-year-old Bob Stewart, charter member of the British communist party. He recalled his own trials and tribulations, which included imprisonment in the first World War as a conscientious objector.

But Cooney was the man of the hour. He is in his early forties, has grown up in the Aberdeen slums, and has a record which ensures his integrity if not his good judgment. This crusader was captured by the Italians in the Spanish Civil War and fought all the way through World War II. It is almost universally agreed around here that he is the hardest-plugging, most likeable, ablest candidate of the four in the race. He has devoted his life to the welfare of the poverty-stricken people in the section where he grew up. He still lives there.

According to our standards this man may be a sinister crackpot who deserves a bit of purging, but we should not make the mistake of underestimating his intelligence or potential influence when and if another real depression hits this part of the world. He would make the toughest kind of ruthless opponent.

I was chiefly concerned with what he had to say about the United States, keeping in mind that many politicians are likely to stretch what they consider the truth in an effort to reach the least intelligent voter. Cooney followed his party line in driving home to his listeners a completely warped interpretation of the aims and ambitions of the American people.

The gist of his remarks was that "American millionaires, atom bombs and hydrogen bombs and preparation for bacteriological warfare have only one purpose--agressive warfare against Russia and the people of Europe and China who have thrown off the rule of the big landowners and capitalists and are running their countries in the interests of the common people."

Not only that, but that the "bomb-drunk war mongers" had bought the British Labor government for the distinct purpose of using her boys as cannon fodder and the island as the base for launching the atomic war with Russia. As soon as the imperialistic, dollar-grabbing Americans got their allies lined up the frightful conflict would begin. "It means nothing but death and destruction for the British people."

Russia, Cooney said, had been leading the movement to abolish atomic warfare but had been stopped cold by the insidious intrigues of American diplomats. This nonsense was supposedly proved by references to recent developments in the United States and by excerpts, torn out of all context, from speeches of Truman, Acheson, Connally, and others.

There is no doubt in my mind that the majority of those present believed this stuff. It is the same line that has been handed out to people in western Europe and, for that matter, to those who will listen anywhere. Though there was no slightest inference of the use of force and violence, it is well to remember that these communists have the burning zeal of religious fanatics who, if able, would run roughshod over all opposition.

Four days after the rally, Cooney polled 1300 votes out of more than 54,000 in this industrial area. You can judge for yourself how dangerous a man he is. You can also figure out, if you will, the best way to sell human beings all over the world on the concept that our controlled free enterprise and democratic society affords the smoothest road to peace and prosperity.