

University of North Carolina Asheville

“I Hold in My Hand.”

J.B. Matthews, United Fronts, Lists, and the Origins of McCarthy Era Anti-Communism

A Senior Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the Department of History
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts in History

by
Jeremy M. Gibson
2765

Asheville, North Carolina
24 November 2009

In 1940, J.B. Matthews published a ghost written book *The Trojan Horse in America* under the name of Martin Dies—the chairman of the Special Committee for the Investigation of Un-American Activities (HUAC).¹ *The Trojan Horse in America* painted a harrowing tale of communist and fascist subversion in America and warned that “the Trojan Horse minorities within a democracy constitute a major threat that cannot be ignored or minimized,” and most importantly “cannot be measured in numerical terms.”² The book was an expansion of Matthews’ theory of “united front” subversion, which he had laid out in testimony before the committee two years earlier. Matthews’ “united fronts” were groups—usually liberal or progressive—controlled in an indirect manner through officers or other highly placed individuals with close or direct connections to the Communist Party. Matthews, however, did not wish to leave the American public paralyzed in fear about the pervasive communist threat—instead, he offered comfort:

Fortunately, however, for the country, the Special Committee on Un-American Activities has made a record of about twenty volumes which include names, addresses, identities, methods, and plans of many of the Fifth Columnists in this country and the majority of their leaders. The information which was gathered during the past two years could not now be obtained, because the conspirators have destroyed their records and, in the parlance of the Communist Party, “gone underground.”³

That “twenty volume” document became known in anti-communist circles as “appendix 9,” it was a list compiled by Matthews, organized and maintained by Matthews and it formed the

¹ U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, *FBI file on the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC)*, Roll 1, Frame 0386. A memorandum dated July 28, 1940. It details a conversation with Matthews in which he tells the interviewer about a potential Dies acceptance of a Vice-Presidential nod. It also talks about the publication of his book. The author of the memorandum notes that “Matthews did not specifically state that he had written the book for Congressman Dies, but his conversation strongly indicated that he had done so.” Other evidence is found in a journal review of the book which acknowledges the rumors of “ghost writers” in the circles of Washington elites.

² Martin Dies, *The Trojan Horse in America*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1940), 349.

³ Dies, *Trojan Horse*, 351.

backbone of governmental anti-communist research throughout the 40s and into the McCarthy years.⁴

The history of the domestic Cold War and the influence of anti-communism as its dominant ideology is a history of links and inference. It is a history of names and the men and women who utilized those names as accusation, or held them up as victims of a modern American witch-hunt. Yet, when these histories are written, J.B. Matthews appears most often as an appendage of other more public figures like Joe McCarthy, J. Edgar Hoover, or Richard Nixon. His historical role, in the literature, remains as that of an influential enabler not an agent. Matthews and his theory of “united front” subversion was at the center of the largest governmental and private investigation into the political affiliations of US citizens in the 20th century. The motivations of the anti-communists might have been to protect the United States or a cultural ideal of Americanism, or to further an agenda of power. Yet always at the center of the crusade were names built upon the foundation of “united front” theory: lists and lists of names. Therefore, in order to understand the domestic cold war and the origins of McCarthyism, it is necessary to understand the origin of the lists. To do that we must understand the list maker: Joseph Brown Matthews.

In attempting to answer the question of why the Cold War happened and why anti-communism became its defining ideology, most historians of American anti-communism tend to focus their research on the Depression era and the Cold War. However, some scholars like M.J. Heale and David Bennett have attempted to locate the roots of the contemporary political Right and other conservative movements, such as the anti-communists, in the 19th century. Heale theorized in a 1990 monograph that “[f]rom the Revolution onward, Americans were warned of

⁴ M. Stanton Evans, *Blacklisted By History: The Untold Story of Senator Joe McCarthy and His Fight Against America's Enemies*, (New York: Crown Forum 2007), 60.

the fragility of republican institutions, and this belief that the United States is uniquely vulnerable to subversion has survived into the twentieth century.”⁵ He argued that the American Legion’s call for “one hundred percent Americanism,” in 1919 as well as the growth of the Klu Klux Klan in the 1920s were the result of this belief.⁶ Bennett, like Heale, traced the origins of the modern right and the anti-communists to the anti-alien, nativist history of the 19th century “know-nothing” movement.⁷ Bennett argued that “racism, anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, or anticommunism... have been organized out of the fear that their America was threatened by powerful, sinister, and conspiratorial adversaries”⁸

To a certain extent this social/structural approach to explaining the question is found in Richard Hofstadter’s influential essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” This approach is also found in an essay he wrote in 1955, “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt.” In both Hofstadter utilized psychological and sociological studies to argue that McCarthyism was the result of men who “in the name of upholding traditional American values and institutions and defending them against more or less fictitious dangers, consciously or unconsciously aim[ed] at their abolition.”⁹ These histories provide insight into the underlying drives of the cadres that would later make up the anti-communist right, and they provide a good explanation for the power of the “united front” argument. They, however, fail to address the questions formulated in the 50s and later about the lasting consequences of the Cold War anti-communist movement, its political origins, or the details of particular actors.

⁵ M.J. Heale, *American Anticommunism: Combating the Enemy Within, 1830-1970*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), xii.

⁶ Heale, 67.

⁷ David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988)

⁸ Bennett, 12-13.

⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and other Essays*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964). Richard Hofstadter, “The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt,” in *The Radical Right*, 3rd edition, ed. Daniel Bell (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 77.

The political historians, who make up the bulk of research into the communist and anti-communist movements, address these questions in detail. John Earl Haynes in a comprehensive examination of the literature defined three trends in the scholarship of communism and anti-communism.¹⁰ The early scholars writing from the early 1950s to the 1960s were termed “traditionalists” by Haynes. To Haynes these scholars, independent of their politics, “regarded Communism as an anti-democratic political movement that sought to replace America’s system of democratic liberties...with a tyrannical regime.” The traditionalists also regarded the CPUSA as completely “subordinate to Soviet Communism.”¹¹ The second period, Haynes defined as a revisionist period, which extended from the end of the 60s to the mid to late 70s. This period was characterized more by liberal political views that examined “McCarthyism and the popular anti-Communism of the late 1940s and 1950s as despicable phenomena that had inflicted grave damage on American culture...”¹² Haynes’ overall description of this revisionist period is one where the CPUSA was discounted as an important force in the historical narrative of the day. This is probably because, both of these earlier periods in the scholarship were hurt by the continuing Cold War, which made access to archival records difficult or impossible. However, by the late 70s and through 80s archives began to open and extensive treatments of the CPUSA’s activities in the 30s, 40s and 50s were produced.

With the 1992 opening of the archives of the Comintern (the organization that directed and set policy for Communist organizations outside the Soviet Union) and the later domestic release by the National Security Agency of the “Venona” decrypts, the debate between the

¹⁰ John Earl Haynes, “The Cold War Debate Continues: A Traditional View of Historical Writing on Domestic Communism and Anti-Communism,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 2 (2000).

¹¹ Haynes, “The Cold War Debate Continues,” 79.

¹² Haynes, “The Cold War Debate Continues,” 80.

revisionists and the neo-traditionalists flared up again.¹³ On the neo-traditionalist front the most influential scholars are John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Richard Gid Powers. They argued that the CPUSA was primarily a creature of the Comintern and Stalin, and was therefore directly influenced and controlled by a foreign power. Haynes' and Klehr's arguments build upon evidence found in Comintern archives of direct Soviet support to the CPUSA. Haynes' more scholarly publications equivocate on this point slightly, but the overall thrust of his evidence goes towards proving the subservient and inimical features of American communism.¹⁴

The neo-traditionalists like Haynes and Klehr clash most vehemently with those whom Haynes defined as revisionists like Ellen Schrecker, Maurice Isserman, and Fraser Ottanelli. The revisionists focused their research on the domestic, non-authoritarian aspects of communist activity in the United States arguing that the CPUSA and its works especially the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) unions of the late 30s were an overall boon to America. Isserman, for example, reviewed the argument that the CPUSA was a wholly owned and controlled subsidiary of the Soviets and did find significant agreement between the American communists and the Soviets. However, he also showed that this had more to do with individual beliefs than a commitment to taking orders from Stalin, and that significant portions of American Communist party history were dominated by internal politics.¹⁵

¹³ John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). The Venona decrypts are a group of intercepted Soviet communications that show soviet support for CPUSA.

¹⁴ John Earl Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace?: American Communism and Anticommunism in the Cold War Era*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 69. Harvey Klehr et. al, *The Soviet World of American Communism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 13. Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism*, (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 187. The pages listed have explicit declarations of this belief but throughout each of these books are both arguments and statements that support the point of view that the CPUSA was a direct appendage of Stalin's will.

¹⁵ Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991). Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?: The American Communist Party during the Second World War*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993). Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998).

All of these scholars include J.B. Matthews in their narratives even hinting in a line, sometimes a paragraph, to his importance. Phrases like he was the “unofficial éminence grise of American anticommunism”¹⁶ or that he was a “guide” to Martin Dies during the first incarnation of HUAC.¹⁷ The most recent book, a popular account in the neo-traditionalist vein, devotes a whole chapter to Matthews, but only in the context of how an article Matthews wrote was used to undermine McCarthy.¹⁸ The examination stops there. He pops up again and again in the narratives as a provider of information, guidance, or as a professional anti-communist, and the link is not made that Matthews, beginning in 1938, was the intellectual force behind the extrajudicial campaign against communism in America, first as the man behind the Dies Committee, then through his protégés, Benjamin Mandel and Robert Stripling, and finally his work for the Hearst Corporation and Joe McCarthy.

Matthews’ journey to the center of the patriotic, anti-communist movement in America, documented in his 1938 autobiography/apologia *Odyssey of a Fellow Traveler* began in 1894 in Hopkinsville, Kentucky “a town of less than ten thousand inhabitants.” He described it as the kind of town affectionately nicknamed “Hoptown” by its citizens. The kind of town where young boys played “marble games after school;” an All-American Town.¹⁹ Hopkinsville was also the center of the Black Patch war, an insurgency of local tobacco growers known as “Night Riders” against James B. Duke’s American Tobacco company monopoly.²⁰ Matthews described the Night Riders as examples of collectivist thugs who attacked, beat and sometimes killed “[f]armers who clung to their individualism” those who “failed to understand their social

¹⁶ Shrecker, 44.

¹⁷ Powers, 126.

¹⁸ Evans, Chapter 37.

¹⁹ J.B. Matthews, *Odyssey of a Fellow Traveler*, (New York, N.Y.: Mount Vernon Publishers, 1938), 16-17.

²⁰ Tracy Campbell, *The Politics of Despair: Power and Resistance in the Tobacco Wars* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993).

obligation to collectivism.” To press his point, Matthews vividly described a scene that “a boy would long remember” of warehouses “in flames—less than two blocks from my home—with hundreds of hooded men galloping through the streets and some tying up policemen, firemen, and telephone operators.”²¹ This, to his anti-communist audience in 1938, would have been a vivid, personal example of the dangers of collective, socialist ideologies like communism. The attack was real, it happened in December 1907, and Matthews may have read about it in the papers.²² He could not have witnessed it, however, because he and his family had moved to Lexington earlier that year.²³

Although he portrayed his background as “small town southern” in *Odyssey of a Fellow Traveler*, his was not typical of small town life. He was materially removed from rural southern culture as the scion of a wealthy and influential family. Matthews obscures this in *Odyssey*, referring to his father only as “the chief of police” mentioning only that he “owned and operated several quarries.”²⁴ But Matthews’ father was also a state legislator,²⁵ an owner of a taxicab company, an insurance investor, and real estate speculator.²⁶ He sent his son to a private Methodist college in Mooresville, Kentucky and from there J.B. left the country in 1915 to spend six years as a minister, teacher, and scholar of East Asian languages in Java. Illustrative of his cultural distance from his *Our Town* roots, J.B.’s son, Roy, in a letter to his mother, wrote, “I

²¹ Matthews, *Odyssey*, 17.

²² Campbell, 55.

²³ “B.J. Matthews,” *Lexington Herald Leader*, p.1, col. 3, (August, 29 1907) : <http://local.lexpublib.org/local.php/> (accessed 10/19/2008). “B.J. Matthews a prominent stone contractor of Hopkinsville, Ky., has bought the Jaeger property at 235 South Limestone street and will remove to Lexington with his family to permanently reside.”

²⁴ Matthews, *Odyssey*, 18.

²⁵ “J.B. Matthews, Leftist Turned Conservative, Dies :Served Briefly on McCarthy Investigating Panel Charged Protestant Clergy Supported U.S. Communists,” *New York Times* (1857-Current file), July 17, 1966, <http://0-www.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/> (accessed October, 15 2008).

²⁶ The J.B. Matthews Papers, *Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library*, Box 703, Folder “General Papers 1915-1934.” Document is an obituary clipping titled “Hon. B.J. Matthews.”

told Dad that I couldn't imagine you or him with a southern accent. He said yours was worse than his, but neither of you were really bad."²⁷ Why Matthews sought to obscure his background with nostalgic, misty, folksiness is unclear, but most likely it helped both he and his readers divide the radical from the safe: the "other" from the "us."

Emblematic of Matthews' removal from his cultural background, he would spend the 1920s and early 30s, seeking a place to fit in. In 1921, J.B. Matthews, his wife, college sweetheart Grace Ison Matthews, and their two children returned from Java. They settled down in Bound Brook, New Jersey, where Matthews obtained a degree in Theology from Drew University and worked as acting pastor at a local Methodist church. By 1924 Matthews obtained a position as a professor of Hebrew at Scarritt College in Nashville, Tennessee. Guided by a belief in the Social Gospel he worked for racial integration and for political liberalism.²⁸ Howard Kester in an oral history described J.B. as "one of the most respected and beloved Professors and Teachers in Nashville" who had "single handedly prevented a race riot at Fisk [University] by calling a judge, the Governor, and other prominent people..."²⁹ Respected and beloved by the students, perhaps, but his employers were not so forgiving. As a result of his agitation for racial equality, he was forced to resign his position; the first of many idealistic disappointments.³⁰

From teacher and activist in Tennessee, Matthews moved on to become an activist and teacher as an Executive Secretary of the most prominent pacifist organization in the country, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (F.O.R). The F.O.R was an international, pacifist, anti-war

²⁷ Matthews Papers, Box 703, Folder "General Papers 1935-1948." Letter from Roy to Mom, dated March 28, 1936.

²⁸ Matthews, *Odyssey*, 27.

²⁹ Mary Frederickson, "Interview with Howard Kester, August 25, 1974," *Southern Oral History Program Collection* (#4007), Transcript, 17.

³⁰ Matthews Papers, Box 703, Folder "General Papers 1915-1934," Letter from Rev. J.L. Cunningham President of Scarritt College, dated April 26, 1927.

organization founded on Quaker beliefs. It sought “the company of those of whatever faith who wish to confront human differences with nonviolent, compassionate and reconciling love.”³¹ A neat fit for an activist driven by his belief in the Christian foundation for social justice and political progressivism. The fit however was not perfect. As his politics became more radical in the 30s, Matthews was due another professional and ideological disappointment.

Matthews characterized his tenure with the Fellowship, from 1928-1933, as the period when his “pacifism shifted from a religious to a political basis.”³² As a result in 1933, the Fellowship ousted Matthews for advocating a position on class war that was unacceptable to the pacifist organization.³³ He had become a “militant socialist”³⁴ advocating peace internationally, but violence, if necessary, in the interests of class equality. Matthews advocated that the F.O.R “could not fail to support the cause of the workers no matter what tactics they used,”³⁵ including violence. He was also scolded by his friend Andy Biemiller, a prominent Wisconsin socialist, for working with the Communist Party of Los Angeles (CPLA). Matthews had offered to write a column for the CPLA’s paper, but in the tense atmosphere of early 30s left wing activism, crossing party lines was, Biemiller wrote, “most destructive to accomplishing the things we are working for within the Socialist Party.” Biemiller finished his letter with a pointed factional reminder, signing his letter “Yours for socialism—through the Socialist Party.”³⁶

³¹ Fellowship of Reconciliation, *Historical Introduction*, <http://www.swarthmore.edu/Library/peace/DG001-025/DG013/dg13forhistintro.htm> (accessed on March, 20 2009).

³² Matthews, *Odyssey*, 37.

³³ Sayre Papers, File of J.B. Matthews. Document dated March 8, 1954 from John Nevin Sayre--former executive secretary of the F.O.R--to Wallace Parmer.

³⁴ Matthews Papers, Box 703, Folder “General Papers 1915-1934.” Letter Sept. 21st 1933. Signed Mickey Most. Details the differences between militant socialists, “old guard” socialist, and communists. Warns Matthews that he hews too close to the “Old Guard.”

³⁵ Matthews, *Odyssey*, 35.

³⁶ Matthews Papers, Box 703, Folder “General Papers 1915-1934.” Letter March 17th, 1933.

Matthews joined the Socialist Party in 1929 “for no other reason than that most of my pacifist associates belonged.”³⁷ It was a telling and fateful decision, because his “united front” thesis of communist control over diverse and unrelated organizations stemmed directly from conflicts he experienced during these years. In the early 30s, the CPUSA’s stance towards the Socialist party was driven by Comintern policy that “social-democratic organizations were accomplices of the process of the ‘fascization’ of society”³⁸ and could therefore not be trusted and should, if possible, be co-opted. This policy created factional tension throughout the 30s between the communists and the socialists. It also created tension within the Socialist Party when more radical socialists of the time, like J.B. Matthews, attempted to work with the communists in “united fronts.”³⁹

The most prominent “united front” of the time was the American League Against War and Fascism (American League). The American League was an umbrella organization that included well known communists, socialists, pacifists, and anti-fascists. It was organized with the goal of demilitarizing United States foreign policy. It was, however, directed largely by the communists in the group, and as such was more militant than the socialists would like and as it turned out more militant than Matthews could take.⁴⁰

A riot at Madison Square Garden in 1934 highlighted Matthews’ difficulty in squaring the circle of his affinity to the Socialist party with his desire for rapid and revolutionary change. On February 16th, the Socialist party organized a rally at Madison Square Garden to protest Austrian fascism. The rally was broken up by a well organized group of New York communists.

³⁷ Matthews, *Odyssey*, 39.

³⁸ Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 55.

³⁹ Ottanelli, 55.

⁴⁰ Ottanelli, 50.

The headline in the *New York Times* the next day screamed: “5,000 Reds Battle with Socialists at Garden Rally: 20 Injured when Communists Raid Anti-Dolfuss Meeting—Women Kicked and Beaten: CHAIRS USED AS WEAPONS: Leader of Invaders is Hurlled from Platform.”⁴¹ This was too much for Matthews, perhaps the reality of violence did not conform to his idealized vision, or maybe the factional conflict just became too intense. Whatever the reason, he resigned his chairmanship in the American League as a result of the incident.⁴² Unfortunately the “bitterness and suspicion”⁴³ generated by the Madison Square Garden riot had consequences for the more militant socialists like Matthews. Later that year in March, he was suspended as a member of the Socialist party for his support of the American League and presumably his strong advocacy of “united front” activity with the communists.⁴⁴

Although Matthews’ various disappointments and frustrations with militant socialism and communism in the early thirties prepared the ground for his eventual metamorphosis, the catalyst for J.B. Matthew’s conversion to anti-communist stalwart and his eventual sobriquet of “Mr. Anticommunist” was a strike in 1935 at Consumers’ Research (CR), a small products testing lab in Washington, New Jersey. Given the size (forty one workers out on strike)⁴⁵ and location of the strike (a small, rural farming community outside of New York), the impact of the strike should have been quite small in a year marked by massive labor unrest throughout the United

⁴¹ "5,000 REDS BATTLE WITH SOCIALISTS AT GARDEN RALLY . . .," *New York Times* (1857-Current file), 1, February 17, 1934, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed March 4, 2009).

⁴² Ottanelli, 56.

⁴³ Ottanelli, 57.

⁴⁴ Matthews Papers, Box 703, Folder “General Papers 1915-1934.” Telegram from Andy Beimiller cancelling meeting on the grounds of his suspension.

⁴⁵ Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES, "RESEARCH BUREAU CLOSED BY STRIKE," *New York Times* (1857-Current file), 40 September 5, 1935, <http://0-www.proquest.com.wncln.wncln.org/> (accessed February 25, 2009).

States.⁴⁶ The strike at Consumer's Research, however, generated reporting, commentary, and condemnation by national newspapers like the *New York Times*; liberal left magazines such as *The New Republic* and *The Nation*; and industry trade journals.⁴⁷ Evidence that the left was more than usually interested in this strike was the creation of the Niebuhr-Baldwin Committee, a kind of liberal "blue-ribbon" commission made up of leading leftists, to mediate the negotiations between management and the strikers.⁴⁸

Two factors made the CR strike unique and particularly troublesome for the left-wing allegiances of Matthews. The first was his deep financial and emotional involvement in the management structure of the enterprise. By 1934, Matthews had been involved with Consumers Research for two years, and as vice-President of the corporation was the number two man in the organization making \$3,380 per year.⁴⁹ This income was enhanced by Matthews' other public speaking engagements which he obtained both through his connection with CR and because he was still regarded as a left wing intellectual. His lecture income was so important to him that often the management of the company was unable to reach him.⁵⁰

Related to his earning potential as a speaker was the status of Consumers' Research as a champion of progressive, liberal ideals. Consumers' Research was a darling of the left, and the

⁴⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, "Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1938", <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/1938.zip> (accessed, Jan. 28 2009), 338. In 1935, 2,104 strikes were begun involving over 1.1 million workers this was the largest number of strikes in a recorded year up until that time.

⁴⁷ Lawrence B. Glickman, "The Strike in the Temple of Consumption: Consumer Activism and Twentieth Century Political Culture," *The Journal of American History* 88 (2001), 101-102.

⁴⁸ Consumers' Research Inc. Records, MC. 3 *Special Collections and University Archives*, Rutgers University Libraries, Box 28, Folder 21. Document titled "The 'Impartiality' of the Niebuhr-Baldwin Committee." dated December 5, 1935. This is a Matthews produced response to the committee's report.

⁴⁹ Consumers' Research, Box 41, Folder, 34. Document dated 11-22-1934. "Minutes of Special Meeting of the Board of Directors."

⁵⁰ Consumers' Research, Box 43, Folder 24. Document dated Jan. 30, 1935, shows the concern of the board at his incommunicado status, but they emphasize his importance as a speaker for the organization. Another document in this folder titled "Topics of Addresses by J.B. Matthews" gives a menu topics that J.B., for a fee, would deliver to a group or business. Other documents from the Duke collection Box 703 show his wife organizing his speaking fees and trips.

fate of its caché of subscriber goodwill rested on a perception of its allegiance to broadly progressive ideals. Its particular liberal niche fell within the spectrum of anti-Big Business, pro-labor and working people. Multiple letters from subscribers bear this view out. One from a student at Columbia in 1932 tells CR that “at least your organization is one that can be wholly relied on, and is not, if traced back, supported in some clever manner by any business groups” and then pleads to CR, almost wistfully, to not “betray that trust.”⁵¹ Another titled “From a professor of Chemistry at Lafayette College” equated a subscription to Consumers’ Digest (the publication of CR) as “contribut[ing] more toward saving civilization,” than any other activity.⁵² After his inability to forge his niche with either the communists or the Socialist Party earlier in the decade, CR provided an outlet for his leftist sympathies as well as a place to make plenty of money. The strike and the Union campaign to discredit CR as a left wing bastion threatened Matthews’ security recalling his disappointments with the socialists and the communists earlier in the decade.

Despite the heated rhetoric on both sides of the conflict where each accused the other of deceitful and shady intentions, there is evidence that before the strike escalated in early September CR management attempted to work with the union. In a document dated August 28th 1935, the management of CR (F.J. Schlink, M.C. Phillips, and J.B. Matthews) tried to reassure the staff by announcing in a memo that “the broad social values of trade unionism and the values to individual workers and to management in collective bargaining are matters beyond dispute,” and that “We welcome the opportunity to deal collectively with members of the staff.”⁵³ While this might be characterized as a cynical ploy, the minutes of a board meeting

⁵¹ Consumers’ Research, Box 94, Folder 40. Photostat of compiled subscriber letters.

⁵² Consumers’ Research, Box 94, Folder 40. Photostat of compiled subscriber letters.

⁵³ Consumers’ Research, Box 41, Folder 32. Memo to Staff

earlier that day also indicated a desire on the part of management to work with the strikers. F.J. Schlink remarked that “in view of the board’s wishing to meet all reasonable requests of the Union,” the board should instead appoint a person to meet with the shop and come to an equitable arrangement.⁵⁴

By October however regardless of early intentions or feelings the strike had evolved, in Matthews eyes, into the work of an “utterly perfidious and cold-blooded plot” by the communists “to annex if possible, or destroy if necessary, an organization working in the interests of consumers”⁵⁵ Matthews’ views on why the CPUSA would be interested in destroying Consumers’ Research are unclear, but when examined from his socialist background, the events surrounding his ouster from the Socialist party, and his resignation from the American League an answer is revealed. The key thought in Matthews’ letter was “annex if possible, or destroy if necessary,” which referred to his experiences with the factional infighting between the communists and the socialists. To Matthews, what had happened recalled the disappointments he had suffered trying to work with the communists, but this time he was not going to take his disappointment lightly.

When the strike ended in March, 1936 following a favorable judgment from the embryonic National Labor Relations Board, the strikers moved on to form Consumers’ Union. Arthur Kallet—a former CR board member sympathetic to the strikers—was the first chairman and president of CR’s new rival products testing organization. Consumers’ Union had by virtue of its “Union” label and its struggle with the injustices (real or not) of Consumers’ Research had

⁵⁴ Consumers’ Research, Box 41, Folder 32. Board meeting minutes.

⁵⁵ Consumers’ Research, Box 29, Folder 21. This quote comes from an attached addendum to a sworn affidavit of October, 10 1935, in which Matthews recounts a secret meeting of communists and their plans for the strike. This meeting cannot be verified, but it sheds light on the belief that Matthews held after the NLRB decided against CR that the NLRB must also be in the pocket of the communists if they could ignore such evidence.

supplanted CR in the left wing community and gained an implacable enemy at Consumers' Research.⁵⁶

The former employees had moved on, but Matthews could not. Depressed and aimless Matthews wrote to his new wife Ruth Shallcross, a colleague and collaborator on two books, in 1936. "I am still feeling rotten physically," he wrote, "And then I might as well admit that I have awful spells of blues over the dastardliness of these incredible hypocrites in the labor and radical world. I try to forget them, but it seems a vain effort... Oh well, maybe I will forget in another ten years or so."⁵⁷ The next two years would prove that for Matthews forgetting this disappointment would be impossible—it could only be purged by a complete break with his liberal past.

The Consumers' Research records of the period 1936 to 1938 show Matthews at the forefront of an organization obsessively committed to defending its reputation and proving that the strike was an unjustified plot by communists. The most important element of this campaign for the later creation of the "united front" theory was a list of names and associations begun in 1935 as a file at CR designated "330.17 f. Liberals."⁵⁸ Significantly, the file was not labeled "f. Communists," which shows that Matthews and Schlink knew that these were not necessarily all communists, but in their minds a causal connection between the two was present. It was this file which provided the seed bed for the evidence that J.B. Matthews later presented to HUAC. The file became a repository names and the connections between those names to progressive, liberal, and radical political organizations. Captured in the file were not only the official

⁵⁶ Inger L. Stole, *Advertising on Trial: Consumer Activism and Corporate Public Relations in the 1930s*, (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006), Chapter 4.

⁵⁷ Matthews Papers, Box 703, Folder "Personal Series 1935-1948."

⁵⁸ Consumers' Research, Box 496, all folders. This box contains the material contained in the file designated "330.17 f. Liberals" by Consumers' Research.

