

the secret of the rosenbergs

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The secret is

We imagined we had the world on a platter. We thought the Russkies were so backward we could just wipe them out before they could develop the bomb.

I

The extreme secrecy shrouding the Manhattan A-bomb project at Los Alamos was largely to deter German spies. But after the German surrender, secrecy intensified. Secretive behavior, such as preventing American and British project scientists from attending a scientific ceremony in Moscow in 1945 certainly tipped off our Russian allies. An American scientist later testified before the Senate Atomic Energy Committee:

I believe that these attempts to maintain secrecy resulted in giving to the Russians the very information which the army most wished to keep from them. Any sensible Russian scientist... would have believed that we were developing an atomic bomb and were keeping it secret....

Los Alamos' scientific director, J. Robert Oppenheimer, believed that the U.S. should, with a system of controls, offer free exchange of information, emphasizing the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Many project scientists, including Leo Szilard, also tried to head off the use of the bomb against Japan, warning that it would provoke an arms race with the Soviets. On June 11, 1945, several of them presented a report to Secretary of War Henry Stimson:

In Russia, too, the basic facts and implications of nuclear power were well understood in 1940, and the

experience of Russian scientists in nuclear research is entirely sufficient to enable them to retrace our steps within a few years, even if we should make every attempt to conceal them. ...it might take other nations three or four years to overcome our present head start, and eight or ten years to draw even with us if we continue to do intensive work in this field.

But the President, in his own words, "regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubts that it should be used."

Yet a major reason for dropping the bomb was not military at all but diplomatic: It had been clear for three months before Hiroshima that Japan was ready to surrender. Admiral Leahy said:

It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender....

The Air Force generals believed that the bomb wasn't necessary to win the war or to preclude an invasion. The U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey concluded:

Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.

Churchill wrote:

It would be a mistake to suppose that the fate of Japan was settled by the atomic bomb. Her defeat was certain before the first bomb fell.

Truman and his advisers (especially Stimson and Secretary of State-designate

James F. Byrnes), however, had other goals. They intended to drop the bomb “to make Russia more manageable” as Szilard reported about discussions with Byrnes two months before Hiroshima.

Even before the bomb was proved, Truman was determined to put it at the center of U.S. foreign policy. He delayed his trip to Potsdam, for the meeting of the “Big Three” (the U.S., England, and the Soviet Union) that would determine the shape of the postwar world, until the bomb had been tested. The bomb was detonated at Alamogordo on July 16, 1945; the Potsdam conference finally began on July 17. Truman's strategy there wholly depended on the singular possession by the United States of the bomb. According to Lord Alanbrooke, Churchill, too, “was completely carried away”:

We now had something in our hands which would redress the balance with the Russians...; now we could say, “If you insist on doing this or that, well...” And then where are the Russians!

Although Truman and his advisers considered the possibility of sharing the technical information on atomic energy, by August 6, 1945, the day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Truman publicly stated his resolve not to do so: “It is not intended to divulge the technical processes of production or all the military applications.” On August 9 he told the nation: “The atomic bomb is too dangerous to be loose in a lawless world. ...We must consider ourselves trustees of this new force.” The War Department soon after released a long report claiming:

The best interests of the United States require the utmost cooperation by all concerned in keeping secret now and for all time in the future all scientific and technical information.

Secretary Byrnes believed that we could

maintain the nuclear monopoly for at least seven years.

In 1946 Truman asked the physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer when he thought the Russians would get the bomb. The scientist replied that he had no idea and asked when Truman thought they'd get it. "Never," he answered.

Manhattan Project scientists continued to assert—now publicly—that no amount of secrecy would allow the U.S. to retain exclusivity. They lobbied for an international agreement to ban the bomb. Many repeatedly predicted, with wide publicity, that the Soviets would develop the bomb in 3 or 4 years.

The consensus of the scientists who made the bomb is that the Russians can make them in five years or less.

Robert Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, 1946

We have all heard about the secrets of the atomic bomb, how they were guarded, and how important it is to keep or not to keep them to ourselves. ...If there was one great secret, we gave it away in July 1945. It was that a chain reaction is possible and that it can be used to make a bomb.

biophysicist Selig Hecht,
Explaining the Atom (Viking, 1947)

The laws of nature, some seem to think, are ours exclusively, and...we can keep others from learning by locking up what we have learned in the laboratory....

It is sinister indeed how one evil step leads to another. Having created an air of suspicion and mistrust, there will be persons among us who think other nations can know nothing except what is learned by espionage. So, when other countries make atom bombs, these persons will cry "trea-

son" at our scientists, for they will find it inconceivable that another country could make a bomb in any way except by aid from Americans.

Physicist Edward U. Condon,
"An Appeal to Reason,"
Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists
(March 1946)

Nevertheless, much of the public, the press, and Congress continued to regard the bomb as an American secret. Despite the flood of testimony, memos, and articles by scientists, America was obsessed with secrecy. The bomb was our precious purse in danger of Russian plunder—and none too safe with our scientists, the trustworthiness of a great number of whom was widely treated with suspicion.

Diplomatically, then the bomb was at the center of American foreign policy. Militarily, too, by the 1945 Potsdam conference, "striking the first blow" in a nuclear war was the official, though secret, U.S. policy. The Joint Chiefs wrote:

In the past, the U.S. has been able to follow in a tradition of never striking until it is struck. [In the future we must be able to overwhelm the enemy] and destroy his will and ability to make war before he can inflict significant damage upon us....

In January, 1946, General Leslie Groves, Manhattan project head, recommended in a secret report:

If we were truly realistic ... we would not permit any foreign power with which we are not firmly allied...to make or possess atomic weapons. If such a country started to make atomic weapons we would destroy its capacity to make them before it has progressed far enough to threaten us. [If disarmament talks fail], we and our dependable allies must have exclusive supremacy in the field, which means

that no other nation can be permitted to have atomic weapons....With atomic weapons, a nation must be ready to strike the first blow if needed.

Truman first threatened the Soviets in 1946, over Iran. One of several first-strike plans was BROILER, drawn up during the Berlin Crisis of 1948. Truman's threat to use the A-bomb in that situation was his fourth.

In 1949 a number of admirals publicized their moral objections to the bomb as centerpiece of U.S. war-fighting doctrine. One wrote that for a civilized society the intent of war cannot be simply the annihilation of the enemy. Another argued that the "atomic blitz" violated U.S. foreign policy and ideals, that it was not related to policy and would result in the wholesale extermination of civilians, causing vast harm and jeopardizing the attainment of a stable postwar economy. Their objections were dismissed.

In late August 1949, the Soviets detonated an atom bomb. When the news reached the U.S. government, the Joint Chiefs and the intelligence services were seized with utter consternation. The Russians had beaten their estimates by 5 to 10 years—for the fact was that officials, disbelieving the scientists' predictions, had at least doubled them. Truman was so chagrined that he required multiple confirmations in writing. Some legislators discussed a pre-emptive strike against Soviet nuclear facilities. But in making the fact of the Soviet explosion public, President Truman said,

Ever since atomic energy was first released by man, the eventual development of this new force by other nations was to be expected. This probability has always been taken into account by us. Nearly four years ago I pointed out that scientific opinion ap-

pears to be practically unanimous that the essential theoretical knowledge upon which the discovery is based is already widely known. There is also substantial agreement that foreign research can come abreast of our present theoretical knowledge in time.

General Eisenhower commented:

the news ... merely confirms scientific predictions. I see no reason why a development that we anticipated years ago should cause any revolutionary change in our thinking or in our actions.

The *New York Times* remarked:

...there is no valid reason for surprise ...Only those Americans who failed to pay attention to what was said of the atomic bomb by the men who knew the most about it—namely, the men who made it—could ever have believed that we possessed a permanent and exclusive monopoly of this destructive weapon.

Still, many journalists and politicians reacted with near hysteria, trying to fix the blame for "stolen atomic secrets." An important element in the propaganda war against the Soviets had been the complete denigration of their science and technology because not propelled by the profit motive and the spirit of free enterprise. It was easy to convince the public that the bomb had been utterly beyond the reach of the Soviets without American treachery. Senator Carl Mundt said:

It now appears that earlier and prevailing laxity in safeguarding this country against Communist espionage has permitted what were once the secrets of our atomic bomb to fall into the hands of America's only potential

enemy.

Congressman Richard Nixon, serving on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), proclaimed:

Russia's atomic know-how was "hastened" by the Truman Administration's failure to act against Red spies in the United States. If the President says the American people are entitled to know all the facts—I feel the American people are also entitled to know the facts about the espionage ring which was responsible for turning over information on the atom bomb to agents of the Russian government.

The Pentagon and a number of scientists responded not with recriminations but by quietly pressing for a crash program on the "super," or hydrogen bomb. While this was being secretly debated, from military and moral standpoints, the public was in hot pursuit of atomic traitors—a pursuit fueled by such events as the revelations of Soviet spying in Canada, the scores of people named as spies and traitors before HUAC by Elizabeth Bentley and other professional witnesses, and by bizarre charges against former high officials.

HUAC engaged in a campaign of smears and trial by press release. These constant accusations, the Hollywood hearings (for which, it has recently been acknowledged, Ronald Reagan was an informer for the FBI), the Alger Hiss case, the release of list after list of hundreds of "communist front" or "subversive" organizations by the Attorney General, the hysteria in the press, constituted a gigantic anti-Communist witch hunt. Whatever you've heard about it—it was worse. In New York State, for example, 321 teachers and 58 college instructors, and 500 other state and local government employees, lost their jobs between 1948 and 1956. "McCarthyism"

neither began nor ended with McCarthy. As Miriam and Walter Schneir have commented, the United States was engaged in a politically useful paranoid effort to trace all world events to *American* treachery, public and private, large and small.... And even the American Civil Liberties Union covertly colluded with the FBI in its witchhunt.

Morton Sobell's appeals attorney, Howard Meyer, said:

... there existed in 1950 a creation of the organs of public sentiment, an image, a demon called the Atom Spy, which was more reprehensible, more outrageous than any type of culprit ... than had ever been brought to the bar of justice since the beginning of the world.

Today the "terrorist," yesterday the "Atom spy."

II

In early 1950 the Pentagon determined that even dropping 200 bombs on 70 Soviet cities with the new long-range bomber the B-36, killing 2.7 million people, wouldn't destroy Soviet society. By 1951, **OPERATION SHAKE-DOWN** entailed attacking the Soviets with over 600 A-bombs. Still, the Pentagon projected that a decisive blow couldn't be struck until the nuclear stockpile was at least doubled or tripled, the huge B-53 Strato-fortress bomber built, and perhaps the hydrogen bomb developed. **"A-Day" represented our last chance to attack without direct retaliation. The National Security Council placed A-Day in 1954.**

In 1950, Paul Nitze, Pentagon official, called 1954 "the year of maximum danger." In a secret National Security Council document, NSC-68, Nitze argued:

The only deterrent we can present to the Kremlin is evidence that we

give that we may make any of the critical points [in the world] which we cannot hold the occasion for a global war of annihilation.

At the end of January, President Truman announced the program to develop the super. *Life* editorialized in its January 30, 1950, issue, under the heading "The Ultimate Bomb," for the development of the super ("the idea of refusing to make the H-bomb is suicidal nonsense"):

The least frightful fact of contemporary life is that frightfulness is normal. What man has wrought, man learns to bear. With the sure instinct of self-sustainment, 20th century man refuses to be overwhelmed by himself. He declines to be torn and harassed by questions, however awful, which provide their own manifest answers, however awful. So it is that Americans have received with notable calm the news that their scientists can make a hydrogen bomb ten times, a hundred times, a thousand times more powerful than the uranium bomb which killed and maimed 130,000 people at Hiroshima.

Only a few days later, Klaus Fuchs, a German-born British engineer, implicated himself in the passage of atomic information to the Soviet Union, for reasons yet unclear. The search for Fuchs's "atom spy ring" in the U.S. began. On June 16, David Greenglass, who had been a low-level machinist at Los Alamos, became the third person arrested in Fuchs's hypothetical ring. On June 24, the Korean War began, and American troops entered the conflict a few days later to the accompaniment of great outpourings of patriotic sentiment back home. On July 17, Julius Rosenberg, a New York engineer, was the fourth person arrested, on the strength of testimony of his brother-in-law Greenglass. Less than a month later, after several other arrests,

Ethel Rosenberg—Rosenberg’s wife and Greenglass’ sister—was also arrested and charged. A couple of weeks later, Morton Sobell was added to the list—after, he said, being kidnapped in Mexico by Mexican police in collusion with American officials. All the arrests were treated as part of the atom-spy ring, although a number of people involved were never prosecuted—and no one was charged with spying. On March 6, 1951, the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and Morton Sobell, for conspiracy to commit espionage, began.

This is not the place to go over the Rosenbergs’ lives, the charges against them, or the intricacies of the alleged connections to Klaus Fuchs or his supposed confederate Harry Gold, a self-confessed fantasist. Others have dealt in minute detail with the elements of the FBI’s investigation and the conduct of the trial. I am following a different trail, the trail of public deception in the matter of atomic secrets, atomic diplomacy, atomic war plans, the trail by which the State came to pursue and destroy a couple against whom the factual evidence was, well—*thin*. In this process, the life of Ethel Rosenberg was traded for that of Ruth Greenglass, her sister-in-law, who was constantly under threat of indictment for her (confessed) collusion with her husband David. Her freedom was the carrot, her incarceration the stick, that organized her own and her husband’s continued testimony against the Rosenbergs, their family members. Ruth Greenglass was never charged.

David Cauter has written, “The summer of 1950 was...an ugly, vicious time, shaped out of the convergence of Korea, the Smith Act verdict, the Rosenberg indictment, and the inflammatory speeches of McCarthy. Radical workers were thrown out bodily [from various factory premises]....In 1952 the mood remained ugly.

On February 8, 1951, a month before the trial, an extraordinary meeting of the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy convened. Those present included senators, congressmen, and Atomic Energy Commission members. Myles J. Lane, one of the prosecutors in the Rosenberg-Sobell case, stressed the importance of getting the death penalty for Julius Rosenberg:

It is important, very important, for one particular reason. Rosenberg is in my opinion the keystone to a lot of other potential espionage agents. ...We feel that ... the only thing that will break this man Rosenberg is the prospect of...getting the chair, plus that if we can convict his wife, ... too, and give her ... 25 to 30 years, that combination may serve to make this fellow disgorge.... It is about the only thing you can use as a lever on those people....

No one objected to this discussion of sentencing before trial. The assistant U.S. Attorney present reported:

The case is not too strong against Mrs. Rosenberg. But for the purpose of acting as a deterrent, I think it is very important that she be convicted too, given a stiff sentence.

To obtain additional evidence against Ethel, the prosecution reinterviewed Ruth Greenglass ten days before trial; she obliged by relating that Ethel had typed her brother David Greenglass’ espionage data in September 1945. Two days later, David corroborated this, although he had previously denied that Ethel had had anything whatsoever to do with any of it.

The Jewish community, as represented by its leaders and intellectuals, seems to have reacted to the indictment of the Rosenbergs and the other Americans

implicated in the case, all Jewish, with a (more or less) quiet paranoia. They welcomed the interesting fact that the judge, Irving Kaufman (with other espionage cases under his belt), and prosecuting attorney Irving Saypol (practically a professional Commie hunter), and at least one of his assistants, the hateful Roy Cohn, were Jewish. (David Cauter has pointed out, though, that a disproportionate number of Irish Catholics, in government and the Church, were at the forefront of the witchhunt. Each group was responding, in its own way, to the intolerance of WASP America, which had no use for either Catholics or Jews.) The Jewish community expressed no objection to the fact that in New York, the largest Jewish city in the world, no Jewish person made it onto the jury. (The prosecution had access to FBI files on all prospective jurors, and no liberals wound up on the jury, either.) The soon-to-be-neocon Jewish intellectuals poured wrath and scorn on the Rosenbergs; a pitiable example was Robert Warshaw's essay, published in *Commentary* only four months after the Rosenbergs' death, attacking their death-house letters for "idealism" and insincerity.

We must demonstrate that we are among those most loyal to America. We must not permit any ground for accusation of remission in our American citizenship.

Rabbi Abraham Cronbach,
at the Rosenbergs' funeral

Judge Kaufman, Roy Cohn told his biographer and friend Sidney Zion, secretly (illegally) and repeatedly conferred with the prosecution. Cohn described how, behind the courtroom bench, he would take Kaufman's calls, placed from a booth near the Park Avenue synagogue. Kaufman, it is said, discussed his intention to impose the death penalty even before the trial began. Subsequent reviews of the trial have criticized the judge's behavior—but he was

widely praised for many years after the trial.

The Rosenbergs were represented by Emanuel Bloch, a man whose practice had largely been confined to personal-injury claims. No one else, it seems, could be found to represent them. (The Communist Party was silent on the case until after it ended. It couldn't afford to defend the Rosenbergs, since membership in the CP, in response to criminalization, had been made secret. The Rosenbergs denied they were members; we still don't know if they were. Perhaps the party was also worried about what line of defense the Rosenbergs would take.)

During the trial, key exhibits included a few sketches of A-bomb parts, drawn from memory, that David Greenglass—a young low-level machinist with only a high-school education—supposedly furnished to Julius, and the side of a Jello box that Greenglass said Julius had cut in half for a recognition device. All these were offered in evidence—in replica, of course. (Attempting to examine these replicas since the 1960s, investigators have been told by the FBI that all trial exhibits have disappeared.)

Numerous scientists, shown David Greenglass' drawings of the high-explosive implosion lens, have called them "baby drawings" and completely inadequate for any scientific purpose. They have also reaffirmed that there was no atomic secret. Given the temper of the times, no one stepped forward to say these things at the trial.

The Jello box used at the trial was Imitation Raspberry flavor.

It was not shown that Julius Rosenberg ever had any contact with Russians. Only Harry Gold, a self-confessed spy with "a rich fantasy life," including a fantasy wife

and family, testified to such a link. There was never any physical evidence of any kind offered to support any of the trial allegations about the Rosenbergs. The sole evidence against Ethel was her brother and sister-in-law's testimony—supported by a maid's testimony that she had referred to a table, allegedly used to photograph documents, as “a gift” (from the Russians, it was suggested); a photographer without records who said he had made passport photos of the Rosenbergs; and Ethel's signature on a 1939 nominating petition for a Communist Party candidate for city office.

On March 28, 1951 as the jury went out for a verdict, these headlines appeared in the *New York Times*:

**ADMIRAL EXHORTS AMERICANS
TO MEET SOVIET PERIL NOW**

**US POWER MUST ‘FRIGHTEN
ENEMY,’ WILSON ASSERTS**

**DANGER OF ATOM BOMB ATTACK
IS GREATEST IN PERIOD UP TO
THIS FALL, EXPERT ASSERTS**

On March 29, 1951, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted — not of espionage, which requires that each substantive charge be proved, but of conspiracy to commit espionage. It was the Greenglass' word against the Rosenbergs'. On April 5, the day of sentencing, these were among the *Times*'s headlines:

**RAYBURN INTIMATES RUSSIANS
MASS TROOPS IN MANCHURIA**

**A Third World War May Be Near,
Speaker Implies in Statement
to House**

**List 550 names, Including Ferrer and
Judy Holliday in
Communist Fronts**

TROOPS FOR EUROPE BACKED BY

**SENATE, HOUSE ASKED
TO ACT**

On April 5, Judge Kaufman sentenced the Rosenbergs to death. During the sentencing, the judge opined:

I consider your crime worse than murder. Plain deliberate contemplated murder is dwarfed in magnitude by comparison.... I believe your conduct in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb years before our best scientists predicted Russia would perfect the bomb has already caused, in my opinion, the Communist aggression in Korea, with the resultant casualties exceeding fifty thousand and who knows but that millions more of innocent people may pay the price of your treason. Indeed, by your betrayal you undoubtedly have altered the course of history to the disadvantage of our country. ...We have evidence of your treachery all around us every day—for the civilian defense activities throughout the nation are aimed at preparing us for an atom bomb attack....

... In the light of the circumstances, I feel that I pass such sentence upon the principals in this diabolical conspiracy to destroy a God-fearing nation, which will demonstrate with finality that this nation's security must remain inviolate....

... the defendants Julius and Ethel Rosenberg placed their devotion to their cause above their own personal safety and were conscious that they were sacrificing their own children, should their misdeeds be detected.... Love for their cause dominated their lives—it was even greater than their love

for their children.

Kaufman's reference to treason was, of course, inaccurate; treason consists of furnishing "aid and comfort to the enemy"; in 1945 the Soviet Union had been our ally (and we have never been declared enemies engaged in war...).

Interestingly, the next issue of *Time* magazine, after opening with Judge Kaufman's sentencing speech, went on to detail the much more important material likely to have been passed by (European-born) scientists Klaus Fuchs, Bruno Pontecorvo, and Canadian Allan Nunn May, and concluded:

David Greenglass, the only American among the top spies, was far less important to the Russians. He furnished Russia with the mechanical details of the bomb. ... But [the Congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy's report "Soviet Atomic Espionage," released the week of April 16] noted, he had nothing like Fuchs' fund of scientific principles and information.

Fuchs, said the joint committee, was by far the most damaging spy. "Fuchs alone has influenced the safety of more people and accomplished greater damage than any other spy not only in the history of the United States but in the history of nations."

(In an obituary for Fuchs in the *New York Times* of January 29, 1988, the paper said, "His spying may have gained the Russians a year on their bomb"—35 years has cooled the rhetoric considerably. His passing rated hardly a mention in other media outlets, such as television news. Ted Koppel did not build a *Nightline* show around him.)

Time was silent on why the Rosenbergs, whose supposed crime was conspiracy with the Greenglasses, were sentenced to

death, and Morton Sobell to 30 years, when the other, "major" figures had received sentences of 10 or 15 years—and Ruth Greenglass hadn't even been indicted. Accounts in the popular press, including that in *Life* magazine, suggest rape, the loss of "the world's greatest secret." *Life* ends by declaring that the penalties were "little enough"(!)—but it paradoxically bypasses the nuclear-threat argument in favor of one based on a nebulous diplomatic disappointment:

Admittedly...it is impossible to "secure" a secret involving the building of whole cities like Oak Ridge and Hanford, the expenditure of billions of dollars, the employment of thousands of persons. Such security is only relative and temporary. ... But the Russians made the time ridiculously short — short enough to make Harry Truman's big news at Potsdam fall flat.

During the trial many names were mentioned (all Jewish) and witnesses called by the prosecution, and indictments opportunistically announced, to establish a chain of associations leading to the conclusion "Guilty!" about the Rosenbergs, David Greenglass, and Morton Sobell. Aside from Harry Gold and Klaus Fuchs, who had already been sentenced (the latter to 14 years, in England—of which he served nine, while Sobell served 19, some of them in grim, maximum-security Alcatraz), **not one person in this chain was ever prosecuted**, although the FBI pursued the case until 1957.

III

The Rosenbergs spent over three years in prison, much of it in Sing Sing. During that period, they were allowed brief

weekly visits and occasional joint meetings with their attorney. They were allowed to communicate with each other by one weekly letter; much of their correspondence centered on their children. Numerous attempts at appeal were made, and several petitions to the Supreme Court to review the case. During one of the lower court reviews, Judge Learned Hand reprimanded Judge Kaufman for his efforts to hasten the Rosenbergs' deaths. Tens of thousands of people around the world marched, demonstrated, and wrote letters to the president asking for clemency and a Supreme Court review.

Always there was the suggestion by the government that if only Julius would confess, Ethel's life would be spared, and perhaps his life as well. Just as Ruth Greenglass' probable indictment had been dangled over her husband David's head, Ethel's life was hostage to Julius' confession. On February 9, 1953, Ethel wrote to their lawyer, Manny Bloch:

In recent weeks an ugly development has been gaining ground. It is being casually bruited about by our less than wholesome brethren that I am to be spared by commutation out of a humanitarian consideration for me as a woman and a mother while my husband is to be electrocuted. ...the responsibility for the decision concerning my husband's life would be shifted squarely onto my shoulders and his blood would be on my hands if I willfully refused to make him "come across"!

So now, my life is to be bargained off against my husband's; I need only grasp the line chivalrously held out to me by the gallant defenders of hearth and home and leave him to drown without a backward glance! How diabolical! How bestial! How utterly depraved!

Be under no illusions...magnanimous sirs, that I shall... play the role of harlot to political procurors.

The fifties were sodden with images of family "togetherness," mamas brought back to the nursery, leaving war work behind, papas come home from the wars. In the early fifties family unity was cemented by shared visions of private suburban rec rooms and rural root cellars turned fall-out shelters, defended from the neighbors by guns. The enemy of this togetherness was widely supposed to be Soviet Russia—abetted by American Communists. These latter were the easier enemy to get to. They were the familiar demons, the collective antithesis of home and family loyalty. Like the pods in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Communists could seem like ordinary people. They could seem like the Rosenbergs seemed. Collective American life was centered on fear of bombs from above and infection from within.

Since Communists were monstrous, and the Rosenbergs were apparently Communists, it was perfectly conceivable that the Rosenbergs were criminals whose crime was not just the crime of the century but the crime of the ages—to have sold out home and country forever. And since ordinary women were unlikely to dirty their hands with politics and the public world in general, the province of men, it followed from the topsy-turvy logic by which Communists, like all demons, must be bound, that the Communist wife must be worse than the husband and that attachments to children must be either absent or unnatural. The Rosenbergs were accused both of disregarding their children and of exploiting them. As to Ethel's character, the slanders centered on a perceived lack of... docility.

On January 14, 1953, the nightclub mu-

sician Christopher Emanuel Balestrero was arrested in Queens for twice robbing an office of the Prudential Insurance Company of America, two blocks from his home, an office at which he had frequently done business. Despite his protestations of innocence, Manny Balestrero was positively identified by the Prudential clerks. During police questioning, Manny was directed repeatedly to write out the text of a hold-up note used by the gunman. In the half-dozen times he complied, he once misspelled a word just as it had been in the real note. After some months of investigation, Rose Balestrero, a housewife and mother of two young boys, apparently a strong and cheerful woman, collapsed from illogical feelings of guilt and had to be hospitalized.

Manny Balestrero went on trial on April 21 and was again positively identified by witnesses. On the fourth day of the trial, a juror became disruptive and a mistrial was declared. During the night of April 29th, a man was arrested in the course of a holdup and confessed to the Prudential robberies. Balestrero, confronting the man in the police precinct, asked, "Do you realize what you have done to my wife?"

On May 20, 1953, Pres. Eisenhower and the Joint Chiefs approved the use of nuclear weapons against China if the Korean War worsened. If the Soviets intervened, **SHAKEDOWN**, all-out nuclear war, would be set in motion.

On May 25, 1953, the Supreme Court refused for the third and final time to hear the Rosenberg case. The *New York Times's* banner headline read, "Rosenberg Appeal Denied for 3D Time by Supreme Court—Stay of Execution for Spies Vacated—Mercy for Couple Hinges on Their Talking." The Rosenbergs were scheduled to die on June 18, 1953, their fourteenth wedding anniversary.

On May 29, 1953, Tenzing Norkey, a Sherpa of Nepal and Edmund Hillary, a

New Zealand beekeeper, reached the summit of Mount Everest.

On June 16, 1953, President Eisenhower wrote to his son John in Korea:

To address myself ... to the Rosenberg case for a minute, I must say that it goes against the grain to avoid interfering in the case where a woman is to receive capital punishment. Over against this, however, must be placed one or two facts that have greater significance. The first of these is that in this instance it is the woman who is the strong and recalcitrant character, the man is the weak one. She has obviously been the leader in everything they did in the spy ring. The second thing is that if there would be any commuting of the woman's sentence without the man's, then from here on the Soviets would simply recruit their spies from among women.

Many years later, in 1986, Richard Nixon, in "Lessons of the Alger Hiss case," on the *New York Times's* Op-Ed page, commented about Priscilla Hiss:

In the case of Communist couples...the wife is often more extremist than the husband.

This is the fearful patriarchal imagination at work: Communism is the destroyer of men's authority over women—patriarchy dethroned—and the loss of the "world's greatest secret" is rape.

On June 17, 1953, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas granted a stay of execution on the grounds that the Rosenbergs may have been tried under the wrong law and the death sentence therefore illegally imposed by the judge without jury recommendation. He then left for summer recess. Attorney General Her-

bert Brownell requested Chief Justice Fred Vinson to reconvene the Court. Vinson did so for the next day—only the third time that the Court had been so recalled.

In the morning, at a White House meeting, it was decided that the President should read a statement “emphasizing that the free world had an interest in the proper handling of the case.” This statement was read after the justices vacated the Rosenbergs' stay of execution. Eisenhower said:

I am not unmindful of the fact that this case has aroused grave concern both here and abroad in the minds of serious people.... In this connection, I can only say that, by immeasurably increasing the chances of atomic war, the Rosenbergs may have condemned to death tens of millions of innocent people all over the world. The execution of two human beings is a grave matter. But even graver is the thought of the millions of dead whose deaths may be directly attributable to what these spies have done. When democracy's enemies have been judged guilty of a crime as horrible as that of which the Rosenbergs were convicted; when the legal processes of democracy have been marshalled to their maximum strength to protect the lives of convicted spies; when in their most solemn judgment the tribunals of the United States have adjudged them guilty and the sentence just; I will not intervene in this matter.

The Rosenbergs' attorneys, futilely, telegraphed the White House to remind the President that the Supreme Court had never reviewed the case. A defense attorney asked Judge Kaufman to postpone the executions because they were now scheduled during the Sabbath. Judge Kaufman replied that he and Attorney General Brownell had spoken about the

matter. What Brownell had done was to move up the time of execution by several hours, so that it would take place before, not after, sundown on the 19th.

The Rosenbergs remain the only people ever condemned to death for espionage by a civil court in the United States.

On the day after the executions, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in *Libération*:

You, who claim to be masters of the world, had the opportunity to prove that you were first of all masters of yourselves...By killing the Rosenbergs you have quite simply tried to halt the progress of science by human sacrifice. Magic, witch hunts, auto-da-fés, sacrifices—we are here getting to the point: your country is sick with fear... you are afraid of the shadow of your own bomb....

The *New York Times*, on the other hand, editorialized:

In the record of espionage against the United States there has been no case of its magnitude and its stern drama. The Rosenbergs were engaged in funneling the secrets of the most destructive weapon of all time to the most dangerous antagonist the United States ever confronted—at a time when a deadly arms race was on. Their crime was staggering in its potential for destruction.

On June 29, 1953, *Life* magazine reported the execution of the Rosenbergs and the scaling of Mount Everest—and also the story of Manny and Rose Balestrero and their two sons. Manny Balestrero, in reflecting on his ordeal, commented, “Before you accuse anyone you should *think*—because you can destroy a family, physically and mentally, like mine would have been destroyed.” Rose Balestrero remained hospitalized for over a year.

Alfred Hitchcock made a movie out of the Balestreros' experience, called *The Wrong Man*.

On August 13, 1953, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Nathan F. Twining submitted a secret report arguing that the U.S. would soon be in a "militarily unacceptable" position and advocating preparation for "general war" with the Soviets.

Twining rejected a second-strike policy, claiming that retaliation was advocated by the "pseudo-moralist who insists that we must accept this catastrophe."

Other Air Force leaders soon argued strongly for a surprise attack. In May 1954, as the Soviets were just beginning to develop the hydrogen bomb, the Pentagon's Advanced Study Group suggested to the Joint Chiefs the advantages of a surprise attack as a "preventive war."

Before his death in 1985 chemist George Kistiakowski, who had devised the Nagasaki bomb's trigger mechanism and worked on various government projects after the war, told Carl Sagan in an interview that Eisenhower asked him to join his administration to help curb the hawks and bomb-makers — the military-industrial complex Eisenhower later warned about.

In April 1954, almost a year after the Rosenbergs' execution, the Atomic Energy Commission's special Personnel Security Board held loyalty hearings "In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer." Oppenheimer was the best known of the many eminent Manhattan Project scientists suspected of "disloyalty." Gen. Leslie Groves, wartime Manhattan Project head but by then in private industry, testifying in response to a question on espionage, said:

I think the data that went out in the case of the Rosenbergs was of minor

value. I would never say that publicly. Again that is something, while it is not secret, I think should be kept very quiet because irrespective of the value of that in the over-all picture, the Rosenbergs deserved to hang and I would not like to say anything that would make people say General Groves thinks that they didn't do much damage after all.

When J. Edgar Hoover found out about Groves's remarks, he made sure that the AEC deleted it from the record. The testimony remained secret for 25 years until the Rosenbergs' sons obtained it—and much else damaging to the government's case—through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit.

In 1961 J. Edgar Hoover wrote in the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*,

Who in all good conscience can say that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the spies who delivered the secret of the atom bomb into the hands of the Soviets, should have been spared when their treachery caused the shadow of annihilation to fall upon all of the world's peoples?

IV

In 1961, also, the United States made its fifteenth and sixteenth threats to drop the bomb since 1945, in Berlin and Laos. These threats have continued, and under the Reagan administration have become a steady constant, notwithstanding proposed treaty reductions in stationary, ground-based missiles or any nonsense about the Star Wars (SDI) boondoggle, which would provide the perfect umbrella for a first strike.

In 1961, also, physicist Edward Teller wrote "If we have stockpiled the tools to

rebuild and the food to sustain us, we can rebuild [after an atomic war] into incomparably the strongest country in a few years.” Teller wasn’t the only one to emit such fantastic myths—recall the Reaganite who claimed that “with enough shovels,” anyone could survive a nuclear war.

Gross public disinformation about survival has gone hand-in-hand with the deception about every aspect of nuclear policy, from basing to testing to strategy. For example, the *New York Times* of February 13 and 14, 1985, revealed that the Reagan administration has had secret contingency plans “to deploy nuclear weapons in Canada, Iceland, Bermuda, and Puerto Rico,” as well as in the Azores, the Philippines, Spain, and the British-held island Diego Rivera—all without the knowledge or consent of the governments involved. The *New York Times* of Jan. 17, 1988, in “117 Secret U.S. Atomic Tests Are Indicated in Seismic Data” described evidence of deception in the number of underground tests since 1963. But the grossest deception, as I’ve indicated, has lain in our nuclear-weapons policies.

American strategic forces do not exist solely for the purpose of deterring a Soviet nuclear threat or attack against the United States itself. Instead, they are intended to support U.S. foreign policy, as reflected, for example, in the commitment to preserve Western Europe against aggression. Such a function requires American strategic forces that would enable a president to initiate strategic nuclear force for coercive, though politically defensive, purposes.

Colin Gray wrote those words in “Victory Is Possible,” published in *Foreign Policy* in 1980. Colin Gray and other members of the ultra-hawkish Committee

on the Present Danger—founding members Eugene Rostow and Paul Nitze, and members William Casey, Richard Perle, Richard Allen, Richard Pipes, Geoffrey Kemp, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Fred Iklé, and William Van Cleave—soon became members of the Reagan Administration. The Committee's guiding idea is that, in the words of Eugene Rostow, we are in “a prewar phase.” The intent of the new cold warriors has been to establish irrevocably—through Star Wars and otherwise, and despite arms control agreements, and despite repeated exposés of the impossibility of anti-nuclear shields or other voodoo defenses—the apparatus to initiate and win a protracted nuclear war.

Secrecy is hardly compatible with democracy. But the unimaginable reality of nuclear weapons, the terrible death by invisible radiation, predisposes not only to secrecy but to State terrorism—of the home population above all—and to dark fantasies of nuclear rape, whether by the Soviet Evil Empire or by Third World terrorists. Nuclear realities diverge completely from the public myths invented to obscure them.

The secret is that there is no secret.

The secret is that the cold war is the secret.

The secret is the arrogance of power.

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martha rosler
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