The Morrison Case
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Cornell in the Cold War (Part II)

Worth a Closer Look

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This is the second of two articles derived from ongoing study of Cornell history from 1945 to the present by Glenn Altschuler and Isaac Kramnick. The first article appeared in the July/August 2010 issue. Altschuler, PhD '76, is the Litwin Professor of
American Studies, dean of the School of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions, and vice president for university relations. Kramnick is the Schwartz Professor of Government. In their research, Altschuler and Kramnick have had access to many presidential papers in the Cornell archives, some of which had never before been open to scholars. The full manuscript, with footnotes and additional material, is available online at cornellalumnimagazine.com.

By Glenn Altschuler & Isaac Kramnick

Between June 1949 and July 1951, Cornell had two acting presidents. The first was Cornelius deKiewiet, the historian who had run the World War II Army program at Cornell and then served as dean of the Arts college and provost. In January 1951, after the trustees chose Deane W. Malott, chancellor of the University of Kansas, as Cornell's next president, deKiewiet resigned to become president of the University of Rochester. For the six months preceding Malott's arrival in Ithaca, Theodore Wright, vice president for research, was acting president. Both men were ensnared in controversies over academic freedom issues that rocked the campus.

In an October 1950 editorial, the Daily Sun found evidence that "hysteria is mounting" and cautioned Americans to tread "a delicate line between foolish blindness and over-zalous witch-hunting." The Sun contrasted Cornell's attitude in allowing Herbert Phillips, a University of Washington philosophy professor who had been fired for membership in the Communist Party, to speak at Willard Straight Hall with the cancellation of his lecture at the University of Michigan.

The trustees were divided over the student invitation in December 1950 to Mrs. Paul Robeson to speak at Cornell. When Victor Emanuel 1918, who had given the University a Wordsworth collection, wondered why she was not banned from campus, board chair Arthur Dean 1919, JD 1923, explained that her son was a Cornell graduate and that, moreover, banning her opened the University to charges of "drawing the color line."

That same month, when students from the ILR school supported a strike by University employees, some trustees expressed grave concern over what Robert Treman 1909 of Ithaca called "radicalism on campus." In letters to Neal Dow Becker, LLB 1905, BA 1906, former chairman of the board, and Mary Donlon, LLB 1920, deKiewiet acknowledged that "three or four active communists in the student body played a noticeable role in the strike agitation." Although he would not curb freedom of discussion, the president assured board members that he would make sure that the ILR school no longer allowed any of its students to become officers in any union that had dealings with the University.

Trustees and alumni sponsored initiatives to encourage anti-communism and Americanism on campus. Myron Taylor, LLB 1894, formerly of U.S. Steel and also the personal representative of the President of the United States to Pope Pius XII, announced in January 1950 a gift in memory of his wife, Anabel Taylor, to create an interfaith religious center on campus. "We are all believers in God and human liberty . . . [so] we must stand together to resist evil," he proclaimed. Taylor hoped his gift would be matched by others, so America could fight the growth of atheism, sponsored by communism. His new inter-faith building, completed in October 1952, would help to "clarify the religious issues at stake in the present [Cold War] crisis."

That year, Mrs. John L. Senior of Lenox, Massachusetts—whom deKiewiet described as "somebody who had a sense of anxiety about the state of American affairs both socially and politically"—established a $300,000 endowment for a chair in memory of her husband, Class of 1901, a leader in the cement industry before his death in 1946. Not anchored in a college or department, the chair was intended to be the first professorship in "American values" in the United States.

While Cornell administrators thought about an appropriate person to fill the chair, a substantial number of prominent faculty in the sciences pledged not to do secret government research. Physics professor Hans Bethe publicly advocated that the United States share atomic secrets with the world, and at a forum in Barnes Hall three faculty members condemned the recent conviction of eleven communists for plotting the violent overthrow of the government. Curtis Nettel's of the history department branded their trial the latest phase of an "anti-American revolution under the direction of Mr. Truman." The faculty at large disagreed, voting in September 1951 that professors advocating overthrow of the United States government should be dismissed.
Differences among trustees and faculty about leftist professors came to a head with accusations against physics professor Philip Morrison. Morrison first appeared on the trustee radar screen in 1948-49, when he attacked investigations of the loyalty of scientists, opposed a United States monopoly of nuclear secrets, and demanded that the United States pledge not to be the first to use the H-bomb. While Hans Bethe often appeared alongside Morrison at Cornell forums, the Nobel laureate was not interested in Morrison’s broader political agenda, including his frequent trips to peace conferences and his attack on the anti-communist McCarran Act.

In September 1950, Morrison was singled out in the anti-communist newsletter “Counterattack,” published by a group of ex-FBI agents, as “a member or supporter of various communist-like activities.” A month later, Senator Joseph McCarthy accused him of belonging to subversive organizations. And in April 1951 a report by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) included him among those associated with “the current communist peace offensive...traveling up and down the country on behalf of the peace campaign.”

Trustee Nicholas Noyes 1906 wondered, “Why do we have such men at Cornell?” When Arthur Dean asked if there was solid evidence that Morrison was a communist, trustee Victor Emanuel indicated that although the FBI could not make available the content of its files to people not connected with the government, J. Edgar Hoover was willing to meet with deKiewet to talk about Morrison. The acting president declined. A historian firmly convinced of the virtues of self-reliance and a free market economy, deKiewet had promised the trustees that he would terminate any teacher proven to be an active communist. But also he reminded them about the values of vigorous debate at Cornell, citing St. Augustine’s observation that “heretics are given to us that we may not remain in ignorance.” Campus leftists could “shoot off their mouths,” he wrote, because it usually led students to realize the unacceptable nature of such views, “strengthening them in their own judgments.”

It was left to Theodore Wright, the scholarly engineer who became acting president after deKiewet left for Rochester, to deal with Morrison, since (as Cornell’s presidential papers reveal) some twenty-five letters and calls from trustees arrived at the president’s office in the immediate aftermath of the HUAC report. Making matters worse was Morrison’s glib dismissal of Senator McCarthy in the Daily Sun as someone who “every rational American has long since recognized, speaking under immunity from suit, is willing to degrade the Senatorial dignity by unfounded character blackening.”

Wright summoned Morrison to a meeting at which he told him that his “extracurricular activities” were hurting the University. Wright made three requests of Morrison, which he repeated in a follow-up letter: He asked that the physics professor not accept sponsorship, formal or informal, of student groups not focused on scientific investigation. He asked that Morrison disassociate his own political opinions from those of Cornell whenever he spoke in public. Finally, he urged Morrison to stop “appearing on platforms in a sympathetic role with avowed and proven communists,” citing as an example the meetings of the American Peace Crusade.

Meanwhile, Wright asked Robert Wilson, the physics department chair, to evaluate Morrison’s importance as a scientist. Wilson replied that Morrison was one of the best teachers on campus and ranked him “with Professor Bethe for first honors in our department.” His political work, Wilson added, was done “in a small fraction of his spare time, and I have always considered it absolutely none of my business.”

On April 18, Morrison thanked Wright for “the reasoned and understanding nature” of their discussion. He agreed not to sponsor student groups and to disassociate himself from Cornell when speaking off campus in non-scientific settings. He would not promise, however, to end his association with the American Peace Crusade. Although he was not a communist and did not endorse the policies of the Soviet Union, he told Wright that walking through the rubble of Hiroshima had left him with “the deep conviction that in the true interests of America, my country, it is urgent that some voices speak for peace.” It was irrational for trustees to brand his activities harmful to Cornell, especially since he had “always tried to appear in public with the dignity and sincerity which befits a Cornell faculty member.”
When Wright reviewed this letter with his academic cabinet, the minutes note that "there followed an extensive discussion of the desirability and possibility of dismissing Professor Morrison." Wright opposed any such action. Cornell faculty would see it as a violation of academic freedom, he pointed out, and the American Association of University Professors would become involved. But what settled the issue for Wright was the fact that Morrison, he felt, was not a communist but "an almost rabid pacifist, a "peace-at-any-price" man" with a guilty conscience over his own role in the development of the atomic bomb. These assurances were passed on through Arthur Dean to Nicholas Noyes, Victor Emanuel, and Frank Gannett in 1948. The Morrison crisis appeared to be over.

A year and a half later, in early 1953, a witness testifying before the United States Senate Internal Security Subcommittee claimed that "Dr. Philip Morrison has one of the most incriminating pro-communist records in the entire academic world." He cited the professor's speeches and writings defending the American Peace Crusade and worried of the danger Morrison posed "due to his participation on the Los Alamos project." The witness, J. B. Matthews, a researcher for several Congressional communist-hunting committees, chided Cornell as well. Despite knowledge of Morrison's past, he said, the University had done nothing, using "something known as academic freedom ... to permit the employment of men who are subversive in their activities with respect to American institutions."

Summoned to deal with the second Morrison crisis was a new Cornell president, Deane W. Malott. The son of a banker, Malott had an MBA from Harvard and had spent some years as vice president of the Hawaiian Pineapple Company. In letters to Gannett and Emanuel, Malott proudly proclaimed that he was a Republican—and, indeed, "extremely conservative."

Speaking to the annual dinner of the Ithaca Chamber of Commerce in March 1952, Malott attacked the "so-called great liberals of today" as radicals "not tinkering with our institutions but out to destroy them." Two weeks later, calling them "leftists," Malott rejected a petition signed by more than 1,700 students requesting that Cornell ban off-campus housing listings that did not include a non-discrimination clause. No wonder, then, that the Agriculture college's Country Almanac praised the new president as "a real man and a real American" for defending "old fashioned American free enterprise and free people" from the "concerted program by pinkos and reds, and internationalists" who would turn Cornell into "a radical hot-bed."

Nonetheless, Malott would have to walk the tightrope, balancing outside pressures with the values central to academic inquiry. He was personally inclined to conservatism, he wrote, but "on the other hand, I have a grave responsibility of preserving Cornell as a free institution, and this I am trying very hard to do." One important step in the evolution of Malott's understanding of this responsibility was his handling of the reopened Morrison case.

Malott appointed a five-person faculty committee in January 1953 "to consider the problems arising from the unfavorable publicity received by Professor Morrison." In addition to two long sessions with Morrison, the committee members took the extraordinary step of visiting Morrison's accuser, J. B. Matthews, in the Hearst building in New York City. Perhaps by design, Matthews was unavailable, but his associate John Clements met with them. According to the two faculty who took notes, Clements boasted that in the six-room suite occupied by his organization was a file with 1.2 million cards documenting communist and communist-front activities. "In most profane language," he accused universities and colleges of having been "arrogant, shameless, and high-handed in harboring communists and fellow-travelers." The Cornell faculty should be ashamed, he fumed, since Morrison "is one of the most active college professors in the country in communist-front affairs." Asked for evidence of Morrison's activities, Clements showed committee members "a pile of about fifty three-by-five cards; each with a date ranging from 1943 to 1952." Clements declined to provide any further information, and the faculty had the impression the evidence was largely circumstantial—"a record of where he has spoken, to what groups, and when."

By contrast, Morrison impressed the committee as being
"straightforward, helpful, and sincere." Asked if he were a Marxist, he replied that he supported public ownership of some property, but opposed violent and revolutionary change since "he thought that over the long sweep of years that the natural drift of our society would be in the direction he favors." Asked if he were a communist, he answered, "I certainly am not—but neither am I wholly opposed to them." Although he had joined the American Peace Crusade, he would support the United States if it went to war with the Soviet Union.

The committee unanimously reported to Malott that Morrison's guilty feelings about his work on the atomic bomb had left "a blind or weakened spot in his capacity to think about social and political concepts while having no effect upon the scientific work at which he is indubitably brilliant." Since there was no evidence that Morrison had ever advocated the overthrow of the government by force or violence, they concluded that "he should not be charged with any activities which would make him guilty of misfeasance or malfeasance as makes him unfit to participate in the relationship of teacher to student."

Malott circulated the faculty committee's report among the Board of Trustees in April 1953. The board was still reeling from an article two weeks earlier in the American Mercury magazine in which the ubiquitous Matthews had named Morrison and seven other Cornell faculty, including the literary critic M. H. Abrams, as "communist sympathizers or dupes."

The case became national news in May, when Morrison, while on leave at MIT, was called to testify before a special session of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee. According to the Associated Press, Morrison "answered all questions fully and unhesitatingly," recounting his involvement with the Communist Party in the Thirties and his break with the party in 1939, three years before he joined the Manhattan Project. He told the committee that he assumed his superiors knew of his past activities. The day after his testimony, Morrison was released as a witness with no recriminatory comments from the committee.

A University spokesman told the Daily Sun that there seemed to be no grounds for "charges that Prof. Morrison was guilty of misfeasance or nonfeasance." Robert Wilson, director of Cornell's Laboratory of Nuclear Physics, noted that his testimony "in no way reflects upon Morrison's ability as a professor of physics... He is an inspiring teacher and an excellent scientist." Although Malott stood by his own faculty committee's report on Morrison, he indicated to the trustees that his very visible appearances for the American Peace Crusade continued to embarrass the University and that there was "need for some corrective action unless these activities are discontinued."

The president met with the professor when Morrison returned from MIT, with Malott suggesting that "by reason of your past actions, your present activities must be especially discreet"—but when Morrison suggested by return letter that Malott draw up a list of organizations that Morrison should avoid, the president refused. It was inappropriate, he wrote, for "an administrative officer to keep taboos lists, or to regulate the personal activity of any professor in Cornell University, or to make agreements of permissible conduct." Malott hoped, however, that Morrison would see the advisability of "withdrawing all association from organizations lying outside of your professional field." But "the decision is entirely yours," Malott concluded.

Privately, Malott was reassuring trustees that, for his part, he had read William F. Buckley's God and Man at Yale, and that no one was subverting the minds of young Cornellians, for "Professor Morrison I do not believe is a communist." Publicly, Malott, the self-proclaimed conservative, defended dissent and free thought. In a published report to the alumni he lamented this "time of widespread hysteria and intolerance of thought, speech, and action," reminding them of earlier periods when "we burned witches in Salem" and banned or burned books. Even more emphatically, in an article in the New York Herald Tribune, Malott called upon "thinking citizens to stand behind the principles of freedom of thought and expression."

But there was another act in this drama. Morrison had been an associate professor since 1948, and in 1954 his physics colleagues voted to promote him to full professor. Fearing a divisive debate among the trustees, Malott refused at first to recommend Morrison's promotion. When he did forward the recommendation the next year, trustees John Colyer 1917, Spencer Olin 1921, and Frank Gannett objected, demanding that a special committee of trustees be appointed to investigate Morrison's activities.

That committee held seven meetings. Accompanied by his physics colleague Professor Dale Corson, Morrison appeared "for a lengthy two-day examination under oath." Meanwhile, the full professors in the physics department wrote the president and the trustees that it was disgraceful to hold up the promotion. They threatened to send no more promotions forward until favorable action was taken on Morrison. In January 1957, the promotion was finally approved—grudgingly: "While the Board of Trustees of Cornell University regrets and deprecates any of the activities of Professor Philip Morrison, nevertheless, on the basis of the evidence so far available to it, nothing has been found which would warrant his being brought up on charges before the University faculty."

Other Cold War issues buffeted Malott as well, including the trustee and alumni firestorm that followed the appointment of Dexter Perkins, a professor from the University of Rochester, as the first holder of the John L. Senior chair. When he got the news, Frank Gannett was furious—Perkins was "too liberal," a "one worlder," and "supported Adlai Stevenson."

But her horror, he wanted to teach a course simply about American foreign policy, not a course on how "communism and socialism are infiltrating every phase of our national life, seeking to destroy our freedom, our government, and our competitive free enterprise system."

Malott stood firm, supporting the faculty's choice for the chair. Perkins "rates among the foremost historians of America," he wrote trustee Walter Todd 1909, adding that "for your confidential information, Dr. Perkins told me he had given money to the Eisenhower"
campaign. He can't be all bad." Malott also asked trustees Neal Becker and Arthur Dean for help in countering "the kick-up from the ultra-reactionaries." If he listened to them and appointed someone "so far to the right to conform to what some of these people think appropriate, he would be laughed off campus by the students as completely ineffective."

Perkins remained the Senior Professor until his retirement in 1958. He was replaced by Clinton Rossiter '39, the author of Seedtime of the Republic and The American Presidency and the recipient in 1956 of a $300,000 grant from the Fund for the Republic, to study "the extent of communist penetration into American society, institutions, and ideals."

After the U.S. Senate censured Senator McCarthy in 1954, the anti-communist pandemic on American campuses began to wind down. The drama of the Cold War at Cornell, however, had several more curtain calls, including the six-year process in which the nearly 100-year-old requirement that male students in the contract colleges had to be members of ROTC was abandoned. The unraveling began in 1954 when two students refused to take the new ROTC loyalty oath, added that June as a rider to the Defense Appropriation Bill. Pressure from land-grant college presidents like Malott led the defense department to abandon this new loyalty oath in April 1955—but the damage was done.

That month, a referendum had 2,790 Cornell undergraduates voting in favor of voluntary ROTC and 1,360 for mandatory. The next month, the faculty—which had ultimate authority in the matter—stood behind compulsory ROTC. But anti-ROTC had become a national movement, and four years later 1,752 Cornell students voted for voluntary ROTC and only 597 for mandatory; this time the faculty agreed. So it was that Malott and Arthur Dean, chairman of the Board of Trustees, wrote to Thomas Gates Jr., secretary of defense, on June 16, 1960, that though "many of us felt some considerable regret in the circumstances leading to the decision," the trustees had approved a recommendation from the faculty and administration to operate Cornell's ROTC programs "on a basis providing for voluntary enlistment."

By the early Sixties, the tide had turned. In August 1961, a letter from trustee J. D. Tuller 1909, angry with the appointment of the leftist economist Paul Sweezy as a visiting professor, was answered bluntly by Alfred Kahn, the chair of economics: "He did an outstanding job of teaching for us. I have discussed his performance with a very large number of students, have you? We will continue to be guided solely by academic competence in our staffing." Malott told Kahn: "Your letter to Tuller was superb!"

That year, the Cornell faculty sponsored a rally against nuclear testing, which endorsed the efforts being made by President John F. Kennedy's chief test-ban negotiator: Arthur Dean. But nothing better symbolizes the end of an era than President Malott's invitation in November 1962, through the Presidium of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences, to Academician I. I. Mints. Would he please visit Cornell in 1963 to give a lecture course? The subject: the development of Soviet society since 1917.

In the years between Day's handling of the Russian Language and Culture Program and Malott's 1962 invitation to the Soviet scholar, there were undoubtedly some socialists and communists among the Cornell faculty—professors who were critical of American capitalism. But to have such ideals or beliefs did not on its own constitute sedition or mark one as subversive. The faculty understood that in a university there were no restraints on thought itself. They knew, as John Stuart Mill had written, that "there ought to exist the fullest liberty of professing and discussing, as a matter of ethical conviction, any doctrine, however immoral it may be considered," and that "all silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility."

The faculty's insistence on this weighed heavily on how Cornell's presidents acted during the Cold War, and by and large the presidents acquiesced themselves well as they navigated competing pressures from students, alumni, trustees, professors, politicians, and the press. Academic freedom was alive, "far above the busy humming of the bustling town."

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