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J. B. Matthews and the “Counter-subversives”: Names as a Political and Financial Resource in the McCarthy Era

Historians have not treated J. B. Matthews kindly. David M. Oshinsky termed him a “right-wing propagandist,” Robert P. Newman an “anti-Communist fanatic,” and Fred J. Cook simply a “fanatic.” Richard Gid Powers, in his 1995 history of American anti-communism, placed Matthews in the ranks of “paranoid conspiracy theorists” who “joined forces with far more disreputable counter-subversives” while “maintaining ... access to mainstream politicians and journalists.”¹

Powers’ term “counter-subversives”—or, more fully, “counter-subversive anticommunists”—referred to a loose confederation, with its heyday in the early 1950s, of right-wing politicians, journalists, authors, ex-Communist informers, patriotic and veterans’ organizations, clergy, businessmen, and World War II-style isolationists, whose near-exclusive goal was the exposure and punishment of “Communists” broadly defined. The “key point of difference” between “counter-subversives” and “liberal anticommunists,” Powers explained, was in their attitude toward the American Communist Party (CPUSA). Liberals, he wrote, while viewing the CPUSA as “despicable,” believed it “absolutely incapable of ever gaining any real power in the United States” and that “discussion and debate” would “expose the insincerity and disloyalty” of Communists and their allies. Counter-subversives, on the other hand, “saw American Communists as ... agents of a hostile foreign power ... [who] were infecting the country with collectivist values incompatible with American traditions, with the goal of eventually imposing a Soviet-style system on the United States,” and thus “had to be exposed, denounced, and punished.”²

Matthews was surely a counter-subversive, but of an unusual kind, one whose influence did not stem from control of an organization or publication or from the novelty or rhetorical force of his message. Instead, Matthews’s considerable political power during the McCarthy era derived from his voluminous files on the American left—files initially compiled during his years as a self-described “fellow traveler” and, after switching sides in the late 1930s, as the staff chief of the Dies Committee, HUAC’s predecessor. An indefatigable collector, he collected letterheads of organizations, mostly defunct, mastheads from back issues of political journals, dinner programs, flyers and press releases announcing long-forgotten speeches and rallies, all displaying names, the names of tens of thousands of left-wing individuals and many hundreds of organizations, indexed, cross-indexed and recorded on file cards. *Time* magazine in 1953 called it “probably the largest private file on U.S. Communists and suspected Communists.” “J. B. Matthews’ stature as an authority,” Murray Kempton wrote in 1955, “rests more on the 500,000 names in his great file than upon any special experience.”³

Matthews’s “great file” dealt not with Soviet espionage but with American political affiliations. Nor did he limit his focus to membership in the CPUSA or even to affiliation with organizations listed as Communist fronts by the Attorney General. The Attorney General’s list, he believed, was vastly underinclusive. “[T]here have been at least 2,500” Communist front organizations, Matthews told the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS) in 1952, “and a bare 100 of those have ever been listed by the Attorney General.” Fronts, of course, attracted non-Communists (their *raison d’être*), presumably liberals, and Matthews, along with other counter-subversives, enjoyed lumping liberals together with Communists.⁴

To gain access to Matthews’s names, counter-subversives beat a path to his door—journalists, politicians, authors, many of them by no means “disreputable.” The editors of *National Review*, for example, which carried Matthews on its masthead as a “Contributor,” regularly dispatched inquiries asking him “what have you got?” on a series of named individuals. So did a host of other leading counter-subversives. Largely by virtue of his files, Matthews became the unofficial “dean” of the counter-subversive community.⁵

This article offers an overview of Matthews’s career and, more broadly, of the counter-subversives’ role during the McCarthy era.