
Fighting the Red-Hunters at The Dawn of the Atomic Age

After the unnecessary atomic bombing of Japan by Harry Truman, Trumanism as “McCarthyism” also hit the atomic scientists and engineers. From a new book by veteran Oak Ridge nuclear engineer Ted Rockwell.

There is a part of the early atomic history that many of today’s anti-nuclear activists have conveniently forgotten, or perhaps never knew. Starting right after the war, the scientists and engineers who had unleashed this new force found themselves under vicious and personally threatening attack, from government groups and their allies crusading against suspected communists. These groups considered any questioning of the desirability of continued Army control of atomic research to be un-American.

In our efforts to establish international civilian control of atomic energy development, we opposed the Army’s initial proposal to maintain control; but during the final stages, our position was adopted by the majority of Congress and was signed into law by the President. Even after that, many of us came under personal attack as Communist dupes or agents.

The Un-American Activities Committee

One of the earliest, most vociferous, and most persistent of the attackers was Congressman J. Parnell Thomas, Democrat of New Jersey, Chairman of the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee. On June 4, 1946, he sent two investigators down to Oak Ridge, who claimed to be sympathetically interested in the aims and the programs of the Oak Ridge scientist groups. The investigators were freely shown through the files and reports and invited to a meeting scheduled for that evening. But they left after four hours.

On July 11, Thomas threw a bombshell into the commit-

tee hearings in the form of a report by Ernie Adamson, the committee’s chief counsel, “based on a six-month investigation,” of serious security problems at Oak Ridge. The report charged that some scientists who used to work at Oak Ridge continued to correspond with scientists “inside the reservation,” and charged that groups had been formed that were “definitely opposed to Army supervision at Oak Ridge.” The report went on to say that “The security officers at Oak Ridge think that the peace and security of the United States is definitely in danger.”

As if charges of treason were not enough, the report also charged the scientists with working with the CIO and the AFL to unionize the plants.

The scientists, speaking through the Association of Oak Ridge Scientists (AORS) as well as for themselves individually, hotly blasted the report and responded to each of the charges. They noted that all of their activities had been in the open, under the watchful eye of the Army security people, and their positions were consistent with those expressed by the Secretary of the Army, most of the Congress, and the President of the United States. Oak Ridge security officers were questioned by the committee and flatly denied having expressed any concern for the national safety.

The scientists noted that they had voluntarily agreed to stop publishing this research in 1939 and had “kept the secret” quite well for three years before the Army created the Manhattan Project. And they were completely mystified as to the charge of working with the unions. Whatever their personal feelings about unions, they were just not in a posi-

tion to get into that struggle, which involved hourly workers and management. So, by showering officials and news media with letters and factual statements, they pretty well demolished the Adamson report. But that was not to be the end of it.

‘They Call It Security’

A year later, Thomas had an article entitled “Reds in Our Atom Bomb Plants: The Full, Documented Story,” in the June 21, 1947 issue of *Liberty*, a popular weekly magazine of the day. The story, “as told to” a professional writer, was consistent in tone with “The Woman with a Scar” and “Washington Murder Go Round” in the same issue. The article was an amplification of the same kind of charges made in Adamson’s report. A frightening red hammer and sickle was imposed on an aerial photo of Oak Ridge. What Thomas probably didn’t know is that the fearsome emblem was centered directly on the building with the largest product output in Oak Ridge: the hospital’s maternity ward.

Although the Atomic Energy Act of 1946 had long been the law of the land, Thomas’s conclusion was, “I believe that in the present chaotic world situation our only solution is to repeal the act and return Manhattan District to the Army, which can best administer security.”

Again, the scientist groups sprang into action, giving interviews, writing letters, refuting the various allegations.

I was really annoyed that widely publicized charges as specific as this could be made by a person in such an authoritative position and then just fade away, never proved or disproved, leaving a bad taste. I was determined to do something about it, or at least raise hell about it. I wrote an article for *The Saturday Evening Post* that had the following note under the title: “This article was written at the request of the Association of Oak Ridge Engineers and Scientists [AORES] by one of its members and was reviewed, discussed, revised, and approved by them before publication.” The article was entitled “They Call It Security,” and noted that Webster’s dictionary linked security with being “free from fear, care, or anxiety; easy in mind,” but that Webster had never been to Oak Ridge. Then I got to the meat of the matter:

Representative J. Parnell Thomas recently charged that “our atomic energy secrets may be secrets no longer,” that U.S. atomic scientists are “fellow travelers, if not actual members of the Communist Party,” and that “if certain of the suspected physicists were discharged, scores of other scientists had threatened to walk out.” . . . If Mr. Thomas knows of any such agents, he should do as was done [in Canada]: gather his information secretly, report his findings to the correct government agency, have them accuse a named list of men with a specific list of crimes, and bring the suspects to trial. . . . Since there is every indication, strengthened by observation of previous attacks by his committee, that he has no intention of following his overall smear



Oak Ridge National Laboratory in 1946, a bulls-eye for the “red-hunters” of the early shift to “Trumanism.” Truman’s and Churchill’s use of the nuclear weapon to launch the Cold War, immediately led to witchhunts against the very laboratories and scientists who had made the nuclear technology breakthroughs.

with specific accusations, a reply by the accused is demanded.

I went on to respond to each of the charges in turn. First, that his committee presumably had the most extensive files on suspected communists and the responsibility that goes with such information to do something about it. Second, with regard to the alleged threat of scientists to walk out if certain suspected communists were discharged, I provided a copy of a letter from the head of the Physics Division of the X-10 lab, stating “I can assure you that there is no foundation whatsoever for such an accusation.” I went on to refute each of the other charges in turn, also pointing out that it is hard to refute such charges as “pro-Soviet infiltration . . . fellow travelers . . . communist suspects . . . there can be no doubt that many others are on the payroll . . . persons of doubtful loyalty,” etc.

I also noted that all of the scientists, *alleged communists included*, who had worked there prior to the recent civilian take-over, had been investigated by the Army who had veto power over all hires. Any red infiltration occurred under Army surveillance.



The House Un-American Activities Committee in session under Chairman Rep. J. Parnell Thomas (D-N.J.), whose nationally-publicized witchhunting of Oak Ridge cost engineers and scientists their jobs. Eventually, Thomas' use of his office for illegal enrichment—and not of uranium—led to his own imprisonment.

After finally getting approval from the AORES, I showed the article to the Atomic Energy Commission public information people, and promptly received a request to see one of the Atomic Energy Commissioners. At Oak Ridge, this was like a order from the Pope, and I hurried somewhat nervously to the appointment. The Commissioner told me, in the most conciliatory tones, that the Commission was at that very moment trying to build special relations with the Congress, and they would appreciate very much if I just held off on the article. They were confident that problems of this sort would soon be straightened out, and I wouldn't want to spoil that, would I?

Of course I wouldn't, and the article never saw the light of day. But Thomas wasn't through with us yet.

'They've Taken My Badge!'

One day, one of my fellow workers came up to me with a wild and frightened look. "They've taken my badge," he sobbed. "What am I supposed to do? They've taken my badge!"

"What did you do?" I asked. "Why did they take it?"

"Nothing!" he said. "I didn't do anything. I don't know why they took it. They just called me into Security this morning and took my badge away. They didn't say why. They didn't say when they'd give it back. They didn't tell me what to do to get it back. I don't even know if I'm allowed to stay in Oak Ridge. They didn't tell me anything!"

I didn't know what to say to him. I was speechless. A couple of other people walking by had overheard the exchange—he was talking pretty loudly—and someone broke in to say that another young scientist had had the same thing happen. This wasn't an isolated case. The other victim had decided to head for the AORES office to get what support he could, which we all agreed seemed like a reasonable move. The various scientist groups correctly saw this as a serious problem with longer-range implications, and they poured on

all available fire-power. Stephen White did a piece in the *New York Herald Tribune* headlined "Two Atomic Scientists Suspended, Many More Face Loyalty Inquiry. Oak Ridge Hearings Based on Anonymous Charges of Red Leanings; Suspects Say Accusations Abound in Errors, Which Can Be Checked."

The article quoted from the official charges. The first defendant had four charges, the first two of which stated; "1. A former landlord of yours has reported that in 1943, after you moved from the premises, certain magazines and pamphlets which may have been left on the premises by you may have included a copy of the magazine *New Masses*. 2. A neighbor has stated that she believes a close relative by marriage is a communist." The other two charges were similar. The second defendant had only one charge, which stated in its entirety: "A person with whom you associated closely in the years 1943-47 said you were very enthusiastic about Russia and seemed to be pro-Russian in your view."

Three other scientists were under investigation, with the charges against them similarly vague.

The newspaper columnist pointed out several easily checked errors in the charges and stated, "Similar errors occur in almost all cases." He quoted defendant number two: "Who is this man that says I am a communist? Who am I defending myself against? He has no name, no face, no social security number." Marquis Childs, nationally syndicated columnist, wrote under the headline: "Case Before Loyalty Board Illustrates the Present State of National Near-Hysteria." Tom Stokes wrote another column that was particularly pointed and on-target, headlined "What Was the Crime of Scientists at Oak Ridge?"

My father wrote me a letter in the midst of all this, enclosing some inflammatory clippings from the *Chicago Tribune*. "This is sort of thing you have advised us was apt to appear," he wrote. "I think I understand thoroughly your point of view in this situation, but do not become too fanatical over it. Projects of this magnitude take time and patience, and investigators can so easily distort what you say."

I replied, "Remember: we are running no 'secret movement.' We are working with Congress and with the press, and they with us. There is nothing shady in what we do. You mustn't believe everything the *Trib* says. . . . I really have been fairly pleased and proud of the way things have gone. The Congressmen who knew the facts were very much on the right team, and most of them were willing to listen. Notice that the Senate, after intensive campaigning by us, passed the McMahon bill, which was good. Then the House, whom we hadn't had time to work on, murdered it. Then, in committee, when the Senate boys, now on our team, explained the thing, it passed overnight. I think there is still hope for the ole U.S."

J. Parnell Thomas Gets His

Well, the People ultimately did tire of the excessive tactics of the red-baiters, but not until a large number of individuals

An Inside Look at Atomic History

“Fighting the Red Hunters” is a short chapter from nuclear engineer Ted Rockwell’s engaging book, *Creating the New World: Stories and Images from the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. Rockwell started work on what later became known as the Manhattan Project in 1943, when he was a young graduate student in chemical engineering. At the time he was interviewed for the job, he could only guess at what the work entailed, because the interviewer couldn’t tell him—for security reasons!

Rockwell gives a lively first-hand account of what it was like for a young engineer in the early days of the Manhattan Project, the civilianizing of the nuclear program, designing the first nuclear plants, working with Admiral Rickover on the first nuclear submarines, and the lessons learned along the way. With a sense of humor and

flair for story-telling, Rockwell also covers the basics of radiation, nuclear safety, regulatory procedures, the hoax of the linear-no-threshold model, environmentalism, and many other technical topics. His images and jokes enable even a self-defined technically-challenged person to understand the science and engineering of the atomic age.

Dr. Rockwell has worked in nuclear energy for nearly 60 years, on the Manhattan Project at Oak Ridge, Tenn.; as Technical Director of Admiral Hyman Rickover’s Nuclear Navy Program; as a founding officer of the engineering firm MPR Associates; and of Radiation, Science, and Health, an international organization of scientists and policy experts. He has Distinguished Service Medals from both the Navy and the Atomic Energy Commission, and is a member of the National Committee of Engineering. He is also the author of *The Rickover Effect*.

Creating the New World (373 pages)—with a foreword by Dr. Glenn Seaborg, discoverer of plutonium—is available from book stores at \$22.50 (paperback) and \$28.95 (hardcover), or from the publisher, 1st Books (Bloomington, Indiana).—*Marjorie Mazel Hecht*

had lost their jobs and their reputations, and even ten-year-old Shirley Temple had been accused of aiding the forces of subversion. Finally, Joe McCarthy was censured by his colleagues, the Un-American Activities Committee was disbanded, and J. Parnell Thomas was thrown into jail.

Thomas’s end was particularly ironic. Born John Patrick Feeney at a time when discrimination against “shanty-Irish” was prevalent, he changed his name to evoke the patriotic image of Charles Stewart Parnell, militant Irish nationalist of the previous generation. Not satisfied with a congressman’s salary, Thomas began in 1940 to add names to his payroll and pocket their salaries. This went on for eight years, until his secretary, Helen Campbell, who was having an adulterous affair with him, discovered his infidelity and told all to columnist Drew Pearson. Ironically, the career of Charles Parnell, whose name Thomas borrowed, had ended the same way.

After getting five trial postponements by a variety of means, including going in for unnecessary surgery, he tried for a sixth, but the doctors would not admit him for further treatment. He was sentenced to a federal penitentiary for 18 months and fined \$10,000 for embezzling \$8,000.

Half a century later, newly-available Russian records revealed that Congressman Samuel Dickstein, Democrat from New York, one of the founders of the House Un-American Activities Committee, was in fact a paid agent of the KGB, sending periodic reports to Russian intelligence while denouncing fellow Americans as being “soft on communism.”

Getting Beyond the Bomb

With the Bomb apparently safely in civilian hands, and an International Atomic Energy Agency struggling to be born, our attention began to turn toward broader issues. How could this awesome force be utilized for peaceful purposes? There was talk of using atomic explosions to dig ditches and move mountains, and even to power spaceships. There was a proposal to blast a sea-level canal through Panama, firing off nuclear explosives in a carefully choreographed sequence, to peel back the earth like opening a zipper. But environmentalists raised serious questions about the consequences of directly connecting the two oceans, and that plan was dropped at an early stage.

A new breed of scientists, engineers, and technical managers was pouring into Oak Ridge, eager to explore a vast rainbow of atomic reactors—*piles* they were called in those days, after the original practice of piling up uranium and graphite blocks. The possible combinations of fuels, coolants, structural materials, and moderators, feeding a wide variety of power conversion systems—steam turbines, gas turbines, and direct conversion of electricity from flowing hot ionized gases—offered a nearly limitless field for research and development. Oak Ridge would have much to keep it occupied in the days and years ahead. Harnessing The Beast would be a worthy challenge; no young engineer could help feeling a thrill at the chance to be one of the “few, we happy few, we band of brothers” (and a few sisters), privileged to undertake this important task for humankind.