

McCARTHYISM BEFORE McCARTHY:
THE 1938 ELECTION IN SOUTH DAKOTA

by

John E. Miller

Election campaigns illuminate not only public problems and issues; they also lay bare the private fantasies and frustrations of people and provide clues to the symbolic mental environments within which they operate. Campaigns are cultural as well as political processes. The rewards they offer are symbolic as well as tangible, elusive and ambivalent as well as concrete and direct. While there is utility in Harold Lasswell's model, which states that politics determines "who gets what, when, how,"¹ much can be gained by conceiving of politics as a process involving the manipulation of symbols, the working out of justifications and rationales for public actions, and the development of relatively consistent ideologies useful for explaining stands on issues and establishing group identifications.²

After the First World War, Western intellectuals grew increasingly sophisticated about the processes by which people acquired their ideas and the manner in which political rhetoric and propaganda could be put to use in the service of partisan causes. Walter Lippmann, in Public Opinion, a path-breaking work published in 1922, stated that it was "clear enough that under certain conditions men respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities, and that in many cases they help to create the very fictions to which they respond." He went on to observe that "no successful leader has ever been too busy to cultivate the symbols which organize his following." They establish unity, he said, and therefore they "have been cherished by leaders, many of whom were themselves unbelievers, because they were focal points where differences merged." In addition, leaders realize that symbols can be used to move a crowd. "In the symbol emotion is discharged at a common target, and the idiosyncrasy of real ideas blotted out."³

Hitler's rise to power demonstrated how easily publics could be manipulated. During the twenties, discussion of Freud's theories undergirded the notion that human nature is essentially irrational. During the thirties, propaganda analysis attracted widespread attention while semantics grew in influence. Books such as Stuart Chase's The Tyranny of Words (1936), which introduced general audiences to the insights of semanticists such as Alfred Korzybski and I. A. Richards, and the widely popular books of Thurman Arnold, The Symbols of Government (1935) and The Folklore of Capitalism (1937), helped convert what had been a minor academic specialty into a widely discussed topic.⁴

The New Deal challenged many traditions and shibboleths of American capitalism while a welter of new federal agencies performed

the much needed task of shoring up its foundations. There were many, however, who believed that Roosevelt and his brain trusters were undermining everything dear to American society and that they were leading the country toward Communism or fascism. These fears, exaggerated as they were, were undoubtedly real in the minds of many Americans, and it required little imagining on their parts to give credence to stories and rumors circulating about Communists in government offices and treason in high places.⁵

In recent years historians have demolished the notion that McCarthyism emerged full-blown on February 9, 1950, in Wheeling, West Virginia, when Wisconsin's junior Senator told a Republican women's club that he had a list of 205 card-carrying Communists who were in the employ of the State Department.⁶ South Dakota history provides further evidence of how anti-communism was utilized for partisan political ends during the years before 1950.

In 1932, South Dakotans, suffering from unprecedented problems of unemployment, drouth, and low farm prices, deserted tradition and returned Democratic majorities in the presidential, congressional, gubernatorial, and legislative races. The social and political upheaval of the decade polarized voters, who lined up with the New Deal or against it, on the side of labor or the Main Street businessman.⁷

As in many other states, the election of 1938 in South Dakota culminated a long series of ideological battles. After six years of Democratic rule in Washington, the sit-down strikes, court packing, an executive reorganization bill conservatives denounced as dictatorial, and Roosevelt's unsuccessful "purge" of the Democratic party, the election drew out conservatives of all types who coalesced to vent their frustrations against liberal New Deal policies.⁸ That year Karl Mundt first went to Congress, where he built a reputation as an outspoken anti-communist over the next 34 years. His success and that of his Republican colleagues came at the expense of Democratic candidates who were smeared as being radical and communistic. The election thus provides a case study of McCarthyism before McCarthy--an election in which candidates were recklessly accused of communistic leanings in order to discredit them.

Heading the Republican ticket in 1938 was Chan Gurney, a Yankton businessman who defeated Governor Leslie Jensen in the Republican Senatorial primary. Jensen's decision to try for the Senate opened the way for state party chairman Harlan J. Bushfield to run for the governorship. The popular and staunchly conservative attorney from Miller defeated Sioux Falls attorney Blaine Simons, a representative of the Norbeck progressive faction in the primary. Running for re-election in the Second Congressional District, which covered the sparsely populated area west of the Missouri River, was Francis Case, a newspaper editor and publisher from Hot Springs.

The first district Congressional nominee, Karl Mundt of Madison, although never having held elective office, was already one of the best-known politicians in the state. After losing by only 2,570 votes to Democratic Congressman Fred Hildebrandt two years earlier, he encountered no primary opposition in 1938. Holding an M.A. degree from Columbia Teachers College, he had taught public school before going into the real estate and insurance business with his father in Madison. In addition, he taught speech, political science, and economics at Eastern State Normal School until resigning in 1936 to run for Congress. He helped organize the National Forensics League, was named state president of the Izaak Walton League, became district governor of Kiwanis clubs in Minnesota and the Dakotas, and served on the State Game and Fish Commission. He was also a Mason, an Elk, an Odd Fellow, a Woodman, a Methodist, and a member of the Eastern Star. He became widely known for his oratorical skill and spoke frequently before civic groups. Since his childhood he had possessed an "urge to sell," and throughout life, according to his secretary when he entered Congress, he was "associated with salesmanship and selling--products from his truck garden, the fish he caught, fire extinguishers, books, knowledge to students, real estate, insurance, and--now--governmental policies and legislative ideas."⁹

On the Democratic side, Oscar Fosheim, a farmer from Howard, won the gubernatorial nomination. He had been born in 1895 on the farm his father, a Norwegian immigrant, had homesteaded 15 years earlier. Although he took courses at South Dakota State College and at Mankato, Minnesota, he later recounted, "Most of my education was derived when walking back of the walking plow in bare feet." After serving in the Army during World War I, he sold real estate in California before returning to farm near Howard. Encouraged by friends, he ran successfully for the legislature in 1930 and won re-election to the lower house in 1932, 1934, and 1936. He and Emil Loriks, the First District Congressional nominee, were dubbed the "Gold Dust Twins" for their vigorous efforts to put an ore tax on the Homestake gold mine, located at Lead in the Black Hills.¹⁰

Loriks, a farmer from Arlington, had to defeat five other Democratic contenders to earn the right to oppose Karl Mundt. A year younger than Fosheim, Loriks worked a farm that his grandfather had homesteaded when the railroad came through during the early 1880's. After graduating from Eastern State Normal he had obtained a master's degree from the University of Nebraska and taught high school science and coached basketball at Alma, Nebraska, before enlisting in the air corps when the United States entered World War I. He was awaiting overseas orders when the armistice was signed. After another year of school teaching he turned down a college teaching offer and returned to farming.

Following his father's lead, he joined the Non-Partisan League. He also helped organize the Farm Bureau in the area. People encouraged him to go into public service, and in 1926 he won a seat in the state senate, where he remained until 1933. Meanwhile he left the Farm Bureau and joined the Farmers Union after approvingly observing its

activities in Pierre. When the Farm Holiday organized in the state in 1932, he became its executive secretary. Two years later he took over as president of the South Dakota Farmers Union. He and Oscar Fosheim, who served as its vice president, worked closely together and often traveled to meetings to build up their following.¹¹

They were joined on the ticket by former Congressman Theo Werner, trying to recapture his old second district Congressional seat, and former governor Tom Berry, both of whom were essentially conservative in their outlooks. The 59-year old Berry, a successful rancher from Belvidere, had ridden into office on Roosevelt's coattails in 1932. Although he had paid lip-service to the New Deal during his four years as governor, his Republican successor, Leslie Jensen, took more liberal positions than he. Trying for a comeback in 1938, he wore his usual cowboy hat and printed on his campaign cards the slogan, "We need 'hoss' sense at Washington." In winning the Senatorial nomination Berry had defeated Congressman Fred Hildebrandt, a railroad man from Watertown who had decided to go after the Senate nomination rather than face Karl Mundt again.

In hindsight, one of the ironies of the 1938 election was Karl Mundt's insistence upon being labelled a liberal Republican.¹² Such a public image would appeal to both disenchanted Democrats and progressive Republicans. Mundt announced, "I am a liberal Republican who wants government to go forward the American way."¹³ He wrote the late Senator Peter Norbeck's brother Enoch, "I have always considered myself a Progressive Republican; as you know, I was a supporter of Pete's and have campaigned with him both in Hamlin County where I formerly lived and in Lake County. I visited Pete in his home about a week before the last election and shall always remember his last remark to me which he wrote on a slip as I was leaving his room. It read, 'Everyone in this house is for you in this campaign.'"¹⁴

Mundt's shrewdly calculated rhetorical appeal to liberals was buttressed by the activist positions he took on several major issues. Most obvious was his pitch for farm support. The central theme of his campaign, just as it had been in 1936, was "A Fair Chance for a Free People."¹⁵ What this would mean for workers, veterans, the aged, businessmen, youth, taxpayers, and relief recipients was spelled out in his campaign brochure, most of which was devoted to farm issues.¹⁶ The centerpiece was "cost of production, with profit." Exactly how that goal would be accomplished remained vague, but Mundt endorsed a variety of federal subsidies and activities to promote agriculture. He thought it not incongruous to advocate cost of production while simultaneously warning against excessive, socialistic governmental intervention in the free market.

In addition, he declared himself to be strongly in favor of federal aid to education, because, he said, schools were reaching the breaking point. He supported aid to public and parochial schools will full control

to remain with local authorities. "If that be treason," he told his listeners, "let the opposition hang me from the nearest sour apple tree."¹⁷

Mundt also courted the labor vote, a small one in South Dakota, endorsing the right of workers to organize and bargain collectively. On the hustings he asserted that he was "definitely sympathetic with the purpose and program of organized labor," and that he stood for "friendly understanding with the laborer." But his citation of the protective tariff as the major Republican contribution to the welfare of laborers and the "influx of immigration, a free-trade mania, and nationalization of labor" as the major dangers facing them must have sounded rather bizarre to labor union activists.¹⁸

The question of old age pensions was a sticky one. The Democrats straightforwardly endorsed the Townsend plan. Having received Townsend support two years earlier, Mundt continued to court their favor without actually endorsing their program. Most economists considered the Townsend plan ill-conceived and unworkable. The staunchly Republican Sioux Falls Argus-Leader called it "a radical and fantastic measure" which "out-deals the New Deal" and "is too extreme even for President Roosevelt." By supporting it, the paper contended, the Democrats--Berry, Loriks, Werner, and Fosheim--had "sealed their doom." Desiring to offend neither the Argus-Leader nor the elderly, Mundt called for sub-robate on the bill while calling for "liberal and adequate pensions." Privately he communicated frequently with Townsend leaders, assuring them of his sympathy for their cause.¹⁹

While seeking to establish his identity as a liberal, Mundt also worked privately to shape a state platform that would undercut the appeal of Loriks and Fosheim to rural voters. By appropriating major programs of the Farmers Union while simultaneously attacking its leaders for radicalism and extremism, the Republicans invited support of all kinds. Mundt worked with E. H. Everson, who had been state president of the Farmers Union from 1929 to 1934 and national president from 1934 to 1937. Everson was a conservative who severely criticized New Deal farm programs and vented his spleen against Emil Loriks, who had succeeded him as state president in 1934.²⁰

Everson's suggestion that the Republicans could carry the bulk of the farm vote by incorporating the Farmers Union program into their platform kindled enthusiasm in Karl Mundt, who relayed the message to Chas Gurney and state chairman J. D. Coon.²¹ Although the state convention failed to adopt every point, it did give prominent attention to the first two points of the Farmers Union program: cost of production and protection of home markets.²² That fall Everson and Peter V. Hansen, who was secretary of the Cost-of-Production Club, traveled around the state together attacking Loriks and Fosheim and the New Deal and urging the election of Republican candidates.²³

Ed Kennedy, who had served as national secretary of the Farmers Union during Everson's tenure as president, also came out against Loriks

and Fosheim and the New Deal, and John W. Batcheller, another former state president of the organization, also came out for the Republicans. But at the state convention the leaders and rank-and-file stated their admiration and gratitude for Loriks and Fosheim's work for the Farmers Union.²⁴

With people like Everson and Hansen serving as point men against the opposition, Karl Mundt could afford to focus his attention upon the positive side of the Republican platform. For instance, he let others carry the ball on criticizing Emil Loriks for having served as a paid "collaborator" (a term which apparently sounded more sinister to them than "consultant," which he in fact had been very briefly) in Henry Wallace's Department of Agriculture. But privately, Mundt avidly sought out additional evidence of Loriks' "collaboration," indicating to an aide of Congressman Francis Case how useful it would be to have information about Loriks' involvement with the Department in the hands of local Farmers Union presidents and suggesting that it would serve "as a whole array of red flags for someone." Mundt recognized that the information would have greatest effect coming from somebody besides himself. "I could transmit this information in its specific form to certain places where it could do me just a whole lot of good between now and election time," he wrote. "I do not expect to use it myself in any way but by giving this information to the proper Farm-Union leaders it would be very beneficial."²⁵

Mundt likewise relied on others to undermine his opponent's credibility and to cast doubt on his character and public record. Piously stating his intention to avoid discussing personalities, he promised not to be "teased, tantalized, or tricked into being diverted from the fundamental issues of this campaign." He warned people that the Democrats would engage in disgusting spectacles of personal diatribe--"Tammany style"--and complained that his opponent had "bitterly criticized" him, steadfastly maintaining, "I refuse to be drawn into a mud pie battle but I consider it a compliment that my opponent has been attempting to plaster me from head to foot, personally, but will not attack my fair chance for agriculture program."²⁶

Mundt really had little need to make personal attacks on Loriks, considering how many others were doing that already. In conservative eyes, the Arlington farmer was vulnerable on two counts: his New Deal leanings and his identification with several allegedly radical or un-American groups. Loriks had been an admirer of Robert M. La Follette, Sr., and Woodrow Wilson and had remained a progressive during the twenties and thirties. Although the South Dakota Farm Holiday was a relatively tame organization compared to sister groups in neighboring states,²⁷ Loriks' association with it and the Farmers Union rendered him a radical and extremist in the eyes of many people. The same taint was cast upon his friend and colleague, Oscar Fosheim.

Their second offense was to support actively the labor movement in a state where unions remained suspect in many minds. In December,

1937, Loriks and other Farmers Union leaders from neighboring states attended a conference in St. Paul, where they signed an agreement to cooperate with Labor's Non-Partisan League, a C.I.O. off-shoot, in a joint legislative program for the following year. The C.I.O. connection constituted evidence of Loriks' unacceptable radicalism in the eyes of many conservatives, who especially saw red after learning that the meeting had been glowingly reported in the Communist party's Daily Worker.²⁸

Throughout the 1938 campaign this meeting was trotted out as evidence of Emil Loriks' un-Americanism and, in the minds of some people, communistic inclinations. Two weeks before the election the Sioux Falls Argus-Leader ran an editorial on the compact and Communist party secretary Earl Browder's approval of it. It noted Loriks' participation "in an agreement that the national secretary of the Communist party now heralds 'as one of our most cherished ambitions.' The Argus-Leader does not believe that Loriks is a Communist. It does maintain, however, that his radical approach to public problems is assisting the CIO and, in turn, the Communist party."²⁹

Throughout the campaign the Argus-Leader was the most influential and one of the worst offenders of fairness and common decency in its completely unsubtle efforts to associate Loriks and Fosheim and Congressman Fred Hildebrandt with the Communists. It asserted editorially, "Governmental radicalism is a major issue in the South Dakota campaign and let no one forget it. . . . They are stirring class hatred. They are encouraging dependency. . . . Bear in mind that the Democratic candidates have received the endorsement of the Communists and other subversive groups and ask yourselves why. What do they expect from them? Why do they favor them? Why do they say they will vote for them? The answers are plain. They believe their subversive causes will be advanced to a greater degree through a Democratic than through a Republican victory. They are interested in dissension, in strife, and in the destruction of the American democracy."³⁰ The Argus-Leader's influence was statewide and its editorials were widely reproduced in local dailies and weeklies. "We are not saying that Loriks and Fosheim in fact are Communists," the paper stated, but then went on to contend, "Candidates who endorse policies that are communistic in nature should not be surprised when they, in turn, receive the blessings of the Communists."³¹

What made Loriks' and Fosheim's programs communistic in the eyes of conservatives such as the Argus-Leader's editors was their affinity for liberal and New Deal-type measures that used governmental power to promote the interests of farmers, laborers, the unemployed, and other special interest groups. Yet, they did not hesitate to extol the candidacy of Karl Mundt, who advocated cost of production for farmers, federal aid for education, and increased pensions for the aged.

How are we to interpret the campaign strategy adopted by the Republicans in 1938? Were Karl Mundt and his Republican colleagues sophisticated and cynical image manipulators unconcerned with the

truth? Were they pursuing a well-planned and clearly thought out strategy to pin the Communist label on the Democrats? It appears more accurate to say that the party, frustrated after almost six years of Democratic rule in Washington, was desperately grasping at any opportunity propaganda techniques and symbolic theory, but being practical politicians they instinctively geared their rhetorical appeals to what they assumed public opinion to be.

The thirties were a decade of intellectual and political upheaval. During a period of transition and flux, people often displayed ambivalence and indecision. They desired change and improvement but searched simultaneously for traditional guideposts. Politicians sought to bridge the gap between the past and the future without tripping on their own contradictions.

Eager to extend their appeal to groups desiring governmental aid, such as farmers, teachers, veterans, laborers, and businessmen, but also fearful of and opposed to increased governmental regulation and taxation, the Republicans discovered a way out of their dilemma by focusing public attention upon their opponents' allegedly radical and sub-symbols associated with Loriks and Fosheim, they hoped to gloss over the contradictory aspects of their own program. Undeterred by the lack of correspondence between the images they projected and the realities of the situation, they played up on the concerns, fears, and prejudices that were prevalent at the time. People think and act not so much in response to actual events and conditions as to their perceptions of them, or, in the words of W. I. Thomas, to their "definitions of the situation." In his words, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."³²

By the late 1930's, responding to changes wrought by the New Deal, passions unleashed by the European dictators, extremist philosophies of native demagogues, and warnings issued by conservative critics, many people grew increasingly concerned about indigenous threats to democracy and the "American way of life." Shrewd politicians, possessing varying degrees of sincerity, enthusiastically adapted their rhetoric to these realities. Anti-communism became a popular political theme in 1938. Karl Mundt had been inveighing against Communism for many years and had given it prominent attention during his first campaign for Congress in 1936. In a commencement address that year he warned his audience that "not all Communists are the long-haired, wild-eyed soap-box type of orators we sometimes see engaged in rabble-rousing on the street corners of some busy city. By far the most dangerous type of Communist is found in our colleges and universities under the guise of professor of some kind or other." His campaign material included anti-communism as a prominent theme.³³ When Sioux Falls attorney George J. Danforth launched his unsuccessful bid for the Republican Senate nomination in 1938, his formal announcement stated, "The Republican part furnishes the only organized opposition to the communistic and

socialistic trends of the present day. Our American system of government is being overthrown, and a foreign system substituted, based on collectivism, bureaucracy and socialism, which lead to dictatorship."³⁴

One of the most outspoken anti-communist crusaders in South Dakota was Arthur Bennett of Milbank, a Townsendite leader who had been the Union Party Senatorial candidate in 1936. In 1938 he ran second to Emil Loriks in a field of six candidates for the Democratic First District Congressional nomination. Convinced that conspiratorial forces had been arrayed against him, he lashed out at the allegedly "communistic" combination of Hildebrandt, Loriks, and Fosheim. Democratic leaders tried to muzzle him, but he persisted in alleging that the South Dakota Progressive Federation had been organized with communistic money for the purpose of nominating the three, who, he asserted, were "not Democrats at heart but radical farmer-laborites."³⁵ He printed and distributed a four page brochure warning, "South Dakotans Wake Up--Tomorrow May Be Too Late! Communism Is Knocking At Our Very Doors." It featured a picture of Emil Loriks and fellow Farmers Union leaders signing the St. Paul pact, and it breathlessly began, "Not at our front door does Communism raise its ugly and menacing head but in its usual slinking, slyster, treacherous way--like a thief in the night--disguised as 'progress' to hide its ugly claws, it is attempting to slip in the back door, RIGHT HERE IN SOUTH DAKOTA, and deprive us of everything we hold dear." The brochure went on to charge that the Progressive Federation was financed and controlled by the Communists, that it had attempted to organize radical farmers and laborers, that it had been instrumental in securing the nomination of Loriks and Fosheim, and that it had tried to secure Bennett's withdrawal from the campaign. It also rehearsed the case of Linn Gale, a Communist who had served briefly on Fred Hildebrandt's Washington staff before the Congressman became aware of his political leanings, and stated that Gale, under an assumed name, had later worked for the election of Fosheim, Loriks, and others whom he considered to be "great progressives."

Bennett asked,

What do South Dakota citizens think about a self-admitted 100 per cent Communist coming into the State and helping to dictate our policies? And why did our New Deal candidates accept this kind of support?

Why have the New Deal candidates . . . never repudiated this Communist, Linn Gale?

Does this record explain why the Democratic state platform adopted in Pierre July 1st failed in a single place to condemn Communism?

The Republican platform condemns Communism in six specific instances.

Who do you think South Dakota Communists will vote for November 8, and why?

Why does C. H. Sharp, secretary of the Communist Party in South Dakota, wear a Fosheim button?

And do you want to be joined in this election with this group boring from within in South Dakota?

Is this America, or what?

Surely the God-fearing, peace-loving people of South Dakota want none of this sort of thing.

Surely they will resolve to fight to the last ditch to protect their homes, their schools, their freedom of speech and of the press, their religious freedom, their personal freedom, their American institutions and ideals.

Surely they will go to the polls on November 8th and repudiate every candidate who is under any suspicion of having had dealings with the Communists.

Surely they will rise in their might and strike a knockout blow to this ungodly alliance.

Surely all classes, creeds, men and women of all parties, will join in a united front to Vote American and Stop Communism in this State.³⁶

Arthur Bennett was not alone in associating Loriks and Fosheim with communism. Similar messages were carried to groups around the state by several clergymen, including Rev. O. H. Hove, a Lutheran minister from Colman, who asserted, "For an organization or a candidate to have communistic support, either directly or indirectly, means they are headed the way the communists want to go."³⁷ Father J. P. Halpin of Henry was happy to report that while two years previously few people had been willing to believe Karl Mundt's assertions that communism existed in South Dakota, now the charges had been proved. Like many other Catholics, he was outraged by the letter of support that had gone to the Spanish loyalists from a group of liberal Congressmen at "the very time when in Spain priests were being hanged on telephone poles, innocent women were being violated, and the church and sacred bones of the saints were being desecrated."³⁸

No one attracted greater attention for the anti-communist cause, however, than Father Hugh K. Wolf of Garretson. After completing theological studies at St. Bonaventure, the Buffalo, New York, native had come in 1927 to Sioux Falls, where he served briefly as chaplain and dean of studies at Columbus Normal School, later taking a parish at Garretson, where he served from 1935 to 1942. Active in civic affairs, he became an avid student of Communist subversion and spoke frequently on the subject to a variety of audiences. Although he was a registered Democrat, during the 1930's he established a cordial friendship with Karl Mundt.³⁹

Wolf told the Sioux Falls Kiwanis Club that Emil Loriks owed his reelection as state president of the Farmers Union to the support of

a communist bloc within the organization, citing as evidence a letter from a McCook County Farmers Union leader. He asserted that Communists were constantly active in Sioux Falls and elsewhere in the state and were using every opportunity to spread their propaganda. Like Arthur Bennett, he also contended that Communists were working "under cover" within the Progressive Federation. To prove it he cited the record of a \$200 donation from the C.I.O. in the minutes of the Federation's organizational meeting which he in turn linked with the St. Paul gathering of December, 1937. He also trotted out the Linn Gale story. Whether Karl Mundt was in direct contact with him during the campaign is undeterminable, but in later years he remained good friends with Mundt and with Mundt's associate and campaign aide, Jerry Lammers, an attorney and state legislator from Madison.⁴⁰

The hue and cry against Communism would undoubtedly have been even louder that fall had Congressman Fred Hildebrandt defeated Tom Berry for the Senatorial nomination. His elimination muted the effect of the best argument Republicans had of the Communist connection. As it was, the Republicans made as much mileage as they could out of the Linn Gale story.⁴¹

Despite the efforts to question the loyalty of Loriks and Fosheim and the conservative drift of public opinion, by the end of the campaign Karl Mundt anticipated defeat. Desperately he requested additional funds from the Republican Congressional Committee, which provided \$2000 of the \$3500 he spent during the campaign. To win their sympathy, he grimly pictured the Democratic steam-roller that was pitted against him.⁴²

Mainly, he let others carry the ball on the Communist issue, but on election eve he mentioned the previous day's Communist party rally in Sisseton, telling people that "the Communist party of South Dakota is now openly holding political rallies to defeat me and I accept their opposition cheerfully." He recalled his long record of opposition to the party. "Ever since I first spoke in public against Communism in 1928 after attending a Communist rally in New York City and listening to their rabble-rousing tirades against the capitalistic system and against all American institutions," he said, "I have been getting mysterious phone calls and abusive letters after almost every speech and I am now glad to see them come out of cover." Without referring to the Democrats, he remarked, "I have been fighting the un-Christian and un-American doctrines of Communism in speeches and articles for over ten years and I shall continue to openly and honestly oppose them in spite of the added opposition it produces; in fact, I am glad they recognize in me such a sincere opponent that they are now holding meetings in an effort to defeat me."⁴³

Toward the end of the campaign Emil Loriks finally took out advertisements testifying to his patriotic credentials. "Loriks' Record For Americanism Speaks For Itself," one of them began. Recounting his Army service during the war and his activity as first commander of his

local American Legion post, the ad indignantly notes, "It is almost beyond belief that in the face of such record any attempt would be made to smear the Americanism of Emil Loriks. . . . He has been, is, and always will be the same kind of a square, straightforward, clean-cut fellow who willingly and simply does his duty--RATHER THAN THE KIND WHO TAKES IT OUT IN SPREAD EAGLE SPEECHES."⁴⁴ The Progressive Federation distributed a broadside making the point more forcefully. In comparing the candidates' records, it noted the war service of Loriks and Fosheim and under the names of Karl Mundt and Harlan Bushfield it indicated in large capital letters, "NONE."⁴⁵

One week before election day, Loriks and Fosheim issued a statement explicitly disowning the support of all "ism groups." That stopped the Sioux Falls Argus-Leader from asking why they hadn't repudiated the Communists; it simply reiterated its old question of why the Communists were supporting them.⁴⁶

Explanation for the popularity of the Communist issue lies in two directions. Political motives obviously played a crucial role. The issue meshed perfectly with anti-New Dealism. In South Dakota and many other states Republicans itched to get back into power.

But political calculations alone do not fully explain the fascination that anti-communism possessed for many people. The upheaval of the thirties left people fearful and uncertain. While totalitarianism swept Europe, radicalism, liberalism, and other "isms" thrived in the polarized ideological situation in the United States. As power flowed to the federal government and its executive branch, fears of centralization, statism, and dictatorship flourished.⁴⁷

Within this context the anti-radical and anti-communist impulse burgeoned. State legislatures probed radical activities on college campuses. South Dakotans could read about a Chicago economist, formerly an advisor for the National Recovery Administration, now warning that the United States might be on the brink of dictatorship.⁴⁸ Former Congressman C. A. Christopherson of Sioux Falls asserted that the basic issue in 1939 lay between constitutional government on the one hand and the threat of Communism and fascism on the other.⁴⁹ Leo Temmey, former state commander of the American Legion and current Republican candidate for attorney general, noted "the lack of Americanism in the Democratic platform and promised that Republicans would return to constitutional government which had been so gravely undermined by the Democrats."⁵⁰ A Sioux Falls Argus-Leader editorial allowed that it was fully aware that President Roosevelt was not a Communist but complained about the way in which his administration was determined to interfere with normal recovery of the capitalistic system.⁵¹ Rexford Tugwell, till his departure from Washington, served as a red flag for those who discerned a "direction and drift" in administration policies toward collectivism and communism.⁵²

Such thinking was pervasive. New Dealers were undermining the Constitution, enforcing collectivism, endangering capitalism, and

moving toward dictatorship. Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, visiting Sioux Falls in October, cautioned, "If we are 'going collectivist' - if we want to make the central government at Washington supreme, in some American paraphrase of fascism at the right or communism at the left or 'government by executive decree' in the center - if that is the American desire, let's make the choice consciously, deliberately, and with open eyes."⁵³

The Republican state platform warned, "Alien philosophies of government and economy have taken root in American soil and now challenge American principles of government and free enterprise. Subversive practices by our own government have undermined the foundations of our free institutions. The fabric of our social structure has been weakened." It urged "the immediate and unequivocal suppression or removal of communistic groups and ideas from the state and Federal Government." "The New Deal way," it stated, "leads inevitably to social revolution and ultimate enthronement of either a fascist or a communist dictatorship."⁵⁴

The most visible manifestation of the anti-communist impulse in 1938 was the establishment and activities of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which soon aroused the enmity of New Dealers and most of those on the left end of the political spectrum. A parade of witnesses came before it testifying to the subversive or communistic politicians in California, Ohio, and elsewhere. Basking in the publicity spotlight and seemingly intent upon discrediting as many liberals as he possibly could, Chairman Martin Dies used leading questions (e.g., "Most of these people are dupes of the Communists, aren't they?") to interrogate generally friendly witnesses, who seemed to have been chosen mainly for their antipathy to New Dealers and liberals in general.⁵⁵

Not surprisingly, South Dakota Republicans grasped at the opportunity for using HUAC as a weapon during the election campaign, something which the chairman had encouraged by his shepherding of other state probes. On October 22, state party chairman J.D. Coon, along with the major candidates--Harlan Bushfield, Chan Gunney, Karl Mundt, and Francis Case--formally requested the Dies Committee to investigate statements made by Father Hugh Wolf, Arthur Bennett, M.S. Carpenter, O.H. Shade, and C.V. Wilson with regard to Communist influence in the South Dakota Progressive Federation, the petitioners asked the committee to look into the charges and to determine whether through the Federation the Communists were influencing the Democratic candidates.⁵⁶

Father Wolf immediately stated his willingness to provide documents and to cooperate with the inquiry and Congressman Dies asked him to turn over whatever evidence he had of Communist influence in the Progressive Federation. Hans Ustrud, secretary of the South Dakota Progressive Federation, also invited the committee into the state to stage

a full, fair, and complete investigation of his organization along with the motives behind Father Wolf's "ridiculous charges" as well as "the un-American activities of the Homestake mine," which he asserted dominated the Republican party in selecting candidates and financing elections.⁵⁷

The committee failed to act on the Republican request. Only two weeks remained before the election, and it went into recess. Meanwhile, President Roosevelt opened both barrels on it, defending Governor Murphy and accusing the committee of an un-American attempt to influence the election. Dies retorted with a condemnation of the administration's campaign of "misrepresentations, ridicule, and sarcasm."⁵⁸

South Dakotans were divided on the issue. Many agreed with the President that the committee was partisanly motivated, but many others believed with Dies that America was threatened by the presence of internal subversion. The economic and social dislocations of the thirties were conducive to such fantasies. As farms blew away during the dust storms, cattle perished in the drouth, people went on relief and to work for the WPA, farm sales were blocked by angry farmers, dictators raved in Europe, and power concentrated in Washington, it was no wonder that people became alarmed with what was going on and were worried about what would happen next. During September and October, 1938, the Munich crisis dominated the headlines and the threat of another European war seemed palpable. The reaction of many South Dakotans to Orson Welles' radio drama of "The War of the Worlds" on Sunday, October 22, demonstrated how common was the jitteriness. While a national corn-husking contest was going on several miles north of Sioux Falls, concession stand operators quickly closed up shop and dashed into town without even turning off the burners on their stoves. People swamped newspaper and police offices with calls.⁵⁹

The edginess of people made them more receptive to arguments based on fear. The communist issue moved to center stage as the 1938 campaign proceeded. With Karl Mundt and other Republican candidates appropriating many liberal themes and with Emil Loriks and Oscar Fosheim and other Democrats less than enthusiastic about New Deal farm policies, differences on specific issues tended to get less attention than broad philosophical conflicts. Fosheim's major proposal was for the rapid disposal by the state of rural credit lands it had acquired through foreclosure when farmers couldn't make payments on debts owed the state loan program. More controversial was his promise to eliminate sales taxes and replace them with an increased ore tax on the Homestake Gold Mine.⁶⁰

Emil Loriks, like most other candidates, concentrated upon the agricultural problem, defending New Deal farm policies but stating the need to go beyond them. Like Fosheim, he identified his party with the "common Man," asserting that it represented "nickels and dimes" while the Republicans were championing the cause of "the aristocracy and

corporations."⁶¹ He seemed to define the opposition more broadly than his running mate Fosheim, who concentrated most of his fire against the Homestake.

In 1938, the Republicans ran a McCarthy-type campaign twelve years before Senator Joe McCarthy burst into national prominence. And it seemed to work. On election day, Republicans swept into office, as South Dakota joined a national swing toward conservatism. Liberals around the country were in disarray; Murphy in Michigan, Benson in Minnesota, Phil La Follette in Wisconsin, and George Earle in Pennsylvania were among the prominent losers. "South Dakotans Repudiate New Deal," headlined the Sioux Falls Argus-Leader.⁶² That was the major message of the election. Increasingly, people were becoming impatient with New Dealers and liberals. They were upset by the sit-down strikes and labor violence, with political attacks upon the Supreme Court, with growing government taxes and power, and with the continued presence of hard times. "South Dakota Joined with Nation in Handing Rebuff to National Administration," was the headline on the Webster Reporter and Farmer.⁶³

The swing to the right was obvious to everyone, but in South Dakota that should have been less surprising than was the continued strength demonstrated by the Democrats. Certainly, not everyone agreed that the New Deal was dead. Straight-ticket voting was the rule: the percentages received by the major candidates varied within a few points of each other:

OFFICE	REPUBLICAN	DEMOCRAT	Rep. %
U. S. Senator	Gurney 146,813	Berry 133,064	52.4
Short Senate Term	Pyle 155,292	McCullen 112,171	58.1
Congress, 1st Dist.	Mundt 111,796	Loriks 95,353	54.0
Congress, 2d Dist.	Case 41,335	Werner 25,932	61.4
Governor	Bushfield 149,362	Fosheim 127,485	54.0
Lieut. Gov.	McMurchie 146,225	Haug 120,396	54.8
Atty. Gen.	Temmey 144,125	Roddewig 123,671	53.8

The Republican swing from 1936 to 1938 was small, but it was crucial.

OFFICE	Rep. %, 1936	Rep. %, 1938
U. S. Senate	48.9	52.4
Congress, 1st Dist.	49.4	54.0
Congress, 2d Dist.	51.7	61.4
Governor	51.6	54.0
Lieut. Gov.	50.2	54.8
Atty. Gen.	49.9	53.8

The legislative lineups, on the other hand, were radically altered. The Republicans increased their majority in the state senate from 2 to 25 and in the house from 29 to 48 between 1936 and 1938.

The election re-established the G.O.P. as the dominant party in the state for two more decades. The realignment that was occurring in a number of other states waited for another generation in South Dakota. What role the Communist issue played in influencing voters is difficult to determine. The high degree of attention given to it by Republican candidates and the big play it received in the press may have influenced few voters' decisions. No doubt it did more to reinforce previously established positions than to change those decisions. It convinced those who were already convinced. No big swing occurred in 1938. The unfortunate outcome, however, was that red-baiting seemed to be a useful tactic for winning elections.

Looking back at the election of 1938 in South Dakota, therefore, reveals the major issues and debates of the time, but it also provides glimpses of the symbols and images that populated the public mind. Although the spotlight here has been directed upon imaginings of radical conspiracies, it should not be thought that ideological thinking limited itself to conservative minds. On the contrary, the identification of conspiratorial enemies and the nurturing of self-heroic images is pervasive in politics. Robert Kelley has suggested that "the image of the enemy is the most serious and revealing element in a political persuasion."⁶⁴

For many South Dakotans the enemies were liberalism, radicalism, and Communism. For others it was scheming businessmen, rapacious bankers, and Wall Street. Finding it difficult to locate believable symbols of evil business in South Dakota, left-wingers had to settle for the Homestake Gold Mine. It was large, it was tangible, and it threw its political weight around the state.

Calling the Homestake un-American seemed just as ludicrous to conservatives as calling Farmers Union and CIO members un-American appeared to liberals. Not surprisingly, intemperate remarks on one side evoked similar replies from the other. But an important distinction is worth making. Left-wingers may have been overly obsessed with business conspiracies, but anti-communists clearly went overboard in associating their opponents with subversive designs. Remarkably enough both Oscar Fosheim and Emil Loriks retained amicable personal relationships with their victorious opponents in later years. Fosheim, who unsuccessfully contested Karl Mundt for his Congressional seat in 1940, traveled to Washington during World War II to testify on a farm bill at the request of Harlan Bushfield, who by now was in the Senate. Emil Loriks worked with Mundt to promote favorable federal policies for South Dakota farmers.⁶⁵

In 1943 Mundt went onto the House Un-American Activities Committee and soon developed a reputation as one of the most vocal critics of Communism in the Congress. In 1954 it was his reluctant duty to preside over the Army-McCarthy hearings when McCarthy himself became the subject of investigation, and his colleague Francis Case was one of the six members of a special Senate Committee that recommended the censure of the junior Wisconsin Senator for conduct "contrary to Senatorial ethics" and "obstructing the constitutional processes of the Senate."⁶⁶

NOTES

¹Harold D. Lasswell, Politics: Who Gets What, When, How (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936).

²Murray Edelman, The Symbolic Uses of Politics (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964).

³Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922), pp. 14, 234.

⁴Bruce Lannes Smith, Harold D. Lasswell, and Ralph D. Casey, Propaganda, Communication, and Public Opinion: A Comprehensive Reference Guide (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946); Stuart Chase, The Tyranny of Words (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1938); Thurman Arnold, The Symbols of Government (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935); Arnold, The Folklore of Capitalism (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937).

⁵George Wolfskill and John A. Hudson, All But the People: Franklin D. Roosevelt and His Critics (New York: Macmillan, 1949), pp. 93-116; Eugene Lyons, The Red Decade (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1971 (1941)); Earl Latham, The Communist Controversy in Washington: From the New Deal to McCarthy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 28-38.

⁶Robert Griffith and Athan Theoharis, ed., The Specter: Original Essays on the Cold War and the Origins of McCarthyism (New York: New Viewpoints, 1974).

⁷Herbert S. Schell, History of South Dakota, 3rd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), pp. 281-97; Alan L. Clem, Prairie State Politics: Popular Democracy in South Dakota (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1967), pp. 36-37.

⁸New York Times, Nov. 9, 1938; James MacGregor Burns, Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956), pp. 358-66.

⁹Webster Reporter and Farmer, Jan. 23, 1936; Aberdeen American-News, Sept. 27, 1936; Ross Baer to Edward Sotto, June 3, 1939, Mundt Papers, Box 1104; "Karl E. Mundt," Current Biography (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1948), pp. 463-65; Wayne E. Hoogestraat, "Evaluation of Karl E. Mundt's Advocated Theories of Persuasive Speaking in Relation to His Practices in Selected Speeches on Communism" (Doctor of Education thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 1963), pp. 19-24.

¹⁰Interview, Oscar Fosheim, with author, July 15, 1980; Interview, Oscar Fosheim, June, 1970, South Dakota Oral History Project, Vermillion, SD.

¹¹Interview, Emil Loriks, with author, April 10, 1980; Interview, Emil Loriks, June, 1970, South Dakota Oral History Project, Vermillion, SD; Studs Terkel, Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression (New York: Avon Books, 1971), pp. 261-66.

¹²"Announcement of Karl Mundt of Madison for Congress," press release, (1938), Karl Mundt Papers, Dakota State College, Madison, South Dakota, Box 1102; South Dakota Republicans were not unique in this respect. The Nation observed, "Perhaps the most striking feature of the campaign was the extent to which the Republicans were compelled to adopt the language of liberalism," in "No Cause for Panic," Vol. 147 (Nov. 19, 1938), p. 525.

¹³Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Sept. 13, 1938.

¹⁴Karl Mundt to Enoch Norbeck, July 5, 1938, Mundt Papers, Box 1104.

¹⁵The slogan is on the cornerstone of the Karl Mundt Library on the Dakota State College campus in Madison, South Dakota.

¹⁶"A Fair Chance for a Free People," broadside, 1938, Mundt Papers.

¹⁷Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Oct. 31, Nov. 7, 1938.

¹⁸Ibid., Oct. 27, 1938.

¹⁹"Of Special Interest to Townsend Club Members," circular (reprint of editorial from Watertown Herald, Sept. 17, 1936), Mundt Papers, Box 1105; Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Oct. 10, 14, 15, 19, 1938.

²⁰Brookings Register, Oct. 21, 1937.

²¹Karl Mundt to Chan Gurney, June 21, 1938, Mundt to J. D. Coon, June 21, 1938, Peter V. Hansen to Mundt, June 30, 1938, Mundt to Hansen, July 6, 1938, Mundt Papers, Box 1104.

²²South Dakota Legislative Manual (Pierre: State Publishing Co., 1939), pp. 446-56.

²³Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Sept. 26, 28, Oct. 6, 24, 1938.

²⁴Ibid., Oct. 28, Nov. 1, 7, 1938.

²⁵Ibid., Oct. 28, 1938; Karl Mundt to George Hart, Aug. 16, 1938, Hart to Mundt, Aug. 6, 1938, Mundt to George H. Norton, Aug. 20, 25, 1938, Norton to Mundt, Aug. 22, 1938, Mundt to Henry Wallace, May 20, 1939, Mundt Papers, Box 1104.

²⁶Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Oct. 21, 28, 1938.

²⁷Robert S. Thompson, "The History of the South Dakota Farmers Union, 1914-1952" (M.A. Thesis, University of South Dakota, 1953), pp. 51-71.

²⁸Daily Worker (New York), Jan. 1, 1938.

²⁹Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Oct. 26, 1938.

³⁰Ibid., Oct. 7, 1938.

³¹Ibid., Oct. 28, 1938; see also editorials on Oct. 15, 16, 20, 22, 26, 31, 1938.

³²W. I. Thomas, On Social Organization and Social Personality, ed. Morris Janowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. xl.

³³"A Rendezvous with Life," speech, Mundt Papers, Box 1208; In a speech delivered in Aberdeen in 1937, "Why Kiwanis," Mundt suggested that the opposing ways of life advocated by Kiwanians and Communists were the best reason to belong to Kiwanis. Mundt Papers, Box 1209.

³⁴Brookings Register, Jan. 24, 1938.

³⁵Ibid., May 2, 1938; (Huron) Evening Huronite, Oct. 14, 1938.

³⁶Friends of Arthur Bennett Club, "South Dakotans Wake Up," brochure, 1938. Mundt Papers, Scrapbook 10.

³⁷Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Oct. 28, 1938.

³⁸Ibid., Nov. 7, 1938.

³⁹Interview, Helene Johnson (served as bookkeeper and secretary for Father Wolf in Garretson and later in Vermillion), with author, July 8, 1980; Interview, Jerry Lammers (Madison attorney who was a close friend and political associate of Karl Mundt), with author, July 2, 1980.

⁴⁰Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, June 11, Oct. 4, 1938; Brookings Register March 24, 1938.

⁴¹Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Oct. 21, 1936, July 12, 1938; Brookings Register, Oct. 22, 29, 1936; Congressional Record (Appendix), June 9, 1938, p. 11484; "Investigation of Communist Propaganda," Hearings Before a Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activities in the United States, House of Representatives, 71st Cong., 2nd Sess., Nov. 10-Dec. 5, 1930, Part 1, Vol. 4, pp. 421-23.

⁴²"Statement of Election Expenditures," Dec. 7, 1938, Mundt Papers, Box 1101; Karl Mundt to Joseph W. Martin, Jr., June 7, Aug. 15,

27, Sept. 12, 1938, Mundt to John Hamilton, Aug. 16, Sept. 5, 1938, Mundt Papers; Box 1104; Gerald Lange. "Americanism over Radicalism: Mundt's First Election, 1938," paper, Dakota History Conference, Madison, S.D., April, 1973.

⁴³Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Nov. 4, 1938.

⁴⁴Ibid., Nov. 1, 1938.

⁴⁵Progressive Federation, "Who's Who and What's What," mimeographed, Sept. 1938, Mundt Papers, Box 1103.

⁴⁶Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Nov. 1, 1938

⁴⁷Richard H. Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Geoffrey S. Smith, To Save a Nation: American Countersubversives, the New Deal, and the Coming of World War II (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

⁴⁸Walter Goodman, The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1968), pp. 3-58; Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Sept. 13, 1938.

⁴⁹(Huron) Evening Huronite, Oct. 6, 1938.

⁵⁰Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Oct. 7, 1938.

⁵¹Ibid., Sept. 25, 1938.

⁵²Brookings Register, Sept. 10, Oct. 5, 1936.

⁵³Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Oct. 11, 1938.

⁵⁴South Dakota Legislative Manual (Pierre: State Publishing Co., 1939), pp. 446-56.

⁵⁵"The Shape of Things," Nation, Vol. 147 (Aug. 27, 1938), p. 194; "Mr. Dies Goes to Town," Nation, Vol. 147 (Sept. 3, 1938), p. 216; Paul Y. Anderson, "Investigate Mr. Dies!" Nation, Vol. 147 (Nov. 5, 1938), pp. 471-72; Anderson, "Behind the Dies Intrigue," Nation, Vol. 147 (Nov. 12, 1938), pp. 499-500.

⁵⁶Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Oct. 23, 1938.

⁵⁷Ibid., Oct. 24, 25, 1938.

⁵⁸New York Times, Nov. 2, 1938.

⁵⁹Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Nov. 1, 1938; An indignant resident of Wentworth wrote a letter to the editor: "I and several of my friends were among the many radio listeners who tuned in at an inopportune time last Sunday and heard the dramatic production of H. G. Wells' 'War of the Worlds.' The result was a horrible feeling worse than any nightmare I have ever experienced. It was entirely too realistic to be enjoyed even if one had known it was merely a play. I do not blame the radio audience for becoming indignant over such entertainment." Ibid., Nov. 3, 1938.

⁶⁰Brookings Register, Sept. 26, 1938; (Huron) Evening Huronite, Sept. 20, Oct. 13, 1938; Webster Reporter and Farmer, Sept. 29, 1938; on the rural credit system see Gilbert C. Fite, "South Dakota's Rural Credit System: A Venture in State Socialism, 1917-1946," Agricultural History, Vol. 21 (Oct. 1947), pp. 239-49.

⁶¹(Huron) Evening Huronite, Oct. 13, 1938.

⁶²Sioux Falls Argus-Leader, Nov. 9, 1938.

⁶³Webster Reporter and Farmer, Nov. 10, 1938.

⁶⁴Robert Kelley, The Transatlantic Persuasion: The Liberal-Democratic Mind in the Age of Gladstone (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. xix.

⁶⁵Interview, Oscar Fosheim, with author, July 15, 1980; Interview, Emil Loriks, with author, April 10, 1980.

⁶⁶Robert Griffith, The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate (New York: Hayden Book Co., Inc., 1970), 250-63, 309-15; Richard H. Rovere, Senator Joe McCarthy (New York: Harper & Row, 1973 (1959)), pp. 229-30.