Matter Of Fact

Post 5/9/47

By Joseph And Stewart Alsop

The Case Of The Ten

THE SPOTLIGHT of attention may soon shift to one of the most complex and dangerous issues facing the American Government today—the issue of total security as against the civil rights of the individual. This will happen if, as now seems possible, a number of the 10 employes of the State Department, dismissed on grounds of "disloyalty" a few weeks ago, decide publicly to challenge the department on the issue.

These 10 people, none of them of top policy-making rank, and most of them well down the bureaucratic ladder, all received on the afternoon of June 26 the same mimeographed communication. They were curtly notified that, pursuant to the McCarran amendment to the State Department appropriation, which provided for the summary dismissal of any employes suspected of disloyalty, their services were terminated "with prejudice" as of that afternoon. Their names were not published. But a State Department press release announced their dismissals, and accused them of "indirect association with representatives of a foreign power." In the public mind, they were identified, however anonymously, as something close to traitors.

Most of the 10 immediately inquired of their superiors as to the cause of their dismissal, asking for the evidence on which it was based. This was not forthcoming. It was at first made apparent that there could be no appeal from the decision. Since then, in response to pressure both from inside and outside the department, a three-man loyalty board to review these and subsequent cases has been established.

TWO OR THREE of the 10 no doubt had very clear ideas of why they were dismissed. But unless some singularly masterful deception is under way, most of the others are sincerely mystified by the whole affair. One man, for example, can explain why the ax fell on him only in terms of the fact that he attended a few left-wing meetings in college days, out of curiosity. Another was the friend of a friend of a man who had fought with the Loyalists in the Spanish Civil War. Another somehow got on the mailing list of a left-wing bookstore. One man had once served as a technician on the staff of a professor known to be well to the left of center. And so on.

The suspicion inevitably arises that certain subordinate officials of the State Department, harking to congressional cries for Communist blood, decided that a respectable number of heads must be served up on a platter. This theory gains plausibility from the fact that at least two of the purgees were already on terminal leave from the department, and were recalled only for the purpose of dismissing them.

Since these two individuals were not expected to return to work in the department under any circumstances, it is certainly possible that they were dismissed only to add to the department's box score.

No doubt it was assumed that the fact that no names were published would protect those dismissed. However, it has not worked out that way. In the first place, their fellow employes of course knew why they left the department so suddenly, and Washington is more addicted to gossip than Hog Corners. In the second place, employers have a habit of asking for references, and for reasons for leaving former employment. This fact has already stood between at least one of the 10 and a desirable position. Even those who have found new jobs live in constant fear of losing them if their employers discover why they left the State Department. A number of the 10 have been unable to find jobs, and are reported living on the charity of friends and sympathizers.

SOME OF THE ten purgees are doing what they can to get themselves reinstated, so that they may resign honorably. Failing that, there is at least a fair chance that one or two may decide to become the Dreyfuses in the case, and appeal directly to public opinion through the Civil Liberties Union. Such a public airing of the whole matter might indeed serve a useful purpose. For the issue involved is one of the gravest with which the American Government is faced.

After the Canadian espionage case, which proved beyond any doubt that the Soviet Union used members of the Communist Party as espionage agents against their native country, the State Department would be plain fatuous not to exclude rigorously any person believed to be pro-Communist. But an ideological attitude is something virtually impossible to prove by any known rules of evidence.

Therefore the Government must have some means of ridding itself of those who may only be suspected on reasonably solid grounds of pro-communism. Yet, as the case of the 10 seems clearly to indicate, this may work the harshest kind of injustice on individual Government employes. It is a kind of injustice, moreover, which strikes very close to the heart of American civil liberties. One proposal is that those against whom some valid grounds for suspicion exist should merely be allowed honorably to resign from Government service. At any rate, some reasonable solution must be found. If every independent-minded man in the Government is to be haunted by fears of J. Edgar Hoover's eager hawkshaws lurking under his desk, the already too evident trend toward Government-by-drones is sure to be vastly accelerated.

Post
5-22-48

Robinson Quits As State Dept. Controls Chief

By the United Press

Hamilton Robinson, storm center of criticism for his part in the State Department's loyalty program, has resigned as director of the department's Office of Controls, it was disclosed last night.

Robinson cleaned out his desk late yesterday as director of the office which frames regulations for security in Government departments and hears the appeals of persons who were dropped by the State Department as "poor security risks."

State Department sources said Robinson's resignation, first submitted last November, was entirely voluntary. It was believed he would enter private law practice in Washington, where he now makes his home. He is a native New Yorker.

Sources close to Robinson said his resignation was prompted by the fact that his activities were under constant fire by congressional committees.

Set Up Wartime Rules

They said the fact that Pulitzer prizes had been awarded recently to two Washington reporters for their revelations of the activities of the Office of Controls was not a factor in Robinson's resignation.

These sources said the 39-year-old executive wanted to resume private law practice in the Capital and would do so after a vacation in northern New York.

Robinson first came under fire as the chairman of the four-man security advisory board of the State-War-Navy Air Force Coordinating Committee. It wrote the minimum regulations—under a White House directive—to set up classified categories for information emanating from all executive departments and agencies.

These proposed regulations would give any excutive agency the right to classify information as "top secret," "secret," "confidential" or "restricted."

Reviewed Loyalty Cases

During the war, these classifications were given only to such sensitive departments as State, War and Navy.

Robinson also has been criticized for his role in passing upon 10 State Department employes who were fired last year as bad security risks. He was a member of the review group which looked over their cases.

That review was the basis for a series of stories by Bert Andrews of the New York Herald Tribune, which won a Pulitzer prize this year.

Nat S. Finney of the Minneapolis Tribune also was awarded a Pulitzer prize for his part in publicizing a proposal to set up minimum security regulations throughout the Executive Department.