

ABROAD AT HOME

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Warmed- Over Smear

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One of the low points of the McCarthy era was an attack made not by Senator McCarthy but by President Eisenhower's Attorney General, Herbert Brownell Jr. He charged that former President Truman had promoted a Treasury official, Harry Dexter White, knowing him to be a Soviet spy.

White had been dead five years at the time of the Brownell attack. A grand jury investigating Communism had called him as a witness, and not indicted him.

At an Eisenhower press conference on Nov. 11, 1953, Anthony Leviero of The New York Times asked about what he called the "squalid" Brownell episode. Was it proper, he asked, for an Attorney General to attack a former President by making an unsubstantiated charge against a dead man? Eisenhower ducked the question.

That moment at the press conference came back to me the other day when I read a copy of Time magazine. For there again was the old charge against White, in newly sensationalized dress.

Time published excerpts from "K.G.B.: The Inside Story," a book by Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky. Two full pages of the excerpts were about alleged Soviet agents in the U.S. Government, including White.

The excerpts had the aura of revelations by Mr. Gordievsky, a former K.G.B. man. But reviewers have noted that some of the book is plainly based on earlier American publications. Its references to White actually carried footnotes citing other books as sources, but Time did not mention that.

The Time version was strikingly reminiscent of the original document in the anti-White canon. That was not a book but a Time cover story of Nov. 23, 1953, entitled "The Strange Case of Harry Dexter White." It was a classic example of Time's method in the heyday of Henry Luce, bias laid on with a trowel.

"He was a peddler's son, a puny boy," the 1953 Time piece began. It

Time
magazine
revives a
charge from
the McCarthy
era.

made sure the reader would know that the family was Jewish. It described Harry White as pushy, sneering, little, ruthless and in numerous other ways unpleasant.

Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman stood accused, Time said, of "creating and maintaining a political climate in which treason flourished." But it offered little evidence for that sonorous statement, or for the charge that White was a spy.

The piece relied heavily on Whittaker Chambers, the former Communist courier who had made the charges against White and many others. Chambers had become a senior editor of Time and did much to give the magazine its doom-laden tone at that time.

One of the corroborative details offered by Chambers was that he had given White a Soviet rug to show the Communists' "gratitude." The Time piece said White "shifted nervously" when another spy saw the rug later and said it looked "like one of those Soviet rugs" — and the rug soon "disappeared."

Another charge in the Time piece was that, in 1945, White had slipped a sample of German occupation currency to a Communist spy ring and then urged that the U.S. give the printing plates to the Russians, which was done. (The Russians were fellow-occupiers then, and right or wrong it was an understandable official policy decision.)

This same material turns up in the 1990 book and the Time excerpts. The occupation currency story is there, for example, but by now heightened in a Time caption: "By making sure Moscow was able to churn out perfect allied military marks, he cost taxpayers millions."

The rug story has been improved a bit, too. The book and Time tell us that White "hid in his attic the valuable Bokhara rug given him."

Time and the book take a sinister view of White's leading role at the Bretton Woods conference in July 1944. The conference gave the United States the dominant position in international finance over the next 30 years. Was that an un-American conspiracy?

I do not know what Harry Dexter White may have done. I do know that no one can judge that fairly on the basis of one-sided evidence, however often repeated. And why is it being repeated now?

Authors may say things to make books sell. But why should the editors of Time want to revert to the style that cost it so much credibility? Tony Leviero had the right adjective: "squalid." □