

Howard Fast Replies to Lyons

The letter printed below is the reply which Howard Fast has written to Eugene Lyons for publication in the *New Leader* this week. Lyons, whose long record of systematic attacks upon Socialism and American liberalism have made him a defender of McCarthyism, had invited the noted American novelist (*New Leader*, July 9) to "throw off the Communist weights from your heart and mind . . . to break out of the closed world of Communist alibis for unlimited horror. . . ." Lyons had written this to Fast on the basis of Fast's column in this paper (June 12) in which Fast had said: "Never again will I remain silent when I can recognize injustice regardless of how that injustice may be wrapped in the dirty line of expediency or necessity."



HOWARD FAST

Dear Mr. Lyons:

In your open letter to me, you repeat a number of things that I have said, in the *Daily Worker*, mind you, and then you note other grave and sorrowful injustices perpetrated by the Soviet leadership. You remind me that I did not speak when I might have spoken—something I know only too well and too bitterly, and also a matter concerning which I have already written. You raise an eyebrow at my characterization of McCarthy as an evil man and an enemy of what is best in America, and the implication is there that perhaps since I was mistaken about Stalin, I could also be mistaken—inversely—about McCarthy.

You invoke the image of Whitaker Chambers—surely not to elicit my admiration—and refer to his struggles for his own soul. Well, we all have souls, but I have yet to admit that one can be saved through infamy.

Finally, you ask me to throw off the burden I carried, clear my conscience, and "rejoin the world of free men." Since you do not define that world, I can only presume that you mean the area of commercial success, where, free from the current blacklist, one can dip into the big money—write for national magazines, for television, even for Hollywood. You lay out no blueprint of how one enters his blessed abode, but recent history is fruitful with examples. There are many avenues. One can become a professional informer for the F.B.I., or one can become an amateur informer for the Committee on Un-American Activities. One can write a book detailing the pyrotechnics of one's struggle for one's soul, or about how the communists duped him, or the whole inside dope on the "red network."

Or one can take a more dignified path toward the big money, and declare one's "enlightenment" directly through the great mass media; the fruits of repentance are bountiful.

Conscience indeed, Mr. Lyons! Stalin and those who share his guilt betrayed democracy, betrayed socialism—betrayed the best

hopes of mankind, the noblest dreams, the whole singing future of this tormented, confused and harried race of beings to which we both belong. Having seen that, having wept over it, having experienced my own agony, my own sense of personal betrayal, having sworn an oath with myself that I will never again remain silent while evil and stupid men profane the best of man's hope, what would you have me do? I think it is plain enough in your letter, if only by implication.

You would have me turn upon all those who have stood at my side during the darkest days this country ever knew, toss my belief in humanism and socialist democracy into the wastebasket, name names, accuse, write books about the devil that deceived me—and, of course, accept the very agreeable financial rewards that go with the process.

Conscience indeed, Mr. Lyons! I have carried no burden of the sort you mean. Yes, there were evil things that I did not know and there was evidence that I closed my eyes to. That, I do not deny. But if I did not know, blame my own stupidity and blame me, not others, not devils, not a mysterious "force," and remember that I am not the only one who closed his eyes to evidence. The *New Leader* has a less than perfect record in that respect.

This I do know—that where I recognized wrong, I faced it and fought it as best I could. I fought injustice. I fought against the shackles that were clamped on the tongues and minds of Americans these ten years past. I fought for equality, for freedom of speech, for the Bill of Rights. I was never silent where injustice was being done, and I never weighed my speech or silence against the cost.

In all these fights, I was never alone. Thousands of men and women of the most diverse opinions were with me. I took strength from them and their idealism—and a great many of them were not communists, and some of them had as much distaste for communists as you have.

Will they also be eligible for

"freedom," providing they turn their backs on suffering and injustice, and hear no cry of agony, no whimper of pain, no moan of hunger?

What is this, Mr. Lyons? Does the struggle for freedom, for the hope and dignity of man end because Stalin was a tyrant, because Soviet Socialism did not come a-borning as we would have liked? Have there truly been no changes? I think you are insensitive, Mr. Lyons, and that too much of the world is passing you by. There is a change in the Soviet Union, a profound change.

Listen to what Paul A. Baran, professor of economics at a large western university, and surely no communist, has to say concerning that change. I quote him from the current issue of the *Monthly Review*:

"This points to another reason for the generally prevailing belief that terror and compulsion need not reappear in Soviet life. It is the breathtaking change that has taken place in the structure of Soviet society in the course of the last thirty years. For the country is dominated now by a new generation which, tempered by the struggle for industrialization and hardened by the ordeals of the war, is unique in its moral strength, its patriotism, and the level of its knowledge and insight. This generation that is now everywhere in the driver's seat displays in every aspect of national life its craving for education, for opportunity for unhampered development, for freedom, and for justice. This generation reads voraciously the best in the world's literature, overflows the universities, concentrates on the most difficult areas of science, mobs lecture halls and responds with spontaneous ovation to the *Comedie Francaise*, to David Oistrach, to Emil Gilels, to Porgy and Bess, and to a good paper on the 'Relation of Dialectical Logic to Formal Logic.' . . . This generation is impatient with the 'oldtimers' who fill their books and articles with stale citations, who have lost the ability of thinking for themselves, who cover their intellectual indolence by reference to authority. The mental frame of reference of Soviet youth was not drawn by the OGPU; it was drawn by the writings of Marx and Engels, of Pushkin and Tolstoy, of Shakespeare and Goethe, that were printed and reprinted in the Soviet Union in millions of copies. Its ideas were not shaped by Stalin's hangmen, assassinating innocent people, nor were they formed by comic books extolling rape and murder. Its ideas were molded in schools and youth organizations where socialism, humanism, and devotion to the common weal never ceased to be the content of education.

"It is here where the fundamental difference lies between the fascist despotism of a Hitler or a Franco and the no less repulsive oriental tyranny of a Stalin. The difference is the content of the his-

(Continued on Page 7)

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(Continued from Page 6)

torical development that those dictatorships were able to enforce. If in the case of Hitler it was the unleashing of the most destructive most bloody war in human history, if in the case of Franco it is continual misery and degradation of a great people—in the case of Stalin it is the creation of all the prerequisites for the development of a prosperous and free society."

I quote at such length, not only because I admire Mr. Baran's cogent thinking, not only because he speaks with authority and a first hand contemporary knowledge which neither you nor I possess, but because his observations took place while he was on a mission for our government—a fact which should underline his objectivity.

This is change, Mr. Lyons, the most basic change imaginable; but it is something else as well. It is the life force of socialism, the humanism and brotherhood of socialism; and to me that is no "cover-word," Mr. Lyons. I know what socialism means, and a lifetime of thinking on that subject derives, in my case, not from Stalin, but from the ancient Jewish prophets, from the Testament, from the four Gospels of Jesus Christ, from the teachings of that most beloved master, Thomas Jefferson, from the wisdom and wit of my own literary mentor, George Bernard Shaw, and from the scientific socialist theory of Marx and Engels.

They were my teachers, and they taught well; and from them I learned that man was made to love, not to hate, to live in peace and brotherhood, not in war and degradation, to cherish human life, not to have contempt for it. From them I learned of the pride of mankind and the ultimate and inevitable glory of mankind. From them I learned that a time would come, inevitably, when man would no longer exploit man, and when freedom and justice would come

into its full own. From these teachers, who loved man and watched him with pity and forgiveness these three thousand years, I learned that life on this earth can have dignity and beauty and meaning. I learned that man would someday be the noble thing that God or nature or whatever force brought him into being destined him to be—and I learned from them that the mind of man would be the brightest star in all this far-flung universe.

I learned from them the meaning of socialism, and out of that teaching, I came to understand that this rich and fruitful country of ours, with all its good and patient people, could become like a garden, a wonderland of all the earth, providing we used it wisely and well. This is what socialism means to me, brotherhood, love, reason, work with dignity, and leisure made precious and rewarding, enough for all and nowhere want and privation. To me, socialism means full production in every area of our economy and the fullest and most creative use of every soul in this land. It means growth, maturity and communal wisdom. It means the fruition of our democracy, the doing away with jails and slums and gas chambers. It means schools and hospitals and great research centers. It means the flowering of our culture, the offering of the best in art to all of the people. It means conservation and construction and peace. It means the ownership by all of the people of all the means of production, and it also means, thereby, the sanctity of the family, the home, the cherishing of the very old and the very young. It means freedom of religion and speech and thought—but more than we have ever known. But above all, it means the happiness of our country—and it means peace for all the brotherhood of man.

I have disdained to hide my thoughts. For almost a quarter of a century I have written them down, for all the world to see, and I used no cover-words.

I know very little about you, Mr. Lyons, when all is said and done, probably a good deal less than you know about me; for I never desired to enter the nasty business of name-calling, raking out the past, and trying to prove who was right and who was wrong. Frankly, I didn't give a damn. The past is done; my own life and work and dreams are of the future. A long time ago, you went through the experience you relate in your letter, but the world did not sit still for the generation since then.

I might say to you, Mr. Lyons, isn't it high time you looked about you? Like myself, you might find that a refusal to face all the facts can only be hurtful and destructive in the end.

I do not defend the Communist Party, Mr. Lyons. Today, it is more important to judge it fairly and objectively than to attack it or defend it. It set itself high tasks and noble purposes, and if it fell short, failed, made many tragic errors, and now finds itself isolated and troubled, this in itself is history's definition and reward. But I will say this—that the role of American communism was never coupled with dishonor and I wonder whether you and your associates can say as much? Accuse communists of stupidity, rigidity, of a failure to measure up to needs of the times—but do not accuse them ever of cowardice, dishonor, or an unwillingness to fight in a cause because of the dangers involved. The role they played was signed, not only with their honor but very often with their lives—in Spain, in World War II, and here at home. They did not lessen the best tradition of America.

Mr. Lyons, I do say this to you. Show me a fact, show me proof, show me reality, and I will accept it. Can you answer the same? Will you re-examine the evidence in the cheap and tawdry frame-up of American communists and non-communist radicals that began ten years ago? Will you have the courage to say that these men and women never conspired to overthrow the government of the United States by force and violence? You know that as well as I do, and so do your colleagues. Will you state publicly that there is a difference between pigheadedness and treason? Perhaps there are other definitions and boundaries to the world of free men than yours.

I don't raise this to provoke or anger you; I raise it because today and tomorrow, the people of good will in this land must join together to defend it, to cherish it, and to guard the gains of the past that made America a fine thing in the eyes of mankind. It was not the American communists and radicals who built among the people of the world distrust, fear, and so often hatred of America. It was the atom kings who did that, the madmen who knew only one future and one goal—war! No it is not the American communists who are steadily exploding hydrogen bombs in the Pacific, poisoning the atmosphere and the future too; it is not the American left who nourish the

the Improvement of Housing for Tenants and Business.

Jack asked Lebwahl if there couldn't be some "tightening up on the sponsors" in connection with "this human side" of relocation. To this Lebwahl said glibly that the Committee "has always been aware

malignant dope racket, who print the torrents of vicious comic books and sex magazines, who build bombers instead of schools, who kill children with defective vaccines, who nurture hatred of the Negro people, who debase our culture, who are attempting to match the wickedness of a Stalin with a less bloody type of terror and intimidation.

Shall I give up the struggle against the one because the other is exposed and indicted? Shall I join the effort to drive America toward the past because the Soviet Union is moving toward the future? And because there is more freedom here than in Russia, shall I strive to reverse the situation? Does that make sense, Mr. Lyons?

As you say in your letter to me, no one dictated the column you refer to. I wrote it because I was angry, heartsick, and filled with contempt and disgust for what wicked and cowardly men had done to a splendid cause—and also anger at myself that I kept silent when I should have spoken out. But no one forced me to keep silent. I take no orders from the Communist Party; I take no orders from the Kremlin. The only virtue I can claim is honesty—so far as any man can make such a claim and attempt to live by it.

You see, Mr. Lyons, there is nothing sacred about the Communist Party; if its time is finished, it will go, and perhaps others in the future will judge it better than you or I could. But there is something deeply sacred about man's age-long struggle against oppression and wrong. That must not be betrayed, must not be hampered—because it is the living soul of mankind, his common hope for the future, his legacy to his children and their children and their children's children.

There is my answer to you—written, I hope, not less sincerely than your address to me. I have said a lot of things that I would have hesitated to say under other circumstances, but I think they are just as well said. I could not answer you without saying them. I have no desire for you to take them personally, for I do not know you personally, only by reputation. I also wish to thank you for offering me this opportunity for argument, for out of such frank and public argument, many things are clarified and sometimes even new truths arrived at.

Sincerely yours,
HOWARD FAST.

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