Trump is Building the Blue Scare

Transcript from an Episode of the Ezra Klein Show

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In the hours and days after Charlie Kirk's murder, there was a discussion on social media about whether this would be America's Reichstag fire — a reference to the fire that was a rationale for Hitler's crackdown on political freedom in Germany.

Many of us were worried hearing that, and I think what we've seen since suggests the fears were right. But the analogy was wrong. We should have been looking closer to home. This isn't a Reichstag fire. This is more like the Red Scare.

We often think of the Red Scare in terms of McCarthyism — named for Senator Joseph McCarthy, its most enthusiastic and effective practitioner. But it was a lot more than that.

The Red Scare's basic structure was to define a political enemy that could not be compromised with. The point was to use that charge — that this enemy was everywhere, that it posed an existential threat to America, that its tentacles had to be chopped off everywhere they could be found to go after a very wide swath of your political opponents. To do so using state power. To do so using cultural power. To do so by intimidating employers.

What we are seeing now is a Blue Scare. In this, the Trump administration is not even being remotely subtle about what it intends — how wide a net they want the Blue Scare to cast. Just listen to Vice President JD Vance:

Archived clip of JD Vance:

We're trying to figure out how to prevent this festering violence that you see on the far left from becoming even more and more mainstream. A lot of people are very worried about how we got here in the first place. And you have the crazies on the far left who are saying: Oh, Stephen Miller and JD Vance, they're going to go after constitutionally protected speech. No, no. We're going to go after the N.G.O. network that foments, facilitates and engages in violence.

But the Red Scare took decades to build. At its heart, it had a genuine foreign adversary and real domestic espionage. The Blue Scare isn't being built with the same care or attention or effort at creating political consensus.

The Trump administration, as it often does, is speed-running the project. It took them mere days to get to Jimmy Kimmel.

But to see where they might go, to see what they might try to do, we need to look at where America was not all that long ago.

Corey Robin is a political theorist at Brooklyn College. He's an expert on McCarthyism, as well as the author of the book "The Reactionary Mind," which is, in my opinion, one of the most insightful books you can read on the Trumpist right and what is behind it.

Ezra Klein: Corey Robin, welcome to the show.

Corey Robin: Thanks for having me.

Let's begin here. What was the Red Scare?

There were actually two Red Scares in America. The first one was in 1919, 1920. And that was an intensive government assault on a group of left-wing anarchists, Socialists. Many of them were immigrants and radicals. It was centered around something called the Palmer Raids, during which thousands were arrested and hundreds were deported.

The second Red Scare is what we oftentimes call McCarthyism. That was much longer and far more comprehensive, involving a far greater range of people and ideologies and movements. I would argue it had a much more profound and long-term effect on American political culture.

Let's talk about the first — because the Palmer Raids feel very relevant in this moment. Can you talk about what they were and what triggered them?

It was a really intense but fairly brief episode of political repression, triggered by this combination of ambient fear and anxiety rooted in real things — it was not just hallucinatory. There was a series of bombings that happened on some fairly influential figures. I think in fact there was a bombing attempt or actual bomb attack on Mitchell Palmer, who was the attorney general for the Woodrow Wilson administration.

This was coming off a wave of fairly intense left-wing activity. There was a fairly robust Socialist Party. The Bolshevik Revolution had just happened. There were labor unions chomping at the bit coming out of World War I. So there was a whole bunch of activity.

And the government decided to clamp down upon that and rounded up people, including — most famously — Emma Goldman, who was deported in something called the Soviet Ark. She was on a boat with a bunch of other radicals and sent back to Russia, where she had been born.

It gets at something that I have been worried about — and that I see a symmetry with — in this moment.

You often have profound periods of repression, of state-sponsored violence that pick up on maybe something people had wanted to do before, but it's triggered by genuinely real violence — by assassination attempts, by bombing attempts — that are there in that moment. And then there's a huge ideological project in response.

Absolutely. And in fact, I would argue that most political repression has those features. I think sometimes people on the left and liberals and centrists tend to treat political repression as if it's purely a hallucinatory response to fantasized enemies.

And that's rarely the case. There are oftentimes real stakes. There can be real acts of violence — as there were. There can be real challenges to the ruling order and the political regime.

But you are right that the actors who want to do something about that are oftentimes waiting for what we would call a pretextual moment. And then everything gets thrown in but the kitchen sink as governments respond to that.

I want to pick up on the way the world changes in between the first and second Red Scare. The first one is 1919, 1920, before World War II, before, in many ways, Communism goes on an international march.

I was reading Clay Risen's excellent book "Red Scare," which taught me a lot. And one of the points he makes in that book is that we look back on the Red Scare mainly in the dimensions in which it was a wild overreaction or an act of repression.

But to understand it, you have to understand the ways in which Communism was alive and growing. There were actual fronts in America, and there were fears that there could be takeovers.

Give me a little bit of that texture.

Communism really was on the forward march. Particularly in the 1930s and the 1940s, as the battle against fascism got going, Communists were in the forefront of that battle. And Communists came out of 1945 with a tremendous amount of stature.

I was just reading this book by the German writer Walter Kempowski about four days at the end of World War II, and it's based on diaries and memoirs. The love that American soldiers had for Soviet soldiers — you really feel that there had been a real war fought, and there was a real sense

of camaraderie between them. So Communism had been building.

And then also in the United States: As opposed to 1919, when those parties were much smaller, and they were concentrated in immigrant, urban communities, Communism had become, as it was famously said in the '30s and '40s, "20th-century Americanism." Communist Party members were part of the federal government under Roosevelt. Cultural workers became really big parts of Hollywood and the cultural industries.

You had some in the universities, and most importantly in the labor unions. And most of these people, I think historians would agree, were idealistic and progressive coalition actors. They were a really important part of the New Deal, which is very important for us to understand what follows.

But there were certainly very high-level members of the Communist Party who were also spying for the Soviet Union.

And so right there, you immediately have the problem: You've got a party and a movement and a group of people that have really become integrated into mainstream American life and its culture, in ways that we would find very hard to imagine today.

And yet part of that party is also allied to what immediately following 1945 is going to become the big enemy of the United States. And that is a recipe for disaster.

So you have in this period the growing strength of a number of emancipatory movements.

You have labor unions, you have the desegregation and Civil Rights movements. You have a movement for gender equality. You have, in a much more nascent way, a movement for sexual equality, for rights for gay and lesbian men and women.

And the Communists, the Socialists, are sort of two things at once. There's, on the one hand, a group of people with a commitment to more leftist and radical politics, which are braided into these movements for obvious reasons and who are actual political allies.

And then it's connected. You have these party structures, some of them explicitly Communist parties, some of them fronts that really are trying to take orders from Moscow. That's not fake. They're trying to do what they think the party in the Soviet Union wants them to do.

And it's in this ambiguity between the two — the ways that touching a normal political reform movement also might mean

touching a movement allied to the Soviet Union — that you get the raw material for what becomes the second Red Scare.

Before we get to that, which is both more ambiguous, but more explosive, we also have the question of actual espionage and spying.

Yes, this is the other big thing.

That's really important because in many ways, that's the crown jewel of the right-wing's attack. And it's the crown jewel because it's real. It's not fake. There were people who were very closely tied with the Communist Party and who were in the Communist Party who were doing actual spying and espionage at very high levels.

There are nuclear secrets smuggled out of the United States that accelerate the Soviet Union's development of an atomic weapon, which is considered a huge loss in the Cold War.

Absolutely. And also diplomacy at Yalta — there are people who are fairly high up in the Roosevelt administration who know about what's going on there, who were also linked with the party and passing secrets. So it's real stuff. And I think we do a disservice to try to pretend like that wasn't the case, because that was part of the tragedy of the whole moment.

But then you have what you were just talking about, which is: To what extent was the Communist Party really taking orders from the Soviet Union about its political line? And I think historians are much more uncertain about how to answer that.

We have to be really careful because there are a lot of times when the Communist Party is pursuing not just good, emancipatory things but really good coalition politics, really building bridges between different groups. Sometimes the Soviet Union was in favor of that. Sometimes it wasn't. But there it gets much trickier.

The really important thing about this is less about the Red Scare and more about the internal division it creates on the left, the internal suspicion and the internal sense of betrayal that some people feel. They feel like: Wait a minute. When you're speaking to me, are you speaking to me as a good left-winger — or are you taking dictation from somebody else?

That's where this atmosphere of suspicion and recrimination really becomes difficult and has some lessons for us today. Not in terms of people taking dictation from a foreign power — but that atmosphere of mutual distrust among people who are allies. It's poison. It becomes a real problem and makes you very vulnerable.

Tell me a little bit about Alger Hiss.

Alger Hiss was a WASPy, blue-blooded government official. He had gone to Harvard Law School. I think he had clerked for Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., the Supreme Court justice. And he became a fairly high-up figure in the Agriculture Department.

In many ways, he was a representative figure of what we're talking about in D.C. It was a very left-wing city. It had a very left-wing culture. And the Communist Party was a big part of that. He was part of that milieu and got involved in what became exposed as a spy ring, involving a man named Whittaker Chambers, a kind of only-in-America type of figure.

He was a very troubled, very interesting, very mournful figure, who was the opposite, in a way, of Hiss. Just as a character study, Hiss was very good looking, he was very suave, he was very tall, he was very slender. Chambers was a mess, and he looked like a mess.

Chambers was a spy. And Alger Hiss passed him a series of papers for his handlers to take back to the Soviet Union.

I think the significance is less the specifics of what was going on than how this became — I don't know how you would even describe it today. Everything from Charlie Kirk to O.J. Simpson — it was a cultural event.

Also, there's the House Un-American Activities Committee, which starts up before McCarthy becomes a significant figure. I believe the first televised congressional hearings are this Chambers-Hiss showdown.

When you read back into this, it's so hard to put yourself in the mind-set of what it all is. The Agriculture Department is a much bigger deal in that period of American life than it is today. Not that it's a small thing today, but there were way more farmers then.

And Hiss goes on to be a top aide to Dean Acheson, who was the absolute elite of the elite on the foreign policy side of things.

It's not quite like if Jake Sullivan or, on the right, maybe Stephen Miller turned out to be a spy for the Chinese Communist Party. But it's maybe one step below that.

Hiss was a scion of the American establishment. He really was a figure.

I'm glad you brought up the Agriculture Department because Henry Wallace — who ended up being F.D.R.'s vice president — comes out of the Agriculture Department. So there's a real sense that he is from the establishment, but he's part of the American grain.

And this does a lot of things. But one of the things is it really

creates a sense: Well, if it could have been him, then you can't discount it being anybody.

What are the tools that are being used in this period of the Red Scare?

Let's just start with that. This is really a larger lesson about political repression in America — both what's different and what's similar.

McCarthyism — that Red Scare — was not particularly a violent affair. There were not really that many people, comparatively speaking, who went to jail. There were not that many people who were deported if you compare it with the first Red Scare. But what you did have is roughly 20 percent to 40 percent of the American work force subject to surveillance and investigations and firings for their beliefs and activities.

I'm glad you were using the language of the Red Scare as opposed to McCarthyism, because when we say McCarthyism, people really think about Joe McCarthy. Nobody had ever even heard of him, really until 1950, when he comes on the scene.

The Red Scare happens much earlier. It really starts in 1946, and it is comprehensive. First and foremost, at the level of the government, you have to look at the F.B.I. As it turns out, the F.B.I. was gathering surveillance and information and passing it up the food chain. Then it goes to higher levels of the executive branch.

And that leads to the second dimension of the Red Scare, which is the purge of the civil service. It begins around 1947. We're not talking about figures like Hiss. We're really talking about people who work in Washington, in the post office and in a whole range of positions — you know, the government has gotten big — and who are members of the Communist Party. The parents of Carl Bernstein, the great journalist, were Communists. And the government starts getting rid of them as a security threat.

There are hearings, and there is bureaucracy. It's not just random and arbitrary terror, which is an important thing to emphasize. It's a very bureaucratic, procedural mechanism. And it doesn't just get rid of around 10,000 members of the civil service, but it also creates an atmosphere.

Think of what happened recently with DOGE. It's not nearly as scattershot, but it has a chilling effect. So that's the second part.

Then you have congressional hearings, which we've alluded to. There's HUAC, the House Un-American Activities Committee. There's McCarthy's committee and several other committees in the Senate. These are very high-profile media publicity events where they're getting fed information from

the F.B.I. — often confidential information where you can't confront your accuser because it's not a court of law, but it is a court of public opinion.

And this gets us to another level of McCarthyism: How you perform, what you do before these hearings if you're testifying, then goes to your employer. This becomes very famous in Hollywood with people who are either willing to testify, are not willing to testify, are willing to testify about themselves, are not willing to name names about other people. There's a whole thing there. And employers start firing people who are suspect.

I've just talked about maybe one-tenth of what the Red Scare was. But it's important.

But let me hold on the one-tenth for a minute because there's something about the Hollywood dimension of it that I think is important for thinking about now.

So you have this group of screenwriters who are called up. Screenwriters in Hollywood at this time are probably the most left-wing of the Hollywood machine. And some of them were involved in Communist or Communist-funded organizations. Some of them are just more left-wing. But they're a big cause célèbre, and Hollywood rallies around them.

It's pretty amazing in retrospect how quickly Hollywood, with all of its cultural power, falls. They have these hearings — they're kind of a fiasco. And the Motion Picture Association, or whatever it's called then, basically agrees to a kind of soft blacklist to codes of what sort of movies can get released. Ayn Rand writes a guide to what should be in movies — you shouldn't be valorizing the working man. It reshapes the content of movies.

I think this is one of the very scary parts. They don't pass a law telling Hollywood what to do. They go after a couple of screenwriters — and then Hollywood collapses.

And the thing about that self-censorship is that over time, as anybody who has ever been in an institution knows, you do things initially under this threat of coercion, and then over time you start inhabiting the role.

In Hollywood, you see a version of this writ large. There was a very high profile set of hearings. And just to put some meat on those bones about how Hollywood rallies on behalf of these many Communist screenwriters: They form something called the Hollywood Committee for the First Amendment, and they go to D.C. It's people like Gene Kelly, Lauren Bacall, Humphrey Bogart, and there's a beautiful picture of them marching on the Capitol: We

stand for American values. We're the true patriots. We believe in the First Amendment.

And then as you say, very quickly, Hollywood crumbles. The mobilization just fails. The people with economic power in Hollywood just start getting very nervous. There are these kinds of freelance forces out there. There's the famous grocer from Syracuse, N.Y. who won't put products on his shelves if he finds out that the networks or other cultural institutions are putting on advertisements for those products.

There's a kind of reverberation that starts extending out there where people feel like there's going to be some real economic bottom-line consequences if we pursue this route.

For me, the heartbreaking icing on the top of that cake is Humphrey Bogart, who rallied to defend the First Amendment, whom we all know because of "Casablanca" — the great hero of: Nobody, not even the Nazis, are going to push me around. He's told by Ed Sullivan, who's a really good friend of his: What you did there in D.C. is not going over well. You're losing your audience share — whatever the metrics are.

And Bogart gives a very famous interview — I think it was with Look magazine — and he says: I don't know what I was doing. I'm a dope. Let the big shots handle that. I'm just an ordinary schmo kind of a thing. It's just the exact opposite, and he ends his career with that hanging over him.

And as you said, this is all very fast. But there are a lot of little steps — as we've seen in the last couple days — that can happen within 24 hours. Back then it was probably a couple of months, but a very fast turnaround.

Can you give me some examples of how that changed Hollywood? What are the kinds of movies it made before that it didn't make after? What kind of themes got dropped? How did that actually change the culture people consumed?

You have some more overtly political films in the early 1940s, such as "The Grapes of Wrath." Sort of social justice films. You had "Gentleman's Agreement," which was about antisemitism. Even screwball comedy — a lot of it was done by people like Ring Lardner, who were Communists and had strong social content. A lot of that kind of disappears. And then you get "How to Marry a Millionaire," which is a wonderful movie, but very different.

You still have some wonderful films. There's an inward turn. There's more psychological interiority at the exclusion of the social. And then you also have the embrace of fluff.

We have kept Joseph McCarthy lurking on the edge of this

conversation. Tell me about him.

He was a Republican senator from Wisconsin. He had been, I wouldn't say a war hero, but he had fought in World War II, and he was elected in the wake of World War II.

This is a return moment for the Republican Party. They had been really kept out of Congress from 1932 to 1946. They take back the House, and he gets elected to the Senate. And in 1950 he makes this famous speech at Wheeling, W.Va., where he says that he has in his hands a list of — and the numbers keep changing — but it was 205 card-carrying members of the Communist Party in the State Department.

Can I note one thing?

Sure.

I had not understood — and again, I'm taking this from Clay Risen's book — that in 1948 Truman unexpectedly beats Thomas Dewey. Truman had been quite unpopular. He was an underdog going into that election. And the Republican Party's lesson from that is Dewey did not use anti-Communism as an issue.

And the power structure of the Republican Party prior to McCarthy emerging in this way had taken the lesson: We are not going to make that mistake again. We are going to beat the hell out of the Democrats on Communism. And so the Republican Party was ready for McCarthyism.

Yes. Just a slight footnote to that: In 1946, when the Republicans did take back the House, they were doing trial runs. That's when Richard Nixon is elected famously on a Red-baiting campaign. There are parts of the Republican Party that are trying it out. But you're absolutely right: In 1948, Thomas Dewey represented a kind of internationalist wing of the party —

Yes, like Mitt Romney — genteel Republicanism.

I would say even more far more liberal than Mitt Romney, actually.

I just mean in the sense that one of the lessons they take from him is: We tried playing it nicely.

Absolutely. So someone like McCarthy in 1950 is a very successful practitioner of putting the Democrats on their heels. And the important thing to remember about McCarthy is that the Republican Party needed him, they wanted him, and they used him. There were some Republicans who stood up to him. Margaret Chase Smith most famously.

But he was very useful to the party. He immediately got out on the stump during the 1950 midterm elections. And there was a big faction of the

Republican Party, including the minority leader — we're not talking about a kind of radical right-wing faction but the center of the party — that really depended upon him for electoral purposes: for framing the attack, for putting the Democrats on their back feet.

But the important thing I wanted to stress was that between 1946 and 1950, anti-Communism was a Democratic issue. So there are a lot of institutions that are aligned with the Democratic Party that have been engaged with this.

And then suddenly, McCarthy emerges and finds a way of turning what they had been doing into their vulnerability.

I think this is so important, and I think it's a really hard thing to throw your mind back into because the parties aren't polarized and ideologically distinct in the way they are today.

Joseph Kennedy Jr. is a major McCarthy supporter. McCarthy spends many, many weekends at the Kennedy compound. Robert F. Kennedy is on McCarthy's staff. The House Un-American Activities Committee is, at times, led by a Democratic chairman.

So you have both. You have liberal Republicans who actually do challenge McCarthy and end up in trouble for it. You do have liberal Democrats who often lose in challenging McCarthy. They lose primaries, they lose elections.

But it's not highly structured as a Republican-Democratic issue in the way things typically are now.

Absolutely. You alluded to this, but of course, Southern Democrats were a big part of the Red Scare.

And if I could just bring in an additional element of that, you ask: Why were they so anti-Communist?

Well, of course, the Communist Party and left-wing unions had really made it a project, starting in the 1930s. And, in fact, F.D.R. supports this. In 1938, he goes to the South because they believe that until we organize the South with labor unions and the right to vote for African Americans, we can't complete the New Deal. It's going to be stillborn.

This is a very high-level project, and you need organizers to do this. And there are these organizers who go in, and Southern Democrats do not like this.

As we're saying: It's not just a partisan thing. It really goes to the heart of a social cleavage in a big part of the country. There are real stakes for both sides in winning that battle.

This seems also to get at the reason this becomes so uniting on the right. And I mean here the ideological right, not just the Republican Party.

There's an effort to paint every social movement they don't like — and this goes back to this ambiguity — as a Communist plot to take over America. Racial integration: Communist plot to take over America. Labor unions and the elevation of the working man: a Communist plot. Gender equality, sexual equality: a Communist plot.

And so you have a lot of purges of people whose real sin is working on behalf of these issues that today we look back on as obvious — the emancipatory path of American politics, the arc bending toward justice.

But people lose their jobs. People are investigated based on the effort to paint all of these as Communist plots.

There was a woman named Dorothy Bailey, who was a government worker, a Black woman. She has to go through an investigation. She's named as a Communist. And she's asked a bunch of questions.

One of the questions she is asked is: Do you believe in desegregating the blood supply of the Red Cross?

And I remember when I was in my first year of graduate school or second year of graduate school reading this, just very naive and thinking: What in the world are they talking about?

It's 1950, 1951. The battle over desegregation is on and about to get much, much bigger. And you have something called the one-drop rule in this country that says you're Black if you have one drop of Black blood. The last thing you want to do — if you believe in all of those things — is to have blood from a Black person going into the bloodstream of a white person.

And the Communist Party, as part of its organizing, very wisely picked this as a battle because it's so outrageous. The irony that's still very hard for me to get my head wrapped around is that it then becomes a question that you're asked by a government or a private inquisitor.

And you say: Why are they asked that question? Well, because many people will deny that they're part of the Communist Party, or they'll say they're no longer part of the Communist Party. And then the question is: Well, how do you determine if they're really a Communist or not? They use what they call the duck test: If it looks like a duck, if it quacks like a duck, it's a duck.

It begins to get at not just the moral dimension of all of this but the cultural politics. You can think of a range of issues now that we completely take for granted that were part of this left-wing front of moral common sense. Like: This is what good people believe in.

It was very present in Hollywood. It was very present in parts of the academy. It was very present in parts of the media. And it goes back to that point you made at the very beginning, which is: This wasn't a hallucination on their part. There were Communists, they were involved in these ideas, there were liberals allied with them, the ground between them was kind of murky. And you had both conservative Democrats and Republicans who — for material, ideological and electoral reasons — hated it. It was really a kind of civil war.

Tell me about the Lavender Scare.

So in the 1930s — D.C. had always been a kind of gay city. It was a place where gays and lesbians could kind of exist. But particularly with the New Deal in the 1930s, you have people coming from all across the country, and many of them joined the administration.

You also have — and this is a really important part — a lot of women coming to D.C. and starting to get positions of power in government. Most famously, Frances Perkins, the secretary of labor. But there were many, many people beneath her. Eleanor Roosevelt is a fixture in this community.

So they created a culture that is associated with the New Deal — of increasing gender equality, or at least increasing representation of women in public spaces and political spaces. And also this increasing gay subculture that was a part of it.

There's one other back story here, which is in espionage and counterespionage circles, finding out if somebody was gay was a really good weapon because you could use it as blackmail.

The security apparatus, long before McCarthy and all those guys, wants to make sure that they know people's sexual orientation, because if they're gay, they're vulnerable to spying for the Soviet Union.

But then as we get closer to McCarthy — you see hints of this in Alger Hiss — there is this notion that these guys are Commies and liberals and pinkos — they're queer.

Dean Acheson, with his fancy pants and his mustache — he's a little bit too concerned about how he looks and his clothes. And it has tremendously devastating consequences.

Archival clip of Joseph McCarthy:

He said the State Department is now staffed with good, loyal, clean living Americans. Well, I don't quite know what his conception of clean-living Americans happens to be, but since he made that statement, 54 individuals who had this unusual state department affliction — homosexuals — were allowed to resign.

What had been a limited security espionage thing becomes a real purge of the government. And it really gets going after 1950. So at that point the statistic is that every day a Communist is being arrested or kicked out of the government — but also a gay person is being kicked out of the government.

This is what blew me away: Twenty-five percent of McCarthy's fan mail was about security threats; 75 percent of it — which is a big part — was about what they called sexual depravity.

I think one of the things I'm trying to draw out in all of this is that you end up with this amorphous omnithreat. Communism is its heart, but maybe it's gay people in government and the sexual and gender revolution that it's speaking about or signaling. Maybe it's racial integration or labor unions. Maybe it's the New Deal itself.

But the turning of it all into a plot, a threat, a kind of insidious force can be used to corrupt any other part of it — I think it's very core to the politics. And it's also, as best I can tell, very core to how it maintains momentum. Because it's hard to find all these Communists — there actually aren't that many of them — so McCarthy begins to go after gay people, right?

Like you can keep changing the subject, and things are linked to each other, even if they're not actually the same or those links aren't even important.

Yes. What was going on there in the sort of Red Scare imagination is the conversion of politics into conspiratorial plots. It's really important to put both of those pieces together the way you just did, because I think oftentimes when we look back on this, it's easy to say: I'm not a conspiracy thinker. I'm against conspiracies. I don't think like that and so on and so forth.

But what makes conspiracies powerful, particularly in a moment like that, is: It's not making [expletive] up. Yes, it's cartoonish, and yes, it's simplifying, but it has real raw material to work with. And of course for the people who are battling that Red Scare and pursuing it, it also gives them a sense of: If we could get to the heart of that plot, we can stop all this.

It's like Archimedes' lever: Give me a lever, and I'll move the world. We

just have to find that. J. Edgar Hoover makes a very famous statement about how people say: Oh, the Communist Party, there's only X number of people.

And he said: Well, look at the numbers during the Bolshevik Revolution. It wasn't that different.

He's not wrong, actually. [**Chuckles.**]

Yes. But it's not a plot. That's not how it worked. I think many leftists would think: Would that it were so easy! But it's not completely wrong, either.

I think that's a good place to move closer to the present. Let's start before Charlie Kirk is assassinated. Trump wins his second term, and he takes office. How has what you've been seeing in the ideological structure of Trumpism, or the methods that Trumpism has been applying to unfriendly institutions and movements, echoed in this?

How have you been telling that story to yourself as somebody so steeped in the Red Scare?

Let me first start by saying that during the first Trump term, I was part of a fairly small group of people on the left who were very skeptical of a lot of the warnings about authoritarianism, fascism, autocracy and strongman politics.

I think I had a lot of evidence on my side. I wasn't just being ornery. There were many ways in which, compared to, say, George W. Bush — if we're thinking about political repression or transforming institutions — Trump was quite a piddling actor. I know the second Red Scare, I know the labor wars in this country, I know about the battle over abolition. It seemed like Trump was small potatoes. Not just because of the ways he was constrained. It also seemed like: What was the revolution that Trumpism was counteracting? You had nothing like the New Deal, or what we've just been describing. So I was skeptical.

What shook me out of this was the assault on government workers and the firings. That was the first thing. For me, employment sanctions are always the canary in the coal mine. There's a long history of it. It's really the way a lot of American political repression has happened. W.E.B. Du Bois, in "Black Reconstruction in America," says it's employment sanctions that is the driving engine during this very violent moment against Black people.

So anybody with that kind of antenna, you didn't see that really in the first term. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Civil society rallied against Trump and resisted in all these ways.

Then, all of a sudden, you see these mass firings happening. There's all kinds of reasons to worry about that if you care about climate change. And a lot of people were talking about all those things, but I was thinking about it instantaneously as McCarthyism.

The other thing was, of course, the capitulation of law firms and universities. And the record of elites and institutions, unfortunately, is not so great. So seeing those institutions start capitulating, often to financial threats. Not: We're going to put you in jail. But: We're going to take away your funding.

Americans have a weird attitude toward money. On the one hand, it's the most important thing in America. And on the other hand, we have this very moralistic idea: Well, if it's just money, stand up to the [expletive]!

And it's like: Could we put these two worlds together? [Laughs.]

The economy is a medium of political coercion in this country. It always has been. Trump didn't invent that.

I want to pick up on something you said because it speaks to your book "The Reactionary Mind," which I love. I've read it twice. And I think it describes second-term Trump much better than first-term Trump.

One of your big points in "The Reactionary Mind" is that we often think of conservatism as conserving. But it's also a movement that reacts to threats to power and to the social order.

You said that one reason you took first-term Trump less seriously as a threat was that there wasn't a revolutionary emancipatory movement that it was in reaction against, at least as you saw it.

I would say that changes between 2016 and 2024, at least at a cultural level. You have a racial reckoning not only but particularly after George Floyd's murder. You have the #MeToo movement. You have a big move on gender expression and gender rights around trans issues, in particular.

I actually think Covid and the professional classes are somehow very relevant here — the sense that cultural power is being exerted there. So that's actually a lot of something to react against.

And Trump comes back to office with a very different coalition. A coalition that now includes Elon Musk, includes much of Silicon Valley and the tech platforms and the people in charge of them. A coalition that includes a very big gender backlash behind it. That includes comedians like Joe Rogan and Theo Von. The centers of

power that are cultural, that are atmospheric, that actually have a lot of money, that have control of attention. It includes R.F.K. Jr. and his coalition, which is not insignificant.

In Trump's 2024 election, he has a much higher share of the Black vote, and particularly Black men, than he did in 2016. He does very well among Hispanic voters.

The social order becomes very liquid in this moment.

It's interesting because I think we spent a lot of time in the first Trump administration — or I certainly did — and we would say to people: What is it?

People talk about demographic change and so on. But I kept saying: You know, one of the big things was racial —

That's what I thought it was. Demographic change.

Yes, exactly. It's not that doesn't create some anxiety. Of course, it does.

But again, historically speaking, it wasn't just demographic change. You needed something more than that.

And also I was thinking on racial equality, the metrics were actually going the other way. So it was like the right had won that battle —

Although they didn't feel that way around Obama.

It's true that they didn't feel that way. But I don't think that matters as much, because I think the reality was they might not have felt that way, but they weren't able to do much with the feeling that they had. They needed some raw material to work with.

And I think you've just begun to lay out some of the raw material that they began to get between 2016 and 2024.

The thing that really concretized this for me, that brought it all together, was an interview with Marc Andreessen in The New York Times.

With my colleague Ross Douthat.

It was an excellent interview. And he talks about what it was like to have his employees start coming back to work after the initial shutdown.

Archived clip of Marc Andreessen:

Covid was a giant radicalizing moment. And at that point, we had lived through eight years of what was increasingly clearly a social revolution. Very clearly, companies are basically being hijacked to be engines of social change, social revolution. The employee base is going feral. There were cases in the Trump era — there were multiple companies I know that felt like they were hours away from full-blown violent riots on their own campuses by their own employees.

He was like a father whose teenage kids were rebelling against him.

Yes, he talks about how at the companies where he knew the C.E.O.s very well, and he was invested, feeling like on any given day the employees might "riot" — I think that was the term he used.

Yes: They're speaking up, they're demanding different power.

I should have brought this into that initial list, because I think the feeling among many of these people was that all of a sudden the employees had all the power.

Yes!

They were getting people fired, they were demanding that workplaces made political statements. Like: Who was really in charge here?

Who was in charge? Any union organizer will always tell you the fundamental battle in any union drive is not about the profit or bottom line, it's who is in charge of the workplace.

What's important about all this is that it brings together all these cultural issues because a lot of these younger employees were talking about trans rights. They were talking about #MeToo. They were talking about Black Lives Matter.

So those aren't just floaters out there in the culture. They're embodied in workers who are fighting with you about the direction of the workplace. And for any employer, when that starts happening, your mind starts racing very fast.

And this is kind of similar to the anti-Communism thing that we were just talking about, because it's not just fantasy on the part of an employer who thinks: We could be losing control.

They sometimes are losing control. And that has implications for all sorts of things.

You have a whole thing that conservatism correctly understands the reality of political loss and stature loss — that conservatives are often right that they are losing things.

Yes. I think this is something the left and liberals and centrists — everybody has a very hard time coming to terms with this. We'd like to think that these people are just crazy. That they're just making stuff up. That they're liars. But the truth of the matter is, it's kind of hard to create a politically repressive social movement out of nothing. I wouldn't say they were as fundamental as some of the stuff we saw in the 1930s or '40s, or in

the ’60s and ’70s. But there were tremors, let’s say.

Another thing that Paul Krugman just wrote about recently in terms of gender equality is that it’s not so much about women entering the work force. First of all, Black women and women of color have been in the work force for forever. But in the ’40s, you do see increasing numbers of women coming into the work force.

Then starting in the ’80s and ’90s, you see younger women increasingly looking for careers. But it’s the kinds of jobs that they’re looking for. They’re looking for jobs that white men have traditionally had: C.E.O.s, professors, filmmakers, editors of The New York Times, the whole nine yards. And it gets very zero sum very fast.

So I do think that conservatives understand this, and people on the left either don’t understand it or try to pretend it away. You’re sort of entering into a war disarming yourself. You just don’t quite understand the stakes.

You’re denying the other side’s subjective reality out of which they will power their politics. I have the experience that I think that many people on the left do, where I hear some of these complaints, and I think they’re ridiculous.

But the level of radicalization around feeling that Twitter was not giving your work enough promotion, that you weren’t allowed to spread — what certainly seemed to many experts — vaccine misinformation.

The sort of raw material of the movies is all diverse now: We’re going to make Thor in Marvel Comics into a woman, we’re going to make Captain America into a Black man. Like, who cares? It’s a comic book.

But people care. And I’m not saying that it is wrong to do that. I want to be very clear. But it is motivating to do that.

You have a line in “The Reactionary Mind” where you say that conservatives often are “the left’s best students.” Tell me about that.

I started teaching about conservatism in the first or second Bush administration. I started reading these texts. I started with Edmund Burke, the father of the whole thing. He hates the Jacobins. He hates the French Revolution. He hates all of it. And one of the things that shocked me is he says over and over and over again that in their commitment, in their fidelity, in their vision, in their execution, they’re our superiors.

There is a real, grudging respect for what this rabble has been able to

accomplish. And over the years, you see this recur throughout history. You see increasingly elaborate attempts to learn from the left.

Now sometimes this is very kind of strategic and instrumental. David Horowitz had been on the left and then moved to the right. He was a big activist against universities, and he said: Let's just use all the language the left on the campus is using and just turn it against them. And say: You're the ones engaging in hate speech. You're doing this, you're doing that. He was very cynical and open about it.

You read Christopher Rufo, and he's explicit about being a student of what he believes the left does. Stephen Miller, in a different way, does the same thing.

There's been this move in the past couple of months to say: Aren't you all the big proponents of free speech? Didn't you just run as opponents of cancel culture and say that you would defend our rights to say anything?

And there's been this effort to tag the right with hypocrisy — to be fair, it's very hypocritical. That's fair play. But I think it actually misses, in a way, what's going on. I think they consciously understand themselves as having learned from what they think the left did — back when they felt the left had control of cultural institutions. Canceling people for things they said, sending online mobs against them, shadow banning, moderating them, using money through Title IX and other things to push universities ideologically.

And now they are supercharging it. And I want to be clear that I am not absolving them of their responsibility for this or saying this is the left's fault. But I really believe that what they understand themselves as doing is a kind of hyper-charged turnabout.

And in some ways, we're in a weaker position — because if we can charge them with hypocrisy, they can charge us with it, too.

Yes. I would like to move it out of the moral register. I think you're making a really important point that everybody needs to understand. But sometimes the language of hypocrisy kind of —

Yes, I agree with you.

But let's just start with a point that I think a lot of the best historians of McCarthyism and the second Red Scare make, which is that part of the apparatus that was used against the Communist Party was developed by the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s.

J. Edgar Hoover was beloved by the Roosevelt administration, which used him to go after its partisan enemies. But also whatever threat there was perceived to be of Nazi saboteurs, allies with the Nazis and so forth.

It's not a question of turnabout is fair play. Governments — you build these bureaucracies; they don't just go away. You know this. You're a student of the administrative state. Bureaucrats are trained.

So the first thing is that a bureaucracy has been built over the years — in part by the Democratic Party, by liberal groups and so forth in universities. But it was just a matter of time that would be turned against them. And I think there were some people on the left who were warning about this from the beginning, and they weren't listened to.

The most dramatic turnaround — I feel it very much at the level of rhetoric, and I've seen this on campuses, among students — is the use of: If you are a critic of Israel, if you oppose the state of Israel, if you're an anti-Zionist — then you're engaging in a form of hate speech.

I've had conversations with students who were considered progressive Obama or Kamala Harris types, and who will say quite sincerely that they're committed to the state of Israel. The weaponized language of victim-identity hate speech — which was very popular, potent and powerful on the left — that speech is a form of harm. Which, in certain instances, it can be — I want to be clear on that. But just the assumption that people say things that make me uncomfortable, that I find offensive, and so on and so forth. Over the last two years, if you want to look at the politically potent and explosive moments where you're seeing the writing on the wall — that was it.

University administrators really were caught with their pants down. They didn't know how to react to this because they were so steeped in that language themselves. Suddenly you have students who are expelled and faculty being investigated.

The truth of the matter is that calling for the destruction, simply saying "I believe in this" — is protected speech.

Some of the things that you were just talking about them doing — the universities — they justified their crackdown in terms of antisemitism — always a very strange rationale for what they were doing. But Trump comes into office with this strange new coalition, and it doesn't have an omnithreat. DOGE was justified as efficiency — as if it were the reincarnation of reinventing government from the Bill Clinton administration.

You can go watch panels of people on the right saying: We have to be honest. This is about ideology. We're trying to take back the administrative state. But it was justified in terms of efficiency and saving money.

You have the attack on the law firms, which isn't really justified by any big argument at all. They just do it. The attack on media outlets is justified by a sense of bias and attacks on Donald Trump.

There isn't a thing uniting it. And it wasn't exactly that it was slowing down. But I would say a month ago, two months ago, my sense of it was that as bad as it was, it wasn't quite holding together. And then Charlie Kirk was assassinated.

Let me ask you this: How have you seen them change what they're saying and what they're doing in the aftermath?

At the level of words — which I'm usually a little skeptical of, but I think in this instance matter — you see the emergence of vengeance as a language. And vengeance is an old language. It goes back to the ancient Greeks and the Bible. It's a very dangerous language. There's a reason the Greeks were terrified of it. Because it has a licensing structure that is extraordinarily permissive, on the one hand. But on the other hand — and this is almost a paradox — it has a very stern moral injunction at the heart of it: You have to take revenge for this loss. And if you don't, it's as if you're committing a second murder yourself. You're not honoring this person.

This is a really terrifying language. It's not a language that's monopolized by the right. There was a wonderful historian, Arno Mayer, who wrote a wonderful book called "The Furies," named after the ancient Greek gods, about the role of vengeance on the left.

It is absolutely terrifying, this sort of holy violence that it seems to authorize, where people are morally empowered to do horrible things that people wouldn't ordinarily feel themselves authorized to do.

Just before I came over here, I saw that The Chronicle of Higher Education is keeping track of how many people have been fired from faculty jobs since the Charlie Kirk murder.

And just one industry.

One industry and voluntary. These are decisions of employers who are just doing this. In an industry, by the way, where you have the most protection of any employee — more protection than you have, Ezra Klein — with tenure and often union rights and so forth.

Hannah Arendt wrote a letter to her mentor Karl Jaspers in the middle of

the McCarthy era. And she said: "Everything melts away like butter under the sun." What she meant was the collapse of the leaders of institutions, of people who, as you were saying about Hollywood, just the day before sounded a little bit more robust.

This murder has galvanized the right for reasons that — like the second Red Scare — are both strategic and sincere. You can see it, and it feels like they're just getting started.

I want to play you a clip of Stephen Miller, who is deputy chief of staff. He was close to Charlie Kirk and seems as much as anybody to be structuring the response here.

Archival clip of Stephen Miller:

With God as my witness, we are going to use every resource we have at the Department of Justice, homeland security and throughout this government to identify, disrupt, dismantle and destroy these networks, and make America safe again for the American people. It will happen, and we will do it in Charlie's name.

"These networks" is the term I want to zoom in on. In that same episode, Vance talks about the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Foundation, The Nation magazine.

Charlie Kirk was murdered by — as best we know — a single gunman making a very, very, very, terrible decision. But what I see happening is an effort to blow this up into a kind of "omnithreat" — that there is this thing called the radical left. It's not just this crazy guy in Utah, it's all the NGOs that support liberal or left-wing causes. It's anybody who, you know, supported liberal judges through George Soros's Open Society Foundations.

I guess the argument is: They created a climate in which this guy got radicalized? But the effort to expand this, to create your threat that links it all together and then crack down on that threat — that feels to me like where we're entering into what I've been thinking about as a Blue Scare.

That feels to me like the symmetry here, the size of the enemy — which I think is something they sort of thought about before. I think bringing in the Ford Foundation is ridiculous. But they've been talking about the N.G.O. network for a long time. And now they have their reason to go after it.

I want to read to you the language of the Smith Act, which was the major legislative tool that was used against the left during the McCarthy era. This

was the way you could bring people up on criminal charges.

What was criminal was: Conspiring with someone else to organize a party or a group, to advocate, teach, or encourage the desirability of the overthrow of the government by force or violence.

What do you notice there? You notice the number of nouns and verbs you have to get through before you get to "violence," right?

And I think it's very relevant to what you just said. It is the identification of a network that can be tied in any way, shape or form to acts of violence.

The flip side of this, which the journalist Ken Klippenstein just posted about, is also that they've come up with a new formula for the lone gunman type, which is "nihilistic violent extremist."

"Nihilistic" is an interesting word choice because it's kind of like anything and everything. So on the one hand, they're identifying this network to go after a whole apparatus that they both believe — and some of them opportunistically believe — but then also this very free-floating signifier of the kinds of individuals who might engage in violent extremism.

Yes. And so the idea is there is no such thing as the individual. The individual is the product of a climate.

Everybody is a vector.

Everybody is a vector. And so, if you're an organization or are someone who works at an organization who maybe said something that is disrespectful to Charlie Kirk or talked about things that you think are the kind of thing that the shooter could have believed, they become fair game.

Absolutely. The precedent I would look to is it oftentimes starts with the employer investigating their own personnel. And those investigations then become a kind of raw database for the authorities. But you can see how in an environment like this, that archive becomes fair game for the Trump administration to demand handing it over and sharing it with other actors. To me, what we're seeing is the elaborate infrastructure — the meeting of rhetoric and institutions and law and the state.

I think that's right. And I think what we're seeing is that being connected to state power in a way the left really did not do in this way.

You just saw it with the Jimmy Kimmel thing, which feels very Red Scare to me. And it comes from the head of the F.C.C. functionally threatening using the F.C.C. power to block a merger.

Yes.

The federal government has a lot of discretionary power, reaching across the entire economy. It funds universities, approves or disapproves mergers, regulates different players and has all kinds of authority to ask for information. If it begins to unleash itself from procedural neutrality, there's very little it can't touch.

So what they seem to me to be doing is that they've been building this for a while, really since starting their second term, they came in and said that the cultural institutions and society were turned against them. That's largely what Project 2025 is about: We are going to use the state to bring them to heel. We're going to break them.

And they were doing that to greater and lesser degrees of effectiveness — but they didn't really have a story. And what they have now is a story mixed with the genuine energy of vengeance. They did know Kirk, and they are really furious. Trump was almost killed by a different assassin's bullet.

So I think the mixture of genuine sincerity, fury and a preexisting ideological project that they had been very systematically figuring out what leverage the federal government has and how they could use it, often in very novel ways — that's coming together now into something new. And I think it is bringing us into a new era. Attorney General Pam Bondi saying that hate speech isn't protected by the Constitution — though she had to walk back this claim a little bit.

We're in something new here — a very fractured mirror of the previous era. But now it's being deployed by a state trying to crush the network that it understands to be its political enemy.

Nancy Mace, the congresswoman from South Carolina — after the murder of Charlie Kirk, she said: "We don't fund hate. We fire it."

You couldn't come up with a more pithy narrative. They're not just going to fire people over this — although they are. They want to crush the institutions that they claim fostered this environment. They have a martyr. They have a cause célèbre.

It's interesting you brought up Trump's assassination attempt, because it almost seems like he was more moved by what happened to Charlie Kirk than what happened to him. It has become emblematic. He's now a figure.

And you see this throughout the history of both right-wing and left-wing movements — they have their martyrs —

I think Trump felt less vulnerable, in a strange way, after his near assassination. I think it scared and shook him. But I also think he came out with this believing: I am chosen by God. I am touched, and I am marked.

And Kirk's killing made them all feel vulnerable. Vulnerability is a very scary emotion.

Yes. Justice Robert Jackson, who was a New Deal Supreme Court appointee and also served as the chief prosecutor at Nuremberg, said: "Security is like liberty in that many are the crimes committed in its name."

Let me flip this because I do think there's a lot of discontinuity here, too. One discontinuity is that leftism, liberalism — or however you want to define the thing they're actually now going after — it's not Communism. It's not on a global march unexpectedly taking over countries. It's not committing espionage on the high levels of the American government. It's also not an alien force trying to alter the country from within — at least not in the eyes of much of the country.

I think that they are very rapidly overreaching. It doesn't make what's about to happen not dangerous. It doesn't mean people are not going to see their lives get destroyed or worse. But the Kimmel suspension was a signal to me. Once you've defined it as Jimmy Kimmel, you've already lost track of what you're going to be able to defend. Because to most people, Jimmy Kimmel does not represent a form of left-wing radicalism. He is milquetoast network comedy. And then you begin to create a nobody-is-safe dynamic — which is what they want to create, but it is also not great politics.

I've been thinking about this from your line when you say that conservatives are often "the left's best students" — the form of the left that Rufo, Miller and others were studying was, in some ways, quite effective for a minute. But it turned out to be politically disastrous, and it overreached almost immediately. It became a thing that Democrats had to run from.

And I wonder if that's a difference between this era and that one: They have a lot of power, but they haven't slowly built a politics that can support this.

You brought up the fact that there's no tie today between the domestic "threat" and any foreign "threat." And that's, of course, true.

But the flip side of that was the Soviet Union. Having to conduct the second Red Scare in light of the ideological challenge it posed throughout the globe forced the right to be careful about how it engaged with its project.

They're very careful to say: We are defending the vital center — as Arthur Schlesinger called it — against the extremes of both.

And you had right-wing organizations on the attorney general's list. J. Edgar Hoover's F.B.I. — despite what the movies tell us — did help break up the Klan in the 1960s. It had to. It was part of this global contestation — particularly in Africa and Asia. And it was disciplined. That's not there anymore.

Henry Farrell, the political scientist at Johns Hopkins, had a great post recently. It's about how regimes need to make it very clear that we're going to reward you if you're with us, and we're going to punish you if you're against us.

And they have to be really consistent about that. There's almost a proto-rule of law element in that reality. And when regimes don't do that — which I think is part of the problem that we're seeing: What does it take to kind of get them off your back? It's not really clear. And what's it going to take to not have people harass you and do all these things? It's not really clear.

That's not always a great position for an authoritarian or pro-authoritarian regime to be in because it means your coalition partners are going to become as uncertain as your enemies are. So on the one hand, it does mean that the right's narrative of a foreign domestic threat is a little bit murkier, but it also means it's a little bit unconstrained by that. Obviously there are still international challenges to the United States, but they're not the same ideological challenges. If anything, the United States seems to following the model of other authoritarian regimes throughout the globe. So that's where I'm just uncertain.

I think we're in the most politically dangerous period of my lifetime. That's at least how I'm experiencing it.

The mistake I made during the first and second term — being steeped in history sometimes isn't such a great thing. You're always looking for parallels. You're looking for discontinuities and all the rest of it.

But the thing is, when you actually go back to Weimar Germany, the thing that everybody sees most clearly among everybody is the idea that: This is all new. We have no idea where this is going. In the historical imagination of today, I've been trying to disentangle myself a little bit from that. Trump has become his own kind of an actor.

I've become very careful about which historians are historically steeped, which commentators I have on. Not because they're wrong, but people get very trapped in their dominant metaphor. If what you know is Russia — it becomes Russia. If what you know is Germany — it becomes Germany. If what you know is fascism — it becomes fascism.

Absolutely.

And those all have light to shed. And they can all create a sense of a story that we already know how it turns out. But we don't.

And I do think your point about the disciplining force of the Soviet Union is real, too. Who ends McCarthyism? It's Eisenhower. And why does the Republican Party nominate Eisenhower rather than Taft? In significant part, what's holding it together is the fight against Communism. And Eisenhower was less of an isolationist and a more credible figure on that.

To me, there's a lesson in that: A lot of people — liberal Democrats, liberal Republicans — challenged McCarthy and lost. What became dangerous for McCarthy was when he really abandoned the center — going after the Army and other institutions — where people just didn't buy it anymore, and then he could be sort of pushed to the margin.

And I think this is tricky. I'm watching people have very different reactions about how to politically respond right now. I don't think any of us really know — and anyone who says they know is lying.

But it's one of my instincts that their abandonment of free speech, their abandonment of due process and their going after people like Kimmel — I think everybody thinks it was bad for Democrats that they lost the comedians. Well, are the comedians so happy about what they see happening right now?

The one place where I think people need to think very carefully about their response and what they want to do is: What kind of coalition can you build against this?

To go to something that you were saying earlier: People get very nervous. There's a lot of political power in people feeling unsettled about where they're going to stand in society and what damage can be done to them. And all of a sudden, the Trump administration is coming for a very wide swath of everyone.

What we were talking about with the Red Scare, it took a long time to build that. The Trump administration is speed-running this — very fast.

This is the scary part of the story: The Second Red Scare succeeded.

Part of what deprived McCarthy of oxygen wasn't just that he went after the military. It was that they had really drummed out — at the level of what their ambitions were, they had succeeded in stopping the New Deal from where it was heading. His electoral returns were diminishing to some degree.

What would you say the damage after the Red Scare had ended did to the left, to the country, to its government and its institutions? And what do you think that tells us about what four years of the Trumpist assault on our government institutions now could do?

The first and most important thing was that there was a nascent, budding movement — one that was bringing together labor rights and civil rights, race and class, and the relationship between African Americans and capitalism. It was a movement being pursued by the Communist Party, by left-wing front groups and left liberals.

The second Red Scare just shut that down. So I would say: To this day, we've never really recovered from that. And we've seen that when we have these arguments that we have about race versus class. This was something that people at the forefront of those movements were thinking hard about —

Why did it shut that down? I don't quite understand.

There was a movement that started with the 1930s but especially in the 1940s — to go into the South and start organizing the South, which at that time was really where the bulk of the African American labor force was.

There was a very clear understanding that if we were going to get things like national health care — which was on the agenda for the Democratic Party — and to achieve these other kinds of expansions, such as including African Americans in the Social Security Act, then you needed to break the "Solid South." You needed to emancipate and enfranchise Black Americans.

But to do that required a lot of sacrifice on the part of labor unions, white workers, white liberals and so forth. And in order to engage in that sacrifice, you had to start making an argument about why standing up for African Americans wasn't just the right thing to do — but the smart thing to do.

And once the second Red Scare was able to break what was known as

Operation Dixie, it effectively left Black Americans on their own. Interestingly, in the 1960s, figures like Bayard Rustin continued efforts to repair that earlier alliance. But it was really broken after that. So I'd say in the field, that was probably the biggest loss.

I think the second one was about foreign policy. There was a group of people in the State Department who were experts on East Asia. These security experts who were on the left were all purged.

There have been a lot of historians who have made the argument that this sets the stage for the disastrous consequences of the Vietnam War — that you just lost a whole body of institutional knowledge that has devastating consequences for the people of Vietnam and for the United States, as well.

The lessons for today are: As we're seeing with the purge of the government, there's a whole body of knowledge that seems to be gleefully being tossed aside. When it comes to climate, vaccines and a whole array of issues — we do not know what the consequences will be.

Always the final question: What are three books you'd recommend to the audience?

There is a translation of Hayim Bialik, who died many years ago, in the last century. He was considered the great Jewish national poet. And he wrote this poem after the Kishinev pogrom, in 1903, called "On the Slaughter." Netanyahu invoked this after Gaza. But there's a translation by a wonderful translator named Peter Cole that's coming out with The New York Review of Books — it's called "On the Slaughter" — that complicates that story and shows what a powerful poet — one who complicates any idea of vengeance in particular. That's one book I'd really recommend.

A second book is Victor Navasky's "Naming Names," which is about the McCarthy era. I recommend it because it's focused on Hollywood and the role of individuals — the choices they made and what the ramifications are. It's a wonderful read that came out around 1980.

The last book is called "Citizen Marx." It's an academic book — the study of Karl Marx by a young political theorist named Bruno Leipold, who's in Britain. And it's the Marx you never knew about. It's Marx as a theorist of freedom, who cared about things like freedom of the press — passionately. His first article is about freedom of the press.

And I think it might be of particular interest to you: He was someone who really cared about this. That was a shock to me — institutional and constitutional design. He was obsessed with the Constitution of the Second French Republic, and all the kinds of things that all of you guys write about.

There's Marx, going all in. And it's 1850, 1851. This isn't young Marx. It's mature Marx.

Corey Robin, thank you very much.

Thank you.