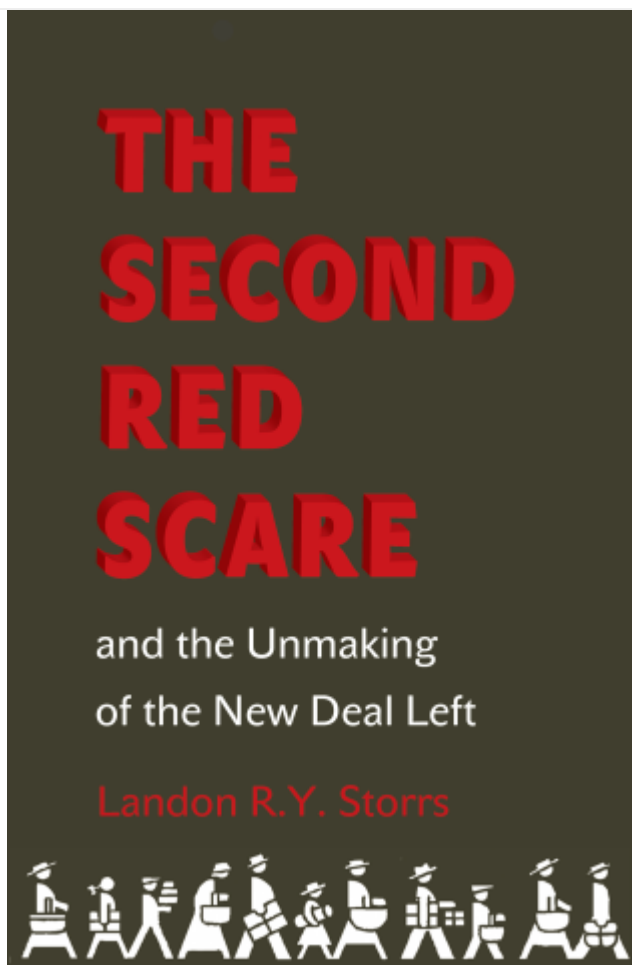


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The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left



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The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left. By Landon R.Y. Storrs (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). Pp. 424. Cloth, \$39.50.

When liberal economist Leon Keyserling and his labor-union allies resigned from the progressive Americans for Democratic Action organization in 1968 over the group's endorsement of antiwar candidate Eugene McCarthy, it signaled a break in the New Deal order that had dominated American politics since the 1930s. Vietnam was not the only fault line of the period, as the 1960s and early 1970s found two generations of left and center-left leaders and activists battling one another over issues ranging from affirmative action and public-housing policy to welfare reform and the democratic primary.

Observers of various sympathies have narrated these struggles as a class-based liberalism forged in the Great Depression confronting a race- and gender-based liberalism born of the Civil-Rights movement, but in *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left*, Landon R.Y. Storrs contends that such categories elide a longer and more complicated history of progressive politics on the New Deal's left wing. Drawing on unpublished letters and interviews, Civil Service Commission (CSC) case files, and the writings of midcentury anticommunists, Storrs argues that men like Keyserling and, to a greater degree than historians have acknowledged, women like Keyserling's wife, the consumer activist Mary Dublin, belonged to an influential cohort of young leftists who took jobs in the federal government in the 1930s and 1940s and hoped to steer the New Deal toward social-democratic ends. Those efforts were derailed by the Second Red Scare of the 1940s and 1950s, which, in the form of congressional committees, FBI investigations, and loyalty board reviews, threatened the livelihood of left-leaning civil servants and forced many either out of government entirely or into the more moderate ranks of the "vital center" liberals. The effects of this period of political repression were to stunt the development of the American welfare state, to leave unreformed the many inequities of the New Deal, and to cloud the historical record of progressive activism in the early and mid-twentieth century.

Storrs's argument unfolds in three stages. The first, based on the public writings and private papers of several young New Dealers, recovers the political commitments of a network of progressive economists, social workers, and activists who greeted Franklin Roosevelt's electoral victory in 1932 with skepticism and yet pursued employment in the civil service all the same. Many of these men and women had been affiliated with Columbia University in the early 1930s and, like Arthur Goldschmidt, Charlotte Tuttle, and Keyserling, found work as staffers and consultants to Harry Hopkins, Rexford Tugwell, Robert Wagner, and Felix Cohen. Others, like Catherine Bauer, Elizabeth Wickenden, and Dublin, had been active in grassroots struggles for consumers' rights and housing reform and clustered in such federal agencies as the National Labor Relations Board and the Office of Price Administration. What distinguished these reformers from their more senior New Deal counterparts was their connection to more radical political circles, their belief that economic injustice was inseparable from racial injustice, and their progressive views on women's roles in government and society. The New Deal left "did not dominate the policymaking arena," but its influence on labor and consumer legislation, housing policy, Native American rights, and even foreign relations grew substantially over the 1930s and 1940s (1).

If historians have ignored New Deal Washington's "sexually modernist, relatively feminist left-liberal scene," conservatives of the period did not (49). Over the late 1930s and early 1940s, a robust coalition of right-wing journalists, anti-statist businessmen, Southern Democrats, and former "fellow travelers" found common cause in the opportunistic project of rooting suspected subversives out of the federal government, targeting New Deal leftists for censure in the press and interrogation before Congress. Guiding the crusade against "Communists in government," Storrs contends, was a sophisticated rhetorical strategy of explicit antifeminism, which painted New Deal women as unfeminine, New Deal men as unmasculine, and the New Deal state as a sprawling "femmocracy" staffed by "sex-starved government gals" who were vulnerable to foreign influences (86). While congressional anticommunists like Howard Smith and Martin Dies Jr. failed to uncover any real radical plots to upend the constitutional order, the early anticommunist movement succeeded in elevating the question of communist infiltration to such dizzying heights that midcentury liberals,

hoping to contain a provocative issue, found themselves aiding the right the in construction of an elaborate federal loyalty program in the late 1940s. The specter of subversion persisted deep into the postwar period, however, and in the 1950s conservatives found in departmental loyalty-review boards, an expansive FBI surveillance apparatus, and two congressional security committees potent, new weapons of agitation, investigation, and suppression.

How progressives navigated the political terrain of the early Cold War forms the third portion of Storrs's narrative, which draws on recently declassified congressional records, hundreds of CSC case files, and an array of public and private sources (including letters, diaries, and datebooks) to argue that the Second Red Scare curbed the social-democratic potential of the New Deal by forcing more ambitious reformers out of politics or into the centrist circles of Democratic loyalists. Keyserling and Dublin, for example, had identified as socialists in their youth and, as New and Fair Dealers, called for economic justice through price controls, income redistribution, and consumer-friendly trade agreements. After a series of traumatic loyalty investigations lasting from the early 1940s to the mid-1950s, however, they moderated their politics, repositioning themselves as "vital center" liberals who privileged growth over redistribution, championed the military-industrial complex as a source of economic stability, and defended Democratic institutions like the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission from radical critiques in the late 1960s. Bauer, another left-leaning New Dealer, had promoted public housing as a solution to the social ills of industrial capitalism in the 1930s and 1940s, but after disloyalty allegations began to endanger her husband's architectural business in the 1950s, she withdrew from the political scene and, as an academic, chastened federal housing officials for building "collectivist high-rises" that failed to "accommodate 'traditional American ideas' about living arrangements" (236). Internationalists like Lewis Lorwin, Thomas Blaisdell, and Paul Porter all abandoned public service when their support of the Marshall Plan earned them accusations of anti-Americanism, and Women's Bureau directors Frieda Miller and Esther Peterson "eschewed positions that might be construed as anticapitalist" once it became clear that their earlier connections to radical consumer and labor organizations made them vulnerable to conservative harassment (233). Deprived of veteran activists who saw the New Deal as an entering wedge in a larger battle for

social democracy, the politics of the postwar period migrated toward the center, leaving the shortcomings of the American welfare state unreformed and “the tensions between capitalism and democracy” unresolved (262).

The Second Red Scare is an exhaustively researched and persuasively argued volume that promises to reshape how historians think about national politics in the mid-twentieth century. Its chief contribution is to offer an alternative model for narrating the transition from the experimental liberalism of the 1930s to the Keynesian liberalism of the 1950s. Where other scholars have emphasized deep shifts in the political and intellectual climate of the period, occasioned by the recession of 1937, the prosperity of the Eisenhower years, or revelations about the horrors of Stalinist communism, Storrs finds the postwar moment to have been far more contested and the narrowing of political possibilities far less inevitable.[1] Were it not for the deliberate actions of a determined few, rather than some essential American aversion to the welfare state, social scientists of the past fifty years might not have been consigned to endlessly query, “Why no social democracy in America?”

Storrs also succeeds in adding valuable complexity to the history of the right, revealing midcentury conservatism to have been much more than an ideology in abeyance. The antifeminism that drove the Dies Committee to interrogate New Deal women far more often than New Deal men, relative to their true numbers, or that disposed Hearst journalists to cast Communist women as “promiscuous seductresses” or “dowdy fanatics” challenges scholarship that reads the merging of family-values traditionalism with the defense of unregulated capitalism as a distinctive feature of the New Right (92).[2] Furthermore, by reconstructing the process by which conservatives demonstrably limited the space for progressive policymaking during and after World War II, Storrs upsets the notion that the right found national political influence only after the fractious Vietnam years. Conservatives may have struggled to achieve positive goals in American government until the 1970s and 1980s, but the power of the Second Red Scare suggests that they performed impressive political work throughout the long New Deal era.

In some instances, *The Second Red Scare* may overplay the radicalism of the New Deal progressives or the centrism of their postwar pivot, and historians will surely debate how much influence a small cohort of

leftists might have had over the 1950s and 1960s even without the interference of the anticommunist movement. But with this volume, Storrs illuminates unknown pockets of New Deal politics and gives depth to a period of repression too often reduced to the indecency of a single senator from Wisconsin.

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[1] See Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

[2] See Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004).



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