



World War II Letters from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade **Premature antifascists and the Post-war world**

The Lincoln Brigade veterans, like most other Americans, looked forward to the postwar world with considerable optimism. By 1945, their fight against fascism that had begun nearly ten years before appeared to be won, a fact that eased some of the disappointment they had carried leaving Spain in defeat. On the domestic front, many Lincolns hoped that the progressive movement that had made such great progress in the 1930s would be able to build upon the successes of the New Deal, strengthen the industrial union movement, and perhaps set the stage for socialist reform.

Many veterans, among them Bill Susman and Martin Kraus, understood that the emerging conflict with the Soviet Union would push domestic politics sharply to the right. The origins of the Cold War remains a subject of endless debate among historians, but what is not debatable is the fact that once the anti-Communist campaign began, the Lincolns were among its first victims. The government's suspicions of their loyalty once again became an issue late in the war when a congressional committee in March 1945 investigated the promotion of fourteen Communist officers, including the Lincolns who served in the OSS. William Donovan's testimony about their loyalty provided no defense when conservative congressmen threatened to cut the OSS budget unless the Lincolns were discharged from the service.

Despite these ominous signs, most Lincolns resumed their trade union and political work with renewed enthusiasm and optimism. They were particularly active in the steel, automobile, maritime, fur, and electrical workers union. However, they quickly realized that the nature of labor unrest, at least in the northern industrial states that had been organized by the CIO, was far different than it had been in the 1930s. In any case, the period from 1946 to 1948 would be the last opportunity for most Lincoln vets to work within the industrial union movement. After the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, labor leaders who aspired to union office were obliged to sign an affidavit stating that they were not members of the Communist party. Many of the Lincolns preferred to leave the labor movement rather than take this oath.

Although the veterans often disagreed about strategy and tactics within the labor and civil rights movements, all believed that Francisco Franco and Spanish fascism represented a major piece of unfinished business. In 1945, David McKelvey White, national chairman of the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, lobbied Congress and delegates to the UN's founding conference in San Francisco to keep Spain out of the new world body. The Lincolns also organized numerous public demonstrations outside the Spanish consulate in New York. But although they and their allies were able to get a good deal of public support for their position and Spain was not admitted to the UN, the anti-Communist thrust of American foreign policy meant that Franco was now being seen as an important strategic ally in the Cold War.

Despite or perhaps because of these anti-Franco activities, the Lincoln Brigade and its allies found themselves under increasing attack. As early as January 1946, the House Committee on Un-American Activities opened an investigation of the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee. When the organization refused to turn over membership and donor lists, ten officers were convicted of contempt of Congress and sentenced to jail.

When Robert Colodny wrote in 1947 that "the intellectual night was fast setting in," he was from the perspective of most Lincolns describing the political situation in postwar America. In December 1947 Attorney General Tom Clark released a list of subversive organizations that include the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, VALB, and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee. With the passage of the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950, the noose tightened even further. VALB was required to register as an agent of a foreign government. Almost all the officers resigned and other Lincolns in the Communist party leadership were put on trial.

During these years, nearly every Lincoln veteran, particularly those active in the labor and civil rights movements, but even those known as non-Communists or even anti-Communists, were targeted for investigation. Federal agents routinely interviewed their employers, neighbors, and landlords. Among this group was future Congressional Medal of Honor recipient Edward A. Carter Jr.

By the early 1950s most of the Lincolns were facing the political inquisition. The campaign culminated in a Subversive Activity Control Board hearing in May 1954. Although several veterans testified that they went to Spain to fight fascism, not to support communism, the government relied on FBI informers and veterans who were disillusioned with the Communist party to establish a direct link between the Lincoln Brigade and the party.

The Lincolns, like so many other radical organizations, were decimated by the Red Scare and blacklists of the late 1940s and 1950s. But when the long night of the fifties began to lift and the civil rights and antiwar movements began to gather strength, the veterans were still around. During the next quarter-century and beyond, they once again took up the banner of the good fight as part of the peace movements that opposed U.S. wars in Vietnam, Central America, and the Middle East.

