



Red-Baiting Senator
Harley Kilgore in the
Election of 1952: The
Limits of McCarthyism
during the Second Red
Scare

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ABSTRACT

As the Cold War heated up in the years following World War II, liberal political candidates were frequently accused of being either Communists or at the very least sympathetic to the Communist Party. During the 1950 senatorial primary campaign in Florida, opponents of prominent liberal Claude Pepper, led by challenger Congressman George Smathers and powerful conservative businessman Ed Ball, widely distributed a sensational pamphlet entitled "The Red Record of Claude Pepper." Using guilt by association, it painted Pepper as soft on Communism and he was subsequently defeated. His defeat seemed to epitomize the power of anticommunism in postwar elections. Oftentimes this "red-baiting," as it came to be known by critics, seemed to spell defeat for the branded politician.

ARTICLE

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In 1952, West Virginia Senator Harley Kilgore faced a similar attack during his bid for reelection. His opponents tagged Kilgore as a Communist sympathizer and published their own version of the “Red Record” pamphlet. Joseph McCarthy, who was at the height of his power and influence, joined the attack, campaigning in the state on behalf of Kilgore’s opponent, former Senator Chapman Revercomb. Yet Kilgore managed to fend off his attackers and was ultimately able to emerge victorious.¹

This article will examine the 1952 senatorial campaign in West Virginia, focusing particularly on the red-baiting of Kilgore. By taking a closer look at this hotly contested race, this study hopes to give not only new insights into postwar West Virginia politics, but also a better understanding of the execution and the limits of aggressive domestic anticommunism.

The use of Communism as an issue in postwar politics can be traced to the 1946 congressional elections, when candidates such as Richard Nixon in California benefited from injecting the issue into campaigns. Nixon accused his opponent, liberal Democrat Jerry Voorhis, of having close ties to Communist-controlled labor unions, and, despite his attempts at distancing himself from such groups as the CIO, Voorhis was defeated.² However, it was the further

intensification of the Cold War, exemplified by the conflict in Korea and coupled with the rise of McCarthy in the 1950s, that ensured the “persistence of the politics of disloyalty.”³ Members from both major political parties would exploit the issue of anticommunism. In 1950 a number of Democratic primary races were dominated by red-baiting. As mentioned above, Congressman Smathers accused his opponent, the incumbent Senator Pepper of Florida, of being pro-Communist and an “apologist for Stalin,” while Senator Glen Taylor of Idaho was called a Communist “dupe” by his opponent. Both men, seeking reelection, failed to make it out of the primaries.⁴

In the early 1950s contemporary observers were struck by the potency of red-baiting in political campaigns. Columnist Marquis Childs, for instance, wrote that, “in every contest where it was a major factor, McCarthyism won.”⁵ In 1950, Republican Karl Mundt advised Nixon to once again use the technique of red-baiting in his bid for the Senate. It was believed that such a strategy could offset the power of labor and racial interest groups allied to Nixon’s Democratic opponent, Helen Gahagan Douglas.⁶ It was the “Red Record” pamphlet, claimed Mundt, which “contributed substantially to the gratifying and emphatic defeat suffered by Senator Pepper in Florida.”⁷ By labeling Douglas as “The Pink Lady,” Nixon was able to successfully associate the actress-turned-politician with the threat of Communism and come away with a victory.

The Cold War clearly had an enormous impact on American politics, pushing the liberal Democratic agenda to the right. However, anticommunism’s actual effectiveness in electoral campaigns is less clear. While some scholars have looked at recent attempts to deemphasize the role of “dirty” politics in postwar elections as a way to rehabilitate the reputations of certain figures, such as Ed Ball and George Smathers, others have argued that the usefulness of McCarthyism and red-baiting as a political tool was inflated.⁸ Richard Fried argues that McCarthy’s own political influence was exaggerated and that Republican victories during the late 1940s and early 1950s were more the result of a Democratic Party weakened by the conflict in Korea and damaged by local issues.⁹ Historians have begun to look more closely at the role of

anticommunism in local postwar electoral campaigns, finding for instance in Florida that anticommunism was mixed with race-baiting to form a lethal weapon against Pepper.¹⁰ The same formula of race and Communism was also used successfully in the 1950 primary campaign against North Carolina incumbent Senator Frank Graham.¹¹ In any event, amidst the highly charged Cold War political atmosphere, support for issues such as civil rights and organized labor were often associated with Communist subversion, so it's difficult to dissociate them from one another.

It was during this period of drastic change that Harley Martin Kilgore rose to prominence on the national political stage. After decades of Republican dominance in West Virginia, the Democrats, led by the likes of Jennings Randolph, Herman Guy Kump, and Homer Holt, procured the reigns of political power in the wake of Roosevelt's triumph in 1932.¹² With the aid of the New Deal, the political influence of organized labor, particularly the United Mine Workers of America, began to grow within the state as well. With their lukewarm stance towards Roosevelt and the New Deal, conservative, Southern-style Democrats such as Kump and Holt often clashed with labor, and, by the end of the 1930s, the party had split into two factions. Led by Senator Matthew Neely, a liberal faction of the Democratic Party emerged with a populist, pro-labor stance that resonated with many West Virginians. After vacating his U.S. Senate seat to run for the governorship in 1940, Neely chose to back Kilgore as the liberal candidate in the Senate race. Neely's political protégé would win the election in 1940 and emerge as a typical representative of a new political tradition.¹³

Kilgore was born in Harrison County in 1893. He attended West Virginia University and was admitted to the state bar in 1914, practicing law in Beckley until 1932 when he was elected judge of the Raleigh County Criminal Court. Kilgore remained in that position until he was elected to the U.S. Senate. In the Senate, Kilgore served on a number of committees, including the judiciary and appropriations. During World War II he served as the chairman of the special subcommittee on war mobilization, which became popularly known as the Kilgore committee. Among

its accomplishments was the establishment of the National Science Foundation. He became known as a reliable backer of the administrative programs of both Presidents Roosevelt and Truman and championed such liberal legislation as extended social security and unemployment protection, pro-labor laws, and anti-monopoly measures.¹⁴ In addition, he was one of the few Congressmen to staunchly oppose the Taft-Hartley bill of 1947. Responding to postwar calls for increased control over unions, Congress overwhelmingly passed the antilabor legislation and eventually overrode President Truman's veto. Kilgore was an outspoken critic of the measure and led an unsuccessful campaign to defeat the veto override, a move that would garner him strong support from organized labor.¹⁵

Despite this apparent steadfast adherence to the liberal, pro-labor ideals with which he was traditionally associated, Kilgore was forced to confront the changing political climate that emerged with the onset of the Cold War. Although he initially favored a measured stance towards the Soviet Union and stressed cooperation immediately after World War II, he eventually became an ardent supporter of Truman's newly-aggressive foreign policy towards Russia. At times, this outlook spilled over into the domestic front, as Kilgore in 1950 abandoned his support for civil liberties; he not only voted for the Internal Security Act, but also cosponsored a piece of legislation that critics called the "Communist Concentration Camp Bill." The Internal Security Act, also known as the McCarran Act, was a federal law that aimed, among other things, to register with the government all known Communist organizations and to investigate and monitor persons in the country who were thought to be subversive. Kilgore's amendment called for the internment of known subversives in times of emergency and the entire act was criticized by many as a serious threat to civil liberties.¹⁶

However, despite his gradual shift away from some of the progressive ideals that had characterized many of the New Deal Democrats, Kilgore was still seen by many as one of the leading liberal Democrats as the 1952 elections approached. Kilgore's opponent in his bid for reelection was conservative Republican

Chapman Revercomb. Revercomb, who had served a term as a U.S. Senator between 1942 and 1948, was well aware of the political climate and hoped to capitalize on the apparent fear of Communist subversion. Focusing on Kilgore's close association with organized labor and his former conciliatory stance towards the Soviet Union, Revercomb planned to use the Democrat's past against him to get back into Congress. The result was a particularly heated campaign that focused almost entirely on the red-baiting tactics perfected by the likes of Joseph McCarthy. The ultimate beneficiary of such an approach, however, would be Kilgore.

Revercomb first charged Kilgore with having Communist ties at the West Virginia Republican state convention in July 1952. Citing congressional documents, Revercomb stated that Kilgore's name appeared as a sponsor for the National Committee to Win the Peace, an organization, he pointed out, which had been identified by the attorney general of the United States as "subversive and Communist." Revercomb announced, "I do not believe West Virginia wants in the senate of the United States anyone who has shown the least sympathy to these dangerous groups." Stressing the seriousness of Kilgore's apparent Communist ties, the Republican nominee called the issue "one of the most vital subjects affecting our life as a free nation."¹⁷

Revercomb had reason to believe that the Communist issue would resonate with the voters of West Virginia. In 1951, Fairmont State College fired art instructor Luella Mundel after college administrators labeled her a threat. Over the next fourteen months, Mundel would unsuccessfully attempt to regain her job and repair her reputation, while her slander suit against the State Board of Education received national attention.¹⁸ The fate of Mundel, as well as her close friend and supporter Harold Jones, who was also fired by Fairmont State, displayed the power of domestic anticommunism. Kilgore's Republican opponent was also taking cues from the broader national political climate. The GOP adopted the "K1C2" formula for their national platform, stressing the issues of Korea, Communism, and Corruption. "The Republican platform took a

strongly anti-Communist line,” wrote Gary Reichard, and so it seems that Revercomb was merely towing the party line.¹⁹



Senator Harley Kilgore, July 1951 Photographer: Fabian Bacharach Courtesy of the West Virginia and Regional History Collection West Virginia University Libraries.

Promising to “document and sustain” his opponent’s position “with records and cases,” Revercomb continued to emphasize the Communist issue throughout the summer. Speaking to crowds

across the state, he accused Kilgore of opposing the Internal Security Act of 1950 and of condemning the House Committee on Un-American Activities, an entity, Revercomb believed, that had “done more than any other American body to bring to light and convict the Communist agents and their sympathizers.”²⁰ Additional evidence Revercomb presented to support his claims that “Kilgore’s utterances and actions clearly reveal[ed] that this sympathetic attitude toward the objectives of the Communists ha[d] dominated his career in the Senate” included the senator’s stance immediately following the Second World War that the United States should share atomic information with the Soviets.²¹

Continuing to exploit Kilgore’s supportive stance towards the Soviet Union directly after the war, a position that by 1950 he and many others had clearly abandoned, Revercomb pointed out that in 1945 the Democrat had taken an “approving position” at a dinner in New York City in honor of M. M. Gousev, chairman of the Amtorg Trading Company.²² In 1952, J. Edgar Hoover had reported that the Soviet Amtorg Trading Company was a “Russian espionage outfit” in the United States that “recruited undercover agents who stole formulas” and other industrial secrets for the Soviet Union.²³ As the summer came to an end, it became apparent that Revercomb was committed to making the Communist issue the centerpiece of his campaign. To this point, however, the words of Revercomb, although they no doubt raised a few eyebrows and caused a trickle of suspicion towards the favorite Kilgore, were seen by many political observers as a desperate attempt to cause a stir in an election that was already decided. It would take the work of William Bradford Huie to open the floodgates.

At the end of September, William Bradford Huie, editor of the *American Mercury*, wrote an article in his magazine entitled “Kilgore: West Virginia Water Boy.” Huie began the article by reflecting on past electoral anticommunism triumphs, stating, “Now that Claude Pepper has been returned to the everglades, and now that Idaho voters have sent Glenn Taylor back to his guitar, the one man in the United States Senate who is most subservient to Communism is the senior senator from West Virginia.” Referring

to Kilgore's Senate record, Huie declared that "he is untarnished by any display of independence" and that "he has remained faithful to the party line . . . [and] looks unblushingly to the Stalin worshippers both for instructions and for money with which to purchase his re-election."²⁴

Huie then pointed out a number of specific examples to back up his claims, many of which had been discussed earlier by Revercomb. The *Mercury* article, however, was much more extensive and thorough (and sensational) than anything previously stated by Kilgore's opponent. By introducing such legislation as the 1942 Science Foundation bill, and by having close ties to various "subversive" organizations and publications, like those that represented labor unions, it was clear to the author that Kilgore, although not a "Red" himself, was "a legislative water boy for Communism." Huie concluded by warning, "If he [Kilgore] can return to the Senate on that record then the cause of Communism in the world will have gained, and the cause of freedom will have lost."²⁵

At least three West Virginia newspapers reprinted the *Mercury* article soon after its original publication.²⁶ Additionally, Huie reproduced his attack in a pamphlet entitled "The Red Record of Senator Harley Kilgore." The twenty-page leaflet, priced at twenty-five cents per copy, presented "the story . . . of Kilgore's . . . constant association with godless communism" by displaying photocopies of press clippings, many from the Communist paper the *Daily Worker*, and official government documents, along with a number of quotes by the senator himself.²⁷ Republicans distributed these pamphlets throughout the state, handing them out at a number of political functions and rallies and even placing them in private mailboxes in some areas.²⁸ The words and actions of Huie raised the level of exposure given to the Communist issue in the campaign. It also lent a sense of objectivity to the argument against Senator Kilgore. In an editorial, the *Raleigh Register*, Kilgore's hometown "Independent Democratic" newspaper, lamented: "The things being said about him [Kilgore] could have been viewed as a politically laid smokescreen if

the opposition had uttered them, but coming as they do from non-partisan sources, we're moved to wonder."²⁹

Accompanying the ever-increasing accusations and level of suspicion against Kilgore were calls for the senator to answer the charges being brought against him. The senator, however, remained silent on the campaign trail. His opponent suggested the reason as to why Kilgore chose to keep his lips sealed, stating "that he cannot answer these charges in the face of the record."³⁰ The senator, though, knew that he had to do something. Kilgore's lawyers, from the firm of Lily and Lily in Charleston, advised him that "to remain silent would be much more unfavorable." On the other hand, his council pointed out the pitfalls of defending himself in a public debate or in the papers, especially given the fact that he could not dispute much of the "evidence" brought against him. Although the conclusions reached by his opponents were clearly not true, the issue was just too complex to be settled in the open. Kilgore's lawyers concluded that the best thing to do would be to let the courts resolve the matter.³¹ His response came in the form of a two-million-dollar libel suit against the *Charleston Daily Mail*, one of the papers that had reprinted Huie's *American Mercury* article.³² Kilgore's reaction would only add fuel to the fire.

In part, the suit against the *Daily Mail* accused the publication of "contriving and wickedly and maliciously intending to insult the plaintiff and injure him in his good name, fame, credit and morals," and "to cause it to be suspected and believed that the plaintiff had been . . . guilty of Communist ideas."³³ This was not the first seven-figure libel suit Kilgore had filed against a West Virginia newspaper. During the primary election earlier in the spring, Kilgore filed a one-million-dollar libel suit that was still pending as of early October against the *Charleston Gazette*. Kilgore took this action after the paper published an "unattributed story" that said the senator was going to drop out of the race in order to accept an appointment as a Federal judge.³⁴ Revercomb quickly jumped on the opportunity to throw Kilgore's reaction back in his face. Referring to the legal action as "an old political trick," the Republican, who once again challenged

his opponent to make a public statement on the matter, went on, “Kilgore does not answer the charges against him . . . he just sues.”³⁵

The media backlash was fast and furious as well, both within the state and beyond. Two of Kilgore’s harshest critics among the state’s media were the aforementioned *Raleigh Register* published in Beckley and the *Charleston Daily Mail*. The *Register* billed itself as an “Independently Democratic” publication while the *Daily Mail* was traditionally seen as Republican-leaning. In both papers the editorial pages were filled with columns that called into question Kilgore’s loyalty, once again using the “evidence” brought forth by Revercomb and Huie.

Asking “Who is Kilgore fighting for?” the *Register* went on to answer that he was for “moss-brained” liberals such as the Hollywood 10, and that his actions in the Senate have “traded off the citizen’s freedom for a mess of social welfare pottage.” According to the paper, Kilgore wasn’t fighting for the common man, especially for the miner, who stood to suffer if the Democrat was able to bring in more federally funded hydroelectric plants to replace the privately-owned coal mines. The *Register* also criticized Kilgore’s legal actions, calling them an “attempted gag of the West Virginia press.” In a two-part series, the paper argued that the senator’s lawsuits had “aroused concern” outside West Virginia, and that these recent “gagging tactics” were just the most recent episodes in a long history of “bullying the press” dating back to his days as a judge in Beckley. Declaring that it had “shown in many ways these last three weeks why he should be retired,” the *Register*, on the eve of Election Day, implored the people of West Virginia to “follow the sound judgment of voters in Florida, Idaho and Utah and send Kilgore to the sidelines tomorrow.”³⁶

The *Daily Mail* took a similar stance to that of the *Register*, but it also took the time to directly address the issue of the lawsuit brought against it by Kilgore. The newspaper reprinted the letter it sent to the senator in response to the suit, which offered him the opportunity and column space to “discuss, answer or deny” the charges brought up in Huie’s article. The *Mail* also attempted to “clarify” its position: that it believed the *Mercury* article to

be a “factual and conscientious summary of certain aspects” of Kilgore’s career, and, by calling into question these aspects, it was not “calling into question his loyalty, but his judgment.” Whether they were saying it was a lack of judgment or a lack of loyalty, Kilgore’s opponents were attempting to portray Kilgore as part of the domestic threat of Communism and therefore a menace to American security and way of life. Commenting on Kilgore’s “strange” silence on the issue, an editorial cartoon in the *Mail* portrayed Kilgore, sitting above an open flame, as one of “the three famous monkeys of Hindu lore . . . Speak No Evil.” In a series of columns in the week leading up to the election, the paper once again utilized the work of William Bradford Huie, taking a number of excerpts from the “Red Record” pamphlet and placing them under the headline, “The Case Against Kilgore.”³⁷ It is clear that, within the media at least, the “case against Kilgore,” as well as his reaction, was the story and defining issue of the campaign.

As the contest became more heated, it began to gain exposure beyond the borders of West Virginia. Senator Joseph McCarthy himself, “Communist hunter extraordinaire,” returned to the Mountain State to campaign against Kilgore, “where,” he stated, “the Communist routing all began, back in 1950.”³⁸ In two separate speeches, McCarthy delivered a “fair sample of fiery oratory” in front of thousands of onlookers. Quoting directly from the *Mercury* article and waving the “Red Record” pamphlet above his head, the senator from Wisconsin declared, “I do not think Kilgore is actually a Communist . . . he was so stupid he was used by Communists.” He concluded his speech by challenging the audience to “go home and demand the truth . . . demand that Kilgore answer these charges.”³⁹ On his radio show Washington, DC, conservative commentator Fulton Lewis Jr. discussed the details of Huie’s article in a two-part series. Stating that the *Mercury* was “doing one of the greatest jobs in the entire publication field,” Lewis endorsed the work of Huie and pointed to Kilgore’s suit against the *Daily Mail* and his attempts at intimidating the press as an implication of his guilt.⁴⁰ Willis Ballinger, another conservative political commentator from Washington, observed at the end of October the effect the

“Communist issue” had on the campaign. Once a clear-cut favorite, Ballinger concedes, “Harley (now) is in real trouble . . . as his record of aids and assists to communists has spread like wildfire over the whole state.”⁴¹ Other external media outlets joined in the speculation of Kilgore’s defeat. Pointing to the *Mercury* article’s publication and Kilgore’s subsequent lawsuit as the turning point, the *Washington (DC) Times-Herald* printed that the senator was “losing ground . . . and losing the support of Democratic papers all over the state.” The “uproar over attempted intimidation of the press,” the newspaper asserted, “has endowed a senate contest with national significance.”⁴² It appeared to some that Kilgore was about to meet the same fate as some of his fellow liberal Democrats, such as Claude Pepper and Glenn Taylor.

However, the self-proclaimed “Fighting Liberal” from West Virginia was not about to lie down in the face of such serious and potentially damaging charges. Despite the fact that he remained publicly silent about the specific allegations of his supposed Communist ties, he would not avoid the Communist issue altogether. He would address the matter on his own terms and emphasize the foreign, rather than the domestic, threat of Communism and show the voters that he was as “anti-Communist” as anyone. At the same time, he continued to show a commitment to the “common man” and many of the social-democratic ideals that characterized his past as a New Deal liberal.

Kilgore stressed these two themes from the outset of his campaign. As part of a radio broadcast in April 1952, the senator answered the question, “Are our foreign policies promoting the national interest?” Showing his support for such assertive policies as the Marshall Plan and the action in Korea, Kilgore stated, “We have moved forward powerfully both in Europe and in Asia to buttress our own security.” Commenting on the rising criticism coming from the right, he said he was “irritated with . . . second guessers who, for example, supported Truman in his . . . stand against aggression in Korea, but when the going got rough, did a complete flip-flop.”⁴³ Kilgore continued delivering his form of anticommunist rhetoric later in the fall. Painting himself as a man of action who

reflected the Truman strategy of global intervention to stop the spread of Communism and guarantee the nation's security, Kilgore, in a campaign speech entitled "America's Foreign Policy and the Republicans," once again cited his support for measures such as the Truman Doctrine which provided aid to Greece and Turkey that "stopped the march of Communism."

He also took time to assail the record of his opponent on these issues. Referring to Revercomb's stance while he was in the Senate, Kilgore asserted that he had opposed the above measures and called for a quick demobilization as well as increased cuts in defense spending right after the war. "If the senate and the country had followed his advice," declared Kilgore, "it would have been disastrous for us and for the free world." Bridging Revercomb's past with his present campaign of red-baiting, the Democrat stated that when his opponent was a senator, "he was not, as you might think from his speeches now, a leader in the fight to stop Communist aggression," continuing, "you cannot meet the challenge of the world today by talking claptrap."⁴⁴

While his position on foreign policy reflected the new anticommunist consensus that had emerged from World War II, Kilgore's attitude towards domestic issues continued to mirror his stance as a New Deal Democrat committed to social welfare and "the common man." Kilgore continued to characterize himself as "labor's friend . . . interested in youth activities . . . a 'fighting friend' of farmers . . . active in education . . . a veterans' champion . . . as well as a supporter of small business and civil rights."⁴⁵ He dismissed the "trickle down theory of giving special privileges to the few," stating that he and his allies had "built the prosperity of the last 20 years on the opposite theory."⁴⁶ Inviting voters to reflect on the economic turnaround that had occurred since the days of the Depression, Kilgore wanted voters to ask: "Am I better off under a Republican or a Democratic administration?"⁴⁷ Tackling everything from soil conservation to the minimum wage, the senator showed his support for a number of liberal issues aimed at improving the common welfare. "To strengthen and extend sound prosperity to all people," declared Kilgore, "is the best guarantee for peace in the world." In

reference to his opponents, the senator charged that the “Republican reactionaries . . . had no program” and that they had “conducted a campaign of political opportunism and name-calling to conceal their lack of a program.”⁴⁸

One of the favorite targets of such “reactionaries” was organized labor, and, as we have seen, with a long history of support for labor unions, Kilgore had also come under attack for his “questionable” affiliation. Despite the “name-calling” that had come with the relationship, the senator had continued to foster his link with the “working man.” At a Labor Day celebration for a local United Mine Workers chapter in Smithers, Kilgore once again reflected on the gains that had been made by laborers during the recent years of Democratic leadership. Speaking of his opposition, the senator pointed to “road blocs, such as Taft-Hartley . . . to each constructive measure” while warning of their “attempts to divide and confuse . . . with shrill orations.”⁴⁹ As proof, Kilgore once again worked to turn the tables and use his opponent’s record against him. While Kilgore spoke of his opposition to such union-controlling legislation as the Taft-Hartley and Case Anti-Labor bills, he reminded voters that Revercomb had supported these measures while in Congress.⁵⁰

Additionally, the Democrats of the state took another page from the opposition’s book and printed a pamphlet of their own. Entitled “The WV Story: Here’s What’s Happened in Your State,” the booklet attempted to chronicle how the Mountain State had prospered under nineteen years of a national Democratic administration. It declared that “during the past 19 years the most highly developed teamwork between businessman . . . and working man in our history has paid off in the greatest expansion of productivity and rise of living standards any nation has ever seen.” Highlighting the state’s gains since the early 1930s, the pamphlet proclaimed that workers had experienced large increases in manufacturing wages, farm income, and bank deposits, while there was better housing and more home ownership than ever before.⁵¹

Kilgore worked hard to convey that he had been an important factor in such gains, and in a state with such a high percentage of

industrial workers (there were well over 100,000 miners alone at the time), the backing of labor was an important goal for any candidate.⁵² Organized labor in West Virginia responded with overwhelming support for Kilgore. He received the endorsement of the Political Action Committee of the State CIO Council in September, and John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers, actively campaigned for the senator throughout the campaign.⁵³ Speaking at a UMWA convention in Morgantown, Lewis bitterly attacked the record of Revercomb, characterizing his term in the Senate as one of “ill-repute and as contrary to the interests of the working people,” while calling him an “errand boy and a man-servant for the corporations.”⁵⁴ In reference to Kilgore’s loyalty to the United States, which his opponent was calling into question, Lewis stated: “Kilgore is as American as the town pump, and I know of no symbol which is more American. He is as much a radical as I am and that is as radical as an old shirt. I ask you to vote for him as willingly as you would vote for me if I were a candidate for public office, which I am not.”⁵⁵

Kilgore also received the support from a number of labor-affiliated media outlets. *Labor’s Daily*, published in Charleston, not only covered the actions of labor leaders such as Lewis as it pertained to the election, but it also gave extensive coverage, in the form of articles and editorials, to the developments of the campaign itself. Reporting on the publishing of Huie’s article in the *Mercury* and its reprint in the *Daily Mail*, *Labor’s Daily* wrote that the “employment of the Hitleresque BIG LIE technique recently reached its zenith” and that Kilgore’s subsequent lawsuit was entirely justified.⁵⁶ The paper also produced a biographical sketch, entitled “Kilgore Well-Known Friend of Underdog,” which detailed a senatorial career of “consistent, unselfish service to better living for plain folks.”⁵⁷ Another newspaper called *Labor*, run by the Railroad Labor Organization, dedicated nearly an entire issue to Kilgore in its West Virginia edition, once again detailing his commitment to organized labor and his support for small business, youth, old-age pensions, and other liberal issues. Further, it contrasted Kilgore’s “Enlightened Liberalism” with the “Reactionism” of Revercomb.⁵⁸ By

maintaining a commitment to the domestic policies of the New Deal Democrats, Kilgore had an important bloc of voters in his corner.

While the senator was working hard on the stump to portray himself to the voters as the ultimate anticommunist Democrat, he labored behind the scenes on another front to further enhance his chances of defeating Revercomb. Almost immediately after Huie had published his article in the *Mercury*, Kilgore and state Democratic officials began another campaign, one that would show that the journalist and editor was not the “non-partisan” source that some had made him out to be. In August 1952, *Newsweek* wrote of the *Mercury*’s financial troubles and reported that the magazine had recently secured a new financial backer. Speaking of Huie’s desperation to keep the “money-losing” publication afloat, it mentioned that Huie made money by selling reprints of “sensational articles.”⁵⁹ Kilgore quickly requested a bibliographical list of all of Huie’s published work, including books and newspaper and magazine articles.⁶⁰

Of particular interest was a story by Huie concerning his alma mater, published by *Collier’s* in 1941, which accused the University of Alabama’s football program of having practiced unethical academic policies. A subsequent investigation launched by the university found that Huie had fabricated much of his evidence and the magazine quickly retracted the story.⁶¹ As part of the university’s investigation, Huie gave a candid interview to sports editors Fred Russel and Ed Danforth in which he freely admitted to a number of instances, including political campaigns, where he had concocted stories for personal gain.⁶² Kilgore sought and received from both the University of Alabama’s dean of the Graduate School and the president, not only an evaluation of the “veracity, integrity and reliability as a journalist of . . . Huie,” but also their permission to use materials compiled by the school in its investigation of the *Mercury*’s editor.⁶³ The result was a series of press releases by the Democratic State Headquarters under the heading “Suggested Editorial” that shed some light on the less-than-reliable career of one of Kilgore’s most vocal and important critics. Stating that those who bought the copies of an attack on the senator “are just the

latest of a whole succession of victims who have been taken in by the fast-talking Huie,” the editorials, with titles like “Writer Who Defamed Kilgore Has Habit of Skipping Facts” and “Huie’s Hoaxes,” were published in a number of state papers, such as the *Charleston Gazette* and the *Fairmont Times*, in the days leading up to the election.⁶⁴

From a national perspective, the Republican Party made significant gains in the election. General Eisenhower defeated Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson by a whopping 353 electoral votes, while the GOP gained a majority in both Houses of Congress. The previously dominant Democratic coalition had taken a beating, and for the first time since the election of 1930, Republicans controlled both the executive and legislative branches of the federal government.⁶⁵ In instances where Democrats were victorious, candidates such as John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts placed a strong anticommunist foreign policy above the traditional New Deal Democratic issue of domestic reform.⁶⁶ The growing political importance of the Communist issue not only played into the hands of conservative forces, but also led to a general antiliberal sentiment that affected both major parties.

Although it is clear that many, including political commentators, the media, and the candidates themselves, focused much of their energy in discussing the issue of Communism and its threat to national security, it is ultimately the sentiments of the larger public that determine the outcome of an election. Interestingly, however, among many of the voters it seems that the issue of Communism was not foremost on their minds during the campaign. As part of a series of articles entitled “How Are You Voting?” the *Charleston Gazette* conducted a number of interviews in many of the suburbs and small communities surrounding the state’s capital. A good number of respondents showed a preference for Republican candidates at both the national and state levels, and support for Revercomb appeared to be about even with that of Kilgore. Surprisingly, however, the Communist issue appeared to have been a relatively small factor in shaping people’s decisions. Much more prominent was their dissatisfaction with Truman’s handling of Korea and the reports

of widespread corruption within the Democratic administration. A number of voters simply wanted a change, giving responses such as, “No party should be allowed to stay in power for 20 years.” There was only one example of a person who seemed to be influenced by the purported Communist ties of Kilgore. The voter, from Nitro, stated, “It looks like Kilgore embraced the Commies a few times. . . . If I have to make a choice . . . I’ll take Revercomb.”⁶⁷ Despite the fact that such an exercise was hardly scientific, allowing no definitive conclusions, it does suggest that, among the people at large, the threat of Communist influence within the government was not a defining issue in the election.

However, in an election it is the final tally that counts as the ultimate reflection of the public’s sentiment. When all the votes were counted, Kilgore had soundly defeated Revercomb by nearly 60,000 votes, the most decisive of any of the state’s major races.⁶⁸ What makes the result even more impressive was the fact that the senator had only won by 4,000 votes the last time he ran for reelection in 1946. Although, as we have seen, Communism as a political issue was alive by the mid-1940s, it was hardly the dominant force it came to be by 1952. While the case of Luella Mundel did show that strong anticommunist rhetoric resonated for West Virginians in the realm of higher education, the same cannot be said for politics. Additionally, it would be difficult to conclude that Kilgore’s party affiliation was the sole determinant of his victory. Despite the fact that the Democratic Party in West Virginia largely maintained the upper hand during the postwar era, the election of a Republican candidate during this period was not impossible. In fact, it was Chapman Revercomb himself who would emerge victorious from a special election held in 1956 to fill the vacancy in the Senate caused by the sudden death of Kilgore.

The red-baiting of Harley Kilgore appears to have failed miserably as a political tactic. Reflecting on the campaign shortly after the election, the *Parkersburg News* came to just that conclusion, even going so far as to say that Revercomb’s approach backfired. As evidence, it pointed out that in Wood County, where the *Parkersburg News* refused to publish attacks on Kilgore’s loyalty, Revercomb

actually fared better than in counties such as Kanawha where the issue was highly publicized.⁶⁹ In the instances where red-baiting appeared to be successful, such as the cases of Claude Pepper and Frank Graham, the opposition was usually able to affectively link racist and anti-labor rhetoric to the issue of Communism. In West Virginia, where race was not a dominant concern and where organized labor still maintained its political power, such damaging associations were difficult to make. The election of Kilgore seems to expose the limits of red-baiting on the campaign trail during the postwar era, for, when McCarthyism came up against an opponent who was able to maintain his support for liberal domestic issues while simultaneously displaying his own commitment to anticommunism abroad, its effects were minimal at best.

NOTES

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1. While there is a wealth of literature that examines the politics of West Virginia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the post-World War II politics of the state has yet to be extensively explored. For a general overview of Kilgore's time as a senator, see Robert Maddox's *The Senatorial Career of Harley Martin Kilgore* (New York: Garland, 1981). Maddox also discusses Kilgore's work during World II in his PhD diss., "Senator Harley M. Kilgore and World War II" (University of Kentucky, 1974). Aside from Maddox's brief discussion of the 1952 election in his biography of Kilgore, there is no detailed analysis of the political manifestations of McCarthyism in West Virginia. Charles McCormick provides a study of manifestations of McCarthyism in higher education in West Virginia in his book, *This Nest of Vipers: McCarthyism and Higher Education in the Mundell Affair, 1951-52* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989). M. J. Heale looks at McCarthyism at the state and local level in *McCarthy's Americans: Red Scare Politics in State and Nation, 1935-1965* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), but does not include West Virginia in any of his case studies. Additionally, Heale does not thoroughly explore manifestations of domestic anticommunism from the perspective of electoral politics.
2. Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 64.
3. *Ibid.*, 129.
4. *Ibid.*

5. Ibid., 130.
6. Jonathan Bell, *The Liberal State on Trial: The Cold War and American Politics in the Truman Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 227.
7. Karl Mundt to Richard Nixon, May 8, 1950, in Bell, *Liberal State on Trial*, 227.
8. Steve Hach, "Tracy Danese's Claude Pepper and Ed Ball: Politics, Purpose and Power and the Pepper-Smathers Democratic Primary Election Campaign of 1950," Claude Pepper Foundation, http://www.claudepepperfoundation.org/_assets/pdf/HachReport.pdf
9. Scholarship on both McCarthy and the "-ism" that bore his name is quite varied and extensive. It can be traced all the way back to the 1950s when McCarthy was still a major political figure and has continued to this day, undergoing constant revision as new materials become available and the sociopolitical climate changes. The studies usually emphasize a specific aspect of McCarthyism, whether it be social, cultural, or political. Both Thomas C. Reeves's *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1997) and David Oshinsky's *A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) provide a thorough examination of the man behind the movement, while Richard Fried's *Nightmare in Red* gives a general survey of McCarthyism. The literature exploring the political aspects is vast, but Fried's *Men against McCarthy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976) and Robert Griffith's *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) are two notable examples. For a detailed discussion of the historiography of the subject, see Ellen Schrecker's essay, "McCarthyism and the Red Scare," in *The Blackwell Companion to Post-1945 America*, edited by Roy Rosenweig and Jean-Christophe Agnew (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2002).
10. Hach, "Tracy Danese's Claude Pepper and Ed Ball."
11. Julian Pleasants and Augustus Burns III, *Frank Porter Graham and the 1950 Senate Race in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 98-110.
12. Thomas Stafford, *Afflicting the Comfortable: Journalism and Politics in West Virginia* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2005), 13-15.
13. John Alexander Williams, *West Virginia: A History* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2001), 166-68.
14. *American National Biography*, s.v. "Kilgore, Harley Martin."
15. Robert Maddox, *Senatorial Career*, 259-62.
16. Mary Sperling McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left: Cold War Politics and the American Liberals, 1947-1954* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978), 77-80; Gary W. Reichard, *Politics as Usual: The Age of Truman and Eisenhower*. (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1988), 12-15.
17. *Charleston Daily Mail*, July 27, 1952; Revercomb Release, July 26, 1952,

Kilgore Papers, A&M 3143, Series 1, Box 5, West Virginia and Regional History Collection, West Virginia University Library, Morgantown, WV (hereafter cited as Kilgore Papers).

18. McCormick, *Nest of Vipers*, 2-6.
19. Reichard, *Politics as Usual*, 81-82.
20. *Charleston Daily Mail*, July 27, 1952.
21. *Charleston Gazette*, Sept. 28, 1952
22. Revercomb Release, Aug. 23, 1952, Kilgore Papers.
23. Hoover, J. Edgar, "Red Spy Masters in America," *Reader's Digest*, Aug. 1952, in "The Red Record of Senator Harley Kilgore," undated pamphlet, Kilgore Papers, Box 4.
24. Huie, William Bradford, "Kilgore: West Virginia Water Boy," *American Mercury*, Oct. 1952, 47-53.
25. Ibid.
26. *Washington (DC) Times-Herald*, Oct. 13, 14, 17, 1952.
27. "Red Record," undated pamphlet, Kilgore Papers.
28. *Raleigh Register*, Oct. 22, 1952; Charlotte Reed to Harley Martin Kilgore, Oct. 13, 1952, Kilgore Papers, Box 3.
29. *Raleigh Register*, Oct. 3, 1952.
30. *Huntington Herald Dispatch*, Oct. 2, 1952; F. M. Staunton to Harley Martin Kilgore, Oct. 1, 1952, Kilgore Papers, Box 3; *Charleston Daily Mail*, Oct. 15, 1952.
31. Lily & Lily to Harley Kilgore, Sept. 30 and Oct. 6, 1952, Kilgore Papers, Box 2.
32. *Charleston Gazette*, Oct. 1, 1952.
33. Copy of lawsuit filed in Kanawha County Circuit Court, undated, Kilgore Papers, Box 4.
34. *Charleston Daily Mail*, Oct. 1, 1952; *Charleston Gazette*, Oct. 1, 1952.
35. *Huntington Herald Dispatch*, Oct. 2, 1952.
36. *Raleigh Register*, Oct. 7, 24, 26, 29, 30, Nov. 3, 1952.
37. *Charleston Daily Mail*, Oct. 1, 14, 26, 27, 28, 29, 1952.
38. *Raleigh Register*, Oct. 22, 1952; McCarthy first hurled accusations of Communist infiltration of the federal government in Wheeling, in February 1950. By 1952, McCarthy's perceived influence had reached such heights that Republican Party leaders sent the Wisconsin senator out to actively campaign for 10 senatorial incumbents and challengers. Reeves, *Life and Times of Joe McCarthy*, 455.
39. *Charleston Daily Mail*, Oct. 22, 1952; *Raleigh Register*, Oct. 22, 1952.
40. WWDC (Washington, DC), Oct. 23, 24, 1952, Fulton Lewis Jr., host, transcript copy in Kilgore Papers, Box 3.

41. WPIK (Alexandria, VA), Oct. 23, 1952, Willis Ballinger, host, transcript copy in Kilgore Papers, Box 3.
42. *Washington (DC) Times-Herald*, Oct. 13, 17, 1952.
43. WHAS, "Capitol Hill Series," April 15, 1952, Harley Kilgore as guest, transcript copy in Kilgore Papers.
44. Harley Kilgore, "America's Foreign Policy and the Republicans," speech transcript, undated, Kilgore Papers, Box 6; *Charleston Gazette*, Nov. 1, 1952.
45. Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, "The Record of Senator Harley M. Kilgore," Washington, DC, 1952, Kilgore Papers, A&M 1108, Series 1, Box 2.
46. Harley Kilgore, "Roane County Homecoming," Aug. 31, 1952, speech copy, Kilgore Papers, A&M 1108, Series 1, Box 2.
47. Kilgore Release, Oct. 28, 1952, Kilgore Papers, Box 3.
48. Kilgore Speech, Nov. 2, 1952, Charleston, WV, Kilgore Papers, Box 5.
49. Kilgore Speech, Sept. 1, 1952, Smithers, WV, Kilgore Papers, A&M 1108, Series 1, Box 2.
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52. "470 Local Elections Will Decide the New President's Congress," *Life*, Nov. 3, 1952, 49.
53. *Charleston Gazette*, Sept. 22, 1952.
54. "GOP Would Abolish Collective Bargaining in Coal Industry, Lewis Tells W.Va. Miners," *United Mine Workers Journal*, Nov. 1, 1952, 5.
55. Ibid.
56. *Charleston Labor's Daily*, Oct. 2, 17, 20, 21, 1952.
57. *Charleston Labor's Daily*, Oct. 25, 1952.
58. *Washington (DC) Labor*, Nov. 4, 1952.
59. *Newsweek*, Aug. 25, 1952, n.p., copy in Kilgore Papers, Box 3.
60. J. H. Bishop (Library of Congress) to Harley Kilgore, Oct. 2, 1952, Kilgore Papers, Box 3.
61. *Collier's*, April 5, 1941, 4.
62. William Bradford Huie, interview by Fred Russel and Ed Danforth, undated, copy of report in Kilgore Papers, Box 3.
63. Harley Kilgore to Prof. Albert Moore, Oct. 8, 1952, and Moore to Kilgore, Oct. 13, 1952, both in Kilgore Papers, Box 3.
64. Democratic State Headquarters releases, undated, Kilgore Papers, Box 3; *Charleston Gazette*, Oct. 26, 1952, and *Fairmont Times*, Nov. 3, 1952.

65. James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 260.
66. Bell, *Liberal State on Trial*, 268-69.
67. *Charleston Gazette*, Oct. 23, 24, 25, 26, 29, Nov. 1, 1952.
68. Adlai Stevenson received over 40,000 votes more than General Eisenhower in West Virginia, while Democrat William Marland defeated Republican Rush Holt by 20,000 votes in the race for governor.
69. *Parkersburg News*, Nov. 7, 1952.