

The Pink Lady and Tricky Dick: Communism's Role in the 1950 Senatorial Election

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The shock had set in and the damage had been done. "I failed to take his attacks seriously enough." That tricky man had struck quite low. What happened to "no name-calling, no smears, no misrepresentations in this campaign?" Is this politics?

California Republican Congressman Richard Nixon needed a stage to stand on if he were to take the next step in politics during the 1950s. World War II left behind a world that was opportune for this next step. In the early days after the war, most Americans hoped for a continuation of cooperation between Americans and Soviets. However, that would change as a handful of individuals took to fighting Communism as one of their political weapons. Author Richard M. Fried suggests Communism "was the focal point of the careers of Wisconsin Senator Joseph R. McCarthy; of Richard Nixon during his tenure as Congressman, Senator" and "of several of Nixon's colleagues on the House Committee on Un-American Activities."¹ The careers of these men, both successful and unsuccessful, had roots in anticommunism. Characteristic of previous campaigns were the accomplishments and failures of each candidate. What appeared during the 1950 senatorial campaign in California was a politics largely focused on whether a candidate could be called soft on

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¹ Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: the McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 3.

Communism. Unfortunately for Nixon's eventual opponent, Helen Gahagan Douglas, who you were thought to be aligned with politically could be severely damaging to a campaign. As Fried writes, "a new vocabulary entered political discourse" and "in the accusations that rumbled through the late 1940s and early 1950s, reputations were made or ruined..."² Nixon deliberately used Communism and hardball tactics during his campaign for the Senate election of 1950 in order to delegitimize Helen Gahagan Douglas and secure his desire for a higher political reputation.

Nixon recalled not being particularly anti-communist until hearing Winston Churchill's Iron Curtain speech in Fulton, Missouri in March of 1946. Until that time he felt rather uninterested in the public fervor surrounding communism. Communism had yet to become a large part of his political actions. Roughly a year later, Nixon recalled his "contempt of Congress citation against Gerhart Eisler, who had been identified as the top Communist agent in America."³ He noted that the only individual who opposed the citation was Vito Marcantonio, an American Labor Party Republican serving as Representative of New York. Nixon used this case as a base for attack on Helen Douglas in his campaign for a Senate election. Interestingly enough, Douglas then argued that Nixon was more pro-Communist than her and voted in Congress similar to Marcantonio. These back and forth accusations in 1950 began an election campaign that can be remembered as hostile, and in Nixon's case, unsympathetic.

Accusations leveled against Alger Hiss⁴ for being a top Communist spy drastically raised American peoples' concern of internal Communism in the United States.⁵ In the years following

² Ibid., 3.

³ Richard Nixon, *the Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), 45-46.

⁴ Alger Hiss was an American lawyer and government official who has accused of being a member of the Communist Party during a House Committee on Un-American Activities meeting on 3 August 1948. This accusation spurred fear amongst those already convinced that Communism had made its way into the US government.

⁵ Nixon, *Memoirs*, 47-48.

World War II, American perceptions of US/Soviet relations were initially disinterested in nature, yet would increase exponentially as events like the Berlin airlift brought Communism into the daily lives of the American people. In 1948, HUAC held hearings during which Whittaker Chambers “named eight individuals, including Alger Hiss, as one-time Communists.”⁶ In the wake of the Hiss case, Nixon’s credibility as a member of HUAC, and his status as a known anti-Communist, would prove useful in his campaign against Douglas. He decided his best strategy to reach the Senate would be to capitalize on his work in the HUAC.⁷

That same year, in light of Republican Governor of New York Thomas Dewey’s loss in the presidential election of 1948, Richard Nixon recalled thinking, “For the first time I began to consider the possibility of trying to move up on my own instead of patiently waiting for seniority or party preferment in the House of Representatives.”⁸ He wanted to do more and wanted to achieve more. He thought that the Republican Party was becoming “complacent” and knew that in order to effect change in a positive direction, he needed to take a step forward.⁹ His ambition went against advice, as he was encouraged by his peers and fellow Republicans to play it safe. Frank Jorgensen¹⁰ said, “You’ve got a good, safe district.”¹¹ Yet Nixon’s desire to push forward with his own agenda was paramount; he was adamant on doing things the way he wanted to do them. He ignored chances to achieve seniority as a representative by running for the Senate in 1950.

The 1950 election campaign of Douglas v Nixon was particularly harsh in nature. Hardball tactics and harsh accusations were present throughout the campaign in the form of speeches,

⁶ Freid, *Nightmare in Red*, 19.

⁷ Stephen E Ambrose, *Nixon: the Education of a Politician 1913-1962* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 198.

⁸ Nixon, *Memoirs*, 72.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰ Jorgensen was Nixon’s chief fundraiser and financial manager during the 1950 Senatorial campaign. He also set up Democrats-for-Nixon committees that grew all throughout the state.

¹¹ Ambrose, *Nixon: the Education of a Politician*, 198.

advertisements, and even little “pink sheets.”¹² It is from these pink sheets that Nixon received his nickname “Tricky Dick” for his attempts to paint Douglas as a Communist. Each of these so-called pink sheets compared Douglas’ and Vito Marcantonio’s Congressional voting records. While Douglas accused Nixon of being a liar who was in truth aligned with Marcantonio, Nixon’s supporters were in the business of ensuring that these sheets got widely distributed.¹³ This was a rather harsh attempt by Nixon to show the voters that Douglas was Communist and that her actions were evidence enough. He also figured he could use his track record as an anti-Communist to discredit Douglas. The fact that she initially did not consider the pink sheets to be effective did not help her cause much. Even author Sally Denton, who largely supports Douglas in her writing noted, “That Helen Gahagan Douglas failed to accurately gauge the depth and breadth of the fear and paranoia that gripped the nation during 1950—a crucial year in American history—would have fatal consequences for her.”¹⁴ Douglas’ lack of concern and Nixon’s determined plan to paint her as a Communist only further highlight the nastiness of the 1950 election campaign.

Douglas’s failure to respond to Nixon’s pink sheets proved naïve. Douglas even acknowledged later, “I failed to take his attacks seriously enough” and “I just thought it was ridiculous, absolutely absurd.”¹⁵ It is this failure to recognize the potency of Nixon’s hardball tactics that would aid in her loss of the 1950 election. No matter how absurd Douglas thought Nixon’s tactics were, their effectiveness became evident. Nixon recalled the importance of Communism during the campaign, noting that there were men like Democrat Manchester Boddy who said Douglas was a “small subversive clique of red hots.”¹⁶ Nixon even claimed that members

¹² Sally Denton, *The Pink Lady: the Many Lives of Helen Gahagan Douglas* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 139.

¹³ Greg Mitchell, *Tricky Dick and the Pink Lady: Richard Nixon vs. Helen Gahagan Douglas—Sexual Politics and the Red Scare, 1950* (New York: Random House, 1998), 141-143.

¹⁴ Denton, *The Pink Lady*, 142.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁶ Nixon, *Memoirs*, 74.

of Douglas' own party wanted her to lose the election in 1950. Jack Kennedy, claimed Nixon, even came to his office during which time he delivered \$1,000 in support of Nixon's campaign on behalf of his father, Joseph Kennedy.¹⁷ Nixon even remembered Douglas' desperation during the 1950 election campaign. He argued that Douglas claimed he was more pro-communist than her and that he was "throwing up a smokescreen of smears, innuendos, and half-truths to try and confuse and mislead the voters."¹⁸ This is but another example of the hardball nature of politics surrounding the election campaign of 1950.

The overuse of hardball tactics that led up to the 1950 Senatorial Election deserve special note. Author Ingrid Scobie pays particular attention to the red-smearing of Douglas by not only Nixon, but also his supporters and leaders of some churches.¹⁹ Nixon went out of his way in creating a campaign with unique attributes. He was able to combine his efforts and indirectly influence the activities of common people into outwardly and directly decrying Douglas' supposed pink nature. Douglas found opposition not only in advertisements and on radio, but also in the streets. Ten days after Douglas opened her campaign, Nixon vowed that in the course of his campaign there would be "no name-calling, no smears, no misrepresentations in this campaign,"²⁰ It became clear that this would not be the case, and Nixon's campaign would be remembered for his coarse tactics against Helen Douglas. What should have been an extraordinary opportunity for Douglas as the potential first female Senator turned into her destruction at Nixon's hands. Nixon doubled back on his claim that he would keep his campaign courteous and not attack or smear Douglas. Instead, he was brutal, but the means by which he achieved success did not concern him much at the time.

There is no doubt that the politics of the late 1940s leading up to Nixon's election as a California Senator were characteristic of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

¹⁹ Ingrid Scobie, "Douglas v Nixon," *History Today* 42, no. 11 (November 1992): 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

brutal accusations, unrelenting badgering, and constant Communist rhetoric. Both Douglas and Nixon used the increase in Communist fervor as a platform for discrediting each other. Unfortunately for Douglas, Nixon had more weight and momentum behind him. The Alger Hiss case, his other work in HUAC, his success with the pink sheets, and reputation as a real anti-Communist propelled him forward to victory in 1950. Nixon's strong desire to move the Republican Party forward, his desire for political prowess, and even a desire to not be beaten by a woman led to harsh politics resulting in a victory, even if a little rough around the edges.