

Vietnam War

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The Man Who Knew Too Much

by James Perloff

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During the 1960s, the consequences of U.S. foreign policy struck America like an unforeseen hurricane. Near the eye of that hurricane was an epic struggle between one man, Otto Otepka, and the architects of the foreign policy. In many ways, this struggle symbolized the age-less conflict between freedom and collectivism. Had it been better known to more Americans, the Otepka affair would have revealed many answers to the puzzles of the nation's plight at that time.

The story really traced back to the Truman Administration. In testimony before Congressional inquiries, ex-Communists such as Whittaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bentley had stunned the country by disclosing the extent of Communist infiltration into the U.S. government — particularly the State Department. The revelations helped unseat the Democrats in the 1952 elections. Although Dwight Eisenhower was little more than the Liberal Establishment's trojan horse to the Republican Party, public pressure forced the new President to restore some semblance of internal security. In 1953 he issued Executive Order 10450, mandating that, where reasonable doubt existed as to the loyalty of a current or prospective government worker, he should not be employed.

Enter Otepka!

Otto Otepka entered the State Department as a security evaluator in 1953. He rose up the ranks and in 1957 became Deputy Director of the Office of Security. Well-known for fairness as well as toughness, Otepka helped rid the State Department of security risks and barred the door to new ones. For his diligent work, he received the Department's Meritorious Service Award.

By 1960, however, the political climate had changed. Joe McCarthy was dead and his campaign against subversion smeared as a witch hunt. The election of John F. Kennedy cued the Liberal Establishment that it might be safe to start bringing the old security risks back from exile.

Shortly after the election, Dean Rusk (Kennedy's choice for Secretary of State) and Bobby Kennedy met with Otepka to discuss the possibility of obtaining security clearance for Walt Rostow. Rostow, a globalist who had written books calling for "an end to nationhood," was tagged to become John F. Kennedy's chief foreign-policy planner. He had been denied clearance three times during the Eisenhower Administration. Otepka explained why. Rostow was the son of a socialist revolutionary; he had long consorted with Communist Party members, including known Soviet spies; two of his aunts had been identified as members of the Communist Party. Corroborating the State Department's view, Air Force Intelligence had branded him a security risk, and the CIA had dropped him from a sensitive contract. Under the Strictures of Executive Order 10450, Otepka explained, security clearance could not be given to Rostow — not, at least, without a new, full-fledged FBI investigation.

What Otepka did not realize, however, was that the purpose of the meeting was not to evaluate Rostow. It was to evaluate Otepka himself. Rusk and Kennedy saw that, to bring Rostow and an army of like-minded underlings into the State Department, Otepka would have to go. Thus began the long struggle that author William J. Gill aptly summed up in the title of his definitive book about the case, *The Ordeal of Otto Otepka*.

Exit Otepka?

The new Administration's first maneuver was to order Otepka onto a special project, reviewing old security files. This effectively tied his hands as the first Rusk appointees began trickling into the State Department. For the time being, Walt Rostow was made a special assistant in the White House, which had its own security standards.

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Next, the State Department's Office of Security was "reorganized." Despite hordes of new personnel requiring background checks, nearly a third of the security evaluators' positions were cut. Otepka's position was also eliminated, but, when members of the Senate complained (Otepka's competence was renowned), he was permitted to stay on in a demoted capacity, as head of the Division of Evaluations.

In the meantime, Dean Rusk began the wholesale razing of security procedures. Normally, a government employee was granted a "security waiver" (deferring a background check) only under emergency conditions. During his first 14 months, however, Rusk issued 152 waivers for new officials. (In contrast, during the eight Eisenhower years, the Secretary of State signed just five such waivers.) Many security clearances were allowed to bypass Otepka's Division of Evaluations. Rusk's new security chief, John Reilly, rubber-stamped them. Walt Rostow was slipped into the State Department, heading its policy planning council. There he authored the infamous "Rostow Papers," which laid out these goals for American foreign policy: unilateral disarmament, world government, and accommodation with the Communist world. With Rusk, he would help engineer the Bay of Pigs disaster as well as the Vietnam War — a war calculated to dispirit America and embroil it in revolution. But one man still blocked the way — Otto Otepka.

Summoned by the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS) in late 1961 and again in 1962, Otepka testified concerning the security changes at the State Department. Shocked, the SISS issued a stern report. The State Department, however, flouted its recommendations and warnings, issuing another 398 security waivers within five months.

Dean Rusk knew that implementation of his foreign policy hinged on Otepka's removal. The next ploy was to have John Reilly offer him a chance to attend the National War College. After discovering that this "honor" would mean an end to his security career, Otepka declined. When Robert McCarthy, a friend of the Kennedys, intimated that Otepka could even have an ambassadorship if he would just walk from security, Otepka held firm. An amazed McCarthy said: "Why is Otepka fighting? What is his price to quit? Every man has his price."

Now the game turned rough. State Department employees were ordered to spy on Otepka. His office phone was tapped, and a bug planted in the wall. His trash bag was examined nightly, his files were rifled, and his safe was cracked. Even his home was placed under surveillance. These actions resulted partly from fear that Otepka might be leaking information to the SISS, but were mostly intended to seek some incriminating pretext on which to fire him.

Eventually, these Orwellian tactics were exposed to the SISS by a former staffer of the State Department, leading to the resignations of Reilly and an assistant. But the war on Otepka continued. He was stripped of his office and secretary, and assigned a make-work job (indexing the *Congressional Record*) in a small room. State Department employees were instructed not to speak to him; few dared even venture "Hello." The persecution was extended to Otepka's former loyal assistants, who were transferred or demoted to petty jobs. Two were assigned to work in a condemned, rat-infested building.

When the surveillance failed to produce anything incriminating, Dean Rusk asked the FBI to investigate Otepka. It also came up empty. Finally, Rusk found his pretext. Because of discrepancies between Otepka's testimony and that of his superiors, the SISS had asked him to substantiate certain allegations. He did so with State Department documents.

In September 1963, Otepka received an official notice of dismissal. It accused him of conduct "unbecoming an officer of the Department of State." What the central charge boiled down to was this: He had shown the SISS two State Department memoranda and an investigative report. This was in violation of a vague directive that Harry Truman had issued in 1948, apparently to protect Alger Hiss. It forbade government workers to disclose information from personnel security files. Although Rusk had violated the directive himself, whenever he felt like it, he applied it to the letter to Otepka.

Otepka appealed the charges. He was forced to wait nearly four years for a hearing. In the meantime, he

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continued to endure his humiliating indexing job at State, the enjoined silence of his co-workers, a smear campaign in the controlled media, and mounting legal costs (which some concerned patriots helped defray). But Otepka did not quit, for to do so would have sent the wrong message to other security officers throughout the government. He knew that the real issue was not his future, but America's.

When Otepka finally received his hearing in June 1967, his attorney, Roger Robb, asked for an impartial judge and an open hearing whose record would be published for the public. These requests were denied. Edward Dragon, a hand-picked Foreign Service officer, presided. Dean Rusk rendered the final verdict, and thus Otepka's judge and prosecutor were in truth the same man. Rusk, of course, upheld the charges. Fearing an outcry in Congress, however, he deigned to allow Otepka to remain in the State Department, but only at a reduced rank in an area unrelated to security.

There was still one glimmer of hope. Richard Nixon, the Republican frontrunner in the 1968 Presidential race, was making many heartening promises to conservatives. Among these was a pledge to see that "justice is accorded this man [Otepka] who served his country so long and so well."

It took Richard Nixon just 24 hours to break that promise. The day after the inauguration, his Secretary of State, William P. Rogers, bluntly informed Roger Robb that Otepka would not be given back his old job, or any other, in State Department security. The Rusk verdict would stand.

To throw conservatives a bone, Nixon appointed Otepka to the Subversive Activities Control Board (SACB). Despite a blistering verbal attack by Ted Kennedy, the Senate approved this nomination 80 to 19, and it was widely proclaimed that Otepka had at last been vindicated. However, the SACB was kept essentially toothless, and in 1973 the Nixon Administration eliminated it from the budget.

The lesson of the Otepka affair is not one of justice — that commodity is far too scarce in our world — but one of spirit. Otto Otepka took his creed from these words of Daniel Webster: "What is the individual man, with all the good or evil that may betide him, in comparison with the good or evil which may befall a great country, and in the midst of great transactions which concern that country's fate? Let the consequences be what they will ... No man can suffer too much ... in the defense of the liberties and constitution of his country."