To the Editors:

Allow me, simply for the sake of the historical record, to comment on those references to my views which appear in five separate articles by leaders of the American Communist Party in Political Affairs, October and November, 1956.

I am much indebted, first of all, to William Z. Foster. He now confirms what was only a hint in my letter to The Nation for August 25, 1956. He reveals that proposals for some basic changes in Party policy and practices were put forward quite some time ago by myself, and independently, by Joseph Clark. It was not "early in 1954," as Foster now remembers it, but half a year before, shortly after we returned from our newspaper posts in Peking and Moscow. In fact, my own views began to take shape in a series of private letters to colleagues on The Worker, and to Party leaders, beginning in 1951.

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peaceful competition, instead of a project as dangerous as world war. The Party became so accustomed to abstract denunciation of imperialism, as a substitute for practical political action, that the concept of being able to impose a period of peace prior to the transformation of imperialist relations was viewed as heretical doctrine.

My own view was that the nature and scope of tempo of the cold war were being misjudged. The real relationship of world forces, arising out of the defeat of the Axis, was proving stronger than all the attempts to reverse that relationship. New factors were operating—such as the end of the atom bomb monopoly, the Chinese Revolution, the rise of a world consciousness for peace—all of which had developed, it should be noted, by 1951.

It was never a matter of minimizing how aggressive were many forces in American life, nor denying the rightness of making the issue of peace the central aspect of the Party's work; it was a matter of recognizing that the cold war was not necessarily a prelude to world war but a struggle to determine the terms of some kind of settlement, within the framework of which the rivalry of the systems would continue peacefully, though not automatically or smoothly. I said this in many ways at that time. The Party's own Draft Resolution of September, 1956, like the Dennis report last April, now admits the misjudgment and recognizes it as a crucial aspect of the Party's deep-rooted sectarianism.

Who really considered the Party's fight against war fruitless? Consider the "Operation Security" which engulfed the whole Party from 1950 until 1956—the attempt to combine some sort of "underground" with the fight for legality. What did it mean to the Party membership and to the world? It was a definitive political judgment that the Party's fight against war until then had been fruitless. More, it was an estimate that the whole world campaign for peace was likely to be so fruitless that within a short time the only way to maintain an American Communist movement would be through an "underground."

I make no abstract comment on the need for "security," which might have been accomplished in many ways. Nor do I cast a shadow on the personal courage and selflessness of the leaders and the cadres of this enterprise, and their families, just as I mean no personal reflection on Foster himself. But it was a testimonial to fruitlessness. It stemmed from Foster's way of seeing things. Many may have thought they were in step with a world outlook. Perhaps a better perspective on this whole era will show the American Communist Party contributed as much to the misunderstanding of American reality elsewhere as did foreign Communists to the misunderstanding from which the American Party suffered. Perhaps the real disservice to international solidarity was the responsibility of American Communists.

The famous "war danger" issue was only one aspect—in fact only the form—of a conflict of views which come under the heading of what Foster now calls "Americanization." The conviction had been growing in me over many years that the strategy and tactics of other Communists were simply not valid for this country, that we had specific—yes, exceptional—conditions. I felt that little progress was possible without a clear break with the habits of thought and the system of leader-
ship, carried over from the bygone era of the Communist International in which so many leaders and members had been shaped.

I do not claim to have had a fully-fashioned outlook to this effect, only elements of it. Nor did I return home in August, 1953 with more than an inkling of the crisis maturing in the Soviet Union. But I did feel strongly that by 1953 the war danger had plainly receded so that even those who oversimplified it in 1951 could see it; hence it was urgent to re-examine all policies and practices quickly. To those who needed to read the zodiac signs in the world Communist firmament, the events of that year should have been persuasive; my feeling was that the American Party had every warrant to act on its own policies, independently and autonomously. If the Party could not take its own initiatives, the very fact of acting only after others did would continue outmoded relationships in a disastrous way.

Why were Clark and myself so impatient, and not-a-little stubborn? Because it was perfectly clear that a deadlock in leadership had prevailed ever since 1945. Many Party leaders had hesitated over the "way-out-in-left-field" policies, relating them not to the "war danger" thesis but other considerations. Many realized that after 1945, the Party might have gone back, so to speak, to 1935—when American Communists did some real things and helped our people solve real problems: to return to 1925 was "out of this world."

But there was always a well-defined group around Foster, more dynamic than any other, which waved "the bloody shirt" of "Browderism" at every opinion contrary to their own. Many who opposed them thought the rough edge could be taken off Foster's views; others believed a mistaken course could be corrected if "managed" properly. Yet they were driven, often against their better judgment, along a ruinous path.

This inner paralysis was continuing in 1953. When Clark's views, and then my own, were made available to Party leaders on some levels, they said they agreed and that they had reached the same conclusions. Nonetheless, it seemed to me that nothing was being done. These men were the real Fabians, as they had been for many years.

Foster is mistaken when he speaks of a "disruptive agitation." There was so little "agitation" that the rank and file and most leading people knew nothing about this conflict until late in 1956. Neither did Foster and his aides invite much discussion; and thus a situation was created, to use a famous phrase, "nasty, brutish, and short." My protest was a refusal to re-register. The whole experience raised the deepest moral and political issues, calling into question long-time loyalties to ideals and friends. I understand very well that this dilemma was not unusual. It is now admitted that hundreds, if not thousands, of Party members suffered ostracism, threats of expulsion, and more, for voicing independent proposals or balking a sectarian course.

My activities thereafter were confined to writing and lecturing on the Left, which I considered an obligation. Perhaps other men, returning from jail and elsewhere, would face up to their responsibilities. In any case it was for the Party itself to tell the story. By the Spring of 1955, the Soviet-Yugoslav reconciliation — which really anticipated the Soviet Twentieth
A COMMUNICATION

Steve Nelson shares a similar view, though in a more tentative way.

It does not seem to have occurred to these commentators that the Nation letter was not written to them, but to a Mr. Benjamin of San Francisco who believed that the revival of a new Left depended on the Party’s self-dissolution. My reply was that Benjamin oversimplified on two counts. I challenged him to take steps toward a revival of the Left irrespective of what the Communists do about their own Party; I urged him to do so without “a lamentation of how fine everything would have been had the American Communists never existed, or in making believe none exist now while urging them to dissolve.” As for the Party, it is true that I doubt whether it can regenerate itself or the American Left and I believe something new must supersede it, which is different from demanding from the outside that it dissolve here and now, and unless it does, nobody else can do anything.

Aptheker asks for evidence to support such doubts. If the American people can be confidently expected to choose Socialism over capitalism, why can’t a few thousand Communists change their own party, he asks, as though this were a perfect syllogism. Perhaps the problem of the American people as a whole can be resolved, whereas a particular political formation has, by now, insoluble problems?

Max Weiss considers that the built-in principles of the Party distinguish it from any forerunner and make self-correction inevitable. This does not exactly explain why Max Weiss has had such difficulties over ten years in applying such principles to achieve the Party’s correction. To Weiss, the Draft Resolution is a “most incisive refuta-
tion” of my doubts. A strange word—“incisive” for such a document, even granting that it charts a forward course which it hesitates to pursue.

John Gates recognizes that neither my views nor actions are personal; they represent a challenge that comes to the Party from many quarters, including present members. He disagrees with me sharply, but presents a program which he thinks will make possible peaceful competition among Socialists.

I do not call upon the Party to dissolve, and never have. Nobody is keeping Weiss or Aptheker from applying their principles. If they resent the suggestion of their political impotence (about which many others have had a more anguishing experience than I) it is up to them to provide a potent rebuttal. I will not be the last to acknowledge that, if and when it comes.

Consider a report of the New York state organizational director in Party Voice, July 1956. This document says that “over the last ten years we have lost more than two-thirds of our membership.” The report then says “of our present membership one-third are industrial workers.” Of the total, no more than 20-30 percent are engaged in sustained activities”, and “no more than 30-40 per cent attend meetings even on an irregular basis.” Moreover, “two-thirds of our present membership is over 40 years old, with no recruiting taking place.”

What do such figures mean, remembering they speak of last July, and granting that the situation may be different say, in California. These figures mean that the specific gravity of all those Party members who are not really connected with productive processes, or even community activities, has risen sharply. Behind the statistics are human beings we have all known. They are fine, able people, with bright memories and deep loyalties. But do they constitute the kind of party they themselves desire? Can they regenerate the American Left? It may be more true that resistance to change in ideas and methods comes most strongly from them. And since they comprise a larger sector of a smaller group, their weight is felt more heavily in opposition to anything except what they have known.

As for the several thousand Party members who are in shops and community activities, I know many of them, have enjoyed the hospitality of their homes and tried to serve them. They do a job that no one can sneer at, and the Party has given them a certain cohesion and guidance. But what is their chief characteristic? Let it be put frankly: while many are known as Left-wingers, for the most part they function in political anonymity, and they do not take responsibility as Communists. They can’t.

It is not a matter of finding fault or allocating it. The historic dilemma of the American Communists has been that so many effective leaders and members could not take responsibility for the Party as such; it is here that so many problems of leadership and so much of the source of bureaucracy lies. Such people cannot dissolve what they have, and nobody should ask it of them. But if the Party can be re-made, do not these, of all people, have to welcome policies of change, and provide new personnel and a fresh outlook?

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kind of party the Communists have

tried to be. He calls it a "Fabian

society," and considers it a backward

step. The Communists, he is sure, will

not break down doors to join it, and

"it is difficult to believe that this is

offered seriously as an instrumentality

for generating a Socialist revival."

I am proposing nothing for which

there is no real need or prospect. Many

Socialist-minded people feel that a pe-

riod of "dis-unification" on the Left,

of a freedom from any organizational

forms enables them to re-think and re-

study best. I respect this feeling and

know how it comes about. It is not in

my thinking that a "Fabian society"

would itself be the organization to

lead Americans through the difficult

transitions of Socialism at some future

time, nor that it would be the or-

ganization on the Left. Perhaps its

function would be no more than to

organize the necessary discussion on

the Left.

But it would be, in the light of

cold realities about the Communist

Party as well as the present moment

in national life, a step forward. For

whom? For those who no longer can

function by the forms and ideas they

had previously accepted. For at least

a part of the three quarters of a mil-

lion Americans who came into and left

the Communist Party over 25 years,

for at least part of the several millions

who were ready to vote the Wallace

ticket in 1948—yes, for those younger

people, north and south, east and west,

Negro and white workers and non-

workes who have questions about

present-day America which go unan-

swered.

It is not for any single individual

or group to form such a movement,

just as I do not think it can come

from the ex-Trotskyites or the Com-

munists. Nobody can re-make the

past, even if he wants to do better,

nor can any group inherit the capital

organization. Such a movement needs

to be educational within itself and be-

yond itself, which is in no sense to

weaken the activities that are going

on all around us through established

organizations. Such a movement needs

democratic debate, re-study, honest ar-

gument, and I think it cannot have

more than a sympathetic detachment

towards Socialist and Communist

forces abroad. It will come as people

listen to each other, and more than

that—hear each other. The basis for

it exists in groups that are function-

ing throughout the country. The dis-

dain which Max Weiss shows for such

a proposal, or at most a grudging tol-

erance, may be a measure of his grasp

of reality, but also an advantage to

such a movement.

When it comes, it will supersede for

most of us what we have known,

without prejudicing the future. It may

only be a halfway house. And many

who do not see the need for it today

may tomorrow ask—and find—a wel-

come in it.