

Netherlands American Studies Review

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Welcome

to the twelfth edition of the *Netherlands American Studies Review* (NASR), the bi-annual student journal of the Netherlands American Studies Association (NASA).

In this first issue of 2026, you will find seven articles and a review, each of which showcases the work being done in the Netherlands to explore questions of contemporary relevance in striking and original ways. Two of the articles, from Eulink and Vader, provide fresh insights into the genealogy of the contemporary right which is reshaping the politics of the United States in 2026. The articles by Kempers and Szepesi discuss aspects of the Red Scare, a topic at the forefront of many people's minds as the Trump administration continues its assault on higher education, the culture industry, and civil society. The temptation to psychologize Trump in this climate is ever-present, but van de Mortel shows the pitfalls of doing so and the long history of attempts through his examination of Willem Oltmans and Richard Nixon in the 1960s. Wincenciak examines the question of authenticity, a topic which is becoming increasingly pressing as we confront the effects of AI on our culture. Finally, Renucci's review of *The End of Ambition* reminds us of the shifting nature of the relationship between the United States and the Global South, a topic with a renewed urgency following recent US actions in Venezuela.

We are thankful for all the students who sent us their work, for the editors who worked tirelessly to select and fine-tune these papers, and, of course, for the NASA Board, which has supported us throughout the process. I want to also take the opportunity to welcome our new academic coordinator, Dr Spencer Morrison, who has stepped into the role with great vigor and enthusiasm, and to thank our outgoing coordinator, Dr William Michael Schmidli, who has been in post across three editors-in-chief and whose tireless efforts have made an enormous contribution in supporting the success of American Studies in the Netherlands – thank you so much to him from the whole NASR community for all his work, and from me personally for all the support he has given me.

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Paper

From Fringe to Mainstream: Samuel T. Francis and the American Right

Kenzo Eulink | University of Amsterdam

This paper was written for the course 'Radicalization of the American Right' for the RMA History

Born on April 29, 1947, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Samuel Todd Francis became one of the most controversial thinkers on the American right in the final quarter of the twentieth century and has continued to be influential into the twenty-first. After completing his doctoral studies in British history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Francis began his career as a policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation in 1977, a time when the conservative think tank was in its infancy but about to make a lasting mark on the conservative movement during the Reagan years. He served as a legislative assistant to Republican North Carolina Senator John P. East from 1981 to 1986 and later joined *The Washington Times*, where he was part of the editorial staff and eventually became a syndicated columnist. Editor-in-chief Wesley Pruden fired the journalist from Chattanooga in September 1995 for racist remarks he had made a year earlier during a speech at a conference of the so-called 'American Renaissance,' a white supremacist organization founded in 1990. The rest of Francis's writing life would focus on the themes of paleoconservatism, race, and populism.¹ It was during this final period that he wrote several monographs, the ideas of which are the central focus of this article, which evaluates Francis's place in the broader conservative movement and its historiography.

This study situates itself within an already rich field of scholarship on the myriad dimensions of American conservatism and its radicalization, in which a key historiographical discussion concerns the divide between the 'respectable' right and the 'radical' right. In general terms, the historiography on this topic can be divided into three overlapping frameworks. First, scholars have conceptualized the divide in psychological terms. This is best exemplified by Richard Hofstadter's framework of the *paranoid style of politics*, in which the extreme right is viewed as an irrational mode of politics long present in American history.²

Notes

¹ The biographical description outlined here I gathered from the following sources: Joe Holley, "Conservative Writer Samuel T. Francis Dies," *Washington Post*, February 26, 2005, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2005/02/26/conservative-writer-samuel-t-francis/8f0d59be-94fe-43ec-93ce-0d24676cb608/>; "Sam Francis, Voice of the Radical Right, Dies Unexpectedly," Southern Poverty Law Center, April 28, 2005, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/reports/sam-francis-voice-radical-right-dies-unexpectedly/>.

² Classic examples of this line of argumentation: Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964; Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right: The New American Right Expanded and Updated* (Doubleday & Company, 1964); Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970* (Harper & Row, 1970). A more recent example of this way of thinking: Jonathan Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (Oxford University Press, 2001). For studies that focus on the division between conservative and moderate Republicans: Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry*

The second approach argues that the ‘fringe’ right has exerted significant influence on postwar American conservatism and contends that it is a constituent part of the ‘mainstream’ conservative fold.³ A third scholarly perspective suggests that the divide between the ‘fringe’ and ‘center’ is a porous one. They argue, instead, that this sharp distinction has inhibited scholarship from discerning the coalitional and strategic nature of the American right and how these dynamics have shaped the Republican Party into a more radical political formation.⁴ Though this brief overview does not fully capture the diversity and richness of the relevant literature, it provides a helpful framework for understanding how historians and political scientists have come to understand the American right.

This article aims to address the problem of the relation between the ‘respectable’ and ‘radical’ right by examining the intellectual writings of Samuel T. Francis. It argues that while he was a marginal and fringe figure in his own time, he was a precursor to ideological developments that later became part of the conservative mainstream. The majority of his works were written in the 1990s and early 2000s, a period that many of the scholars discussed above identify as one of significant radicalization. In light of this, Francis’s thought provides us with a useful case study through which to evaluate the intersection of populism, race, and paleoconservatism. This paper therefore not only attempts to better understand the relationship among the various strands of the American right but also to reconsider Francis as a paradoxical figure: publicly denounced and shunned for his abhorrent views by contemporaries, yet prescient in prefiguring political themes that would later come to dominate the Republican Party. Themes such as opposition to immigration, hostility to globalism and its institutions, emphasis on a “betrayed” white constituency, antipathy toward elites, and, more generally, the promotion of populist nationalism are key ideological elements of the present GOP, and many of them were already evident in Francis’s works. Through investigating his writings, I suggest that scholars of the American right have underestimated his role and the extent to which his work can help in illuminating the radical right’s growing intellectual importance to the mainstream conservative movement.

In the course of this analysis, I therefore also reconsider the intellectual history of the American right and analyze how Francis figures within George Nash’s postwar history of conservative thought. In his much-cited account, Nash conceptualized the conservative movement as consisting of three strands: traditionalists, anti-communists, and libertarians. I propose that Nash’s model of conservatism should be expanded so that it takes paleoconservative populist thinkers into consideration. Through this analysis, this article hopes to contribute to our understanding of how the conservative movement evolved into

Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus (Hill and Wang, 2001); and Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

³ See for example: John S. Huntington, *Far-Right Vanguard: The Radical Roots of Modern Conservatism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022); Matthew Dallek, *Birchers: How the John Birch Society Radicalized the American Right* (Hachette UK, 2023); and George Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* (University Press of Kansas, 2017).

⁴ See for instance: Nicole Hemmer, *Partisans: The Conservative Revolutionaries Who Remade American Politics in the 1990s* (Basic Books, 2022); Jeremy Peters, *Insurgency: How Republicans Lost Their Party and Got Everything They Wanted* (Random House, 2022); and Julian E. Zelizer, *Burning Down the House: Newt Gingrich, the Fall of a Speaker, and the Rise of the New Republican Party* (Penguin Press, 2020).

what it is today, without presuming it to be the inevitable outcome of the historical processes that preceded it.

From a methodological point of view, this article unfolds in three sections. Part I examines Francis's relation with paleoconservatism and his main theories, ranging from the concept of the managerial revolution and "Middle American Radicals" to his views regarding race and its relationship with civilizational decay. In the next section, I evaluate what close study of his thought tells us about the distinction between the 'fringe' and 'mainstream' variations of the American right. To conclude, I synthesize the main findings into a comprehensive answer to the main issue and reflect on the implications of this paper for the broader historiographical discussion. In order to successfully analyze the topics at hand, I utilize a broad selection of Francis's writings in conjunction with insights from recent historical literature.

The term 'paleoconservative,' first coined by far-right political philosopher Paul Gottfried in 1986, is applicable to the school of thought to which Samuel T. Francis belonged.⁵ While he was still employed at *The Washington Times*, Francis published *Beautiful Losers: Essays on the Failure of American Conservatism* (1993). In this collection of essays, Francis lamented his observation that "conservatism had transformed itself into virtual extinction," expressing that he longed for the "Old-Right."⁶ This is a striking claim for a conservative thinker to make, given that the United States had been governed by Republicans for the preceding twelve years. However, this line of thinking was precisely what set paleoconservatism apart, as it was, to a significant degree, an ideological reaction against key elements of the Reagan and Bush administrations. These elements included a globalist foreign policy, military interventionism, the embrace of neoconservatism, the pro-immigration programs of both Reagan and Bush, and their support for free trade and global capitalism.⁷ Instead of these policies and views, paleoconservatives promoted ethno-nationalism, traditionalism, cultural nativism, and anti-managerialism.⁸ Many of these key ideas are expressed in Francis's writings, particularly in the various theories he formulated throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

A useful starting point is his anti-managerialism. As a thinker deeply influenced by the American political theorist James Burnham, Francis adopted many of the ideas set out in Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* (1941).⁹ The central thesis of Burnham's work contended that the rise of a new class of technocrats had succeeded in taking the reins of power in key sectors of society in Europe and the United States. Business, government, and the media were, according to this theory, largely controlled by a segment of highly skilled managers who had displaced the old elite.¹⁰ Francis further developed Burnham's theory in

⁵ George Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* (University Press of Kansas, 2016), 63.

⁶ Samuel T. Francis, *Beautiful Losers: Essays on the Failure of American Conservatism* (University of Missouri Press, 1994), 2-3.

⁷ This article outlines all these resentments in great detail: Jeffrey Bloodworth, "Trumpism's Paleoconservative Roots and Dealignment," *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 1, no. 1 (2023): 185-205.

⁸ For an ideological analysis: Jean-François Drolet and Michael C. Williams, "America First: Paleoconservatism and the Ideological Struggle for the American Right," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 25, no. 1 (2020): 28-50.

⁹ James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution: What Is Happening in the World* (John Day Company, 1941).

¹⁰ Drolet and Williams, "America First," 33.

his own *Leviathan and Its Enemies*, an 800-page, highly disorganized work written in the early 1990s but published posthumously in 2016. In this book, he described how this managerial class had systematically taken over society's institutions. Francis argued that beneath a liberal ideology devoted to reducing crime and poverty, in particular by improving education and the welfare state, this class was tearing apart the traditional way of life.¹¹ This led, according to Francis, to the collapse of "the moral, intellectual, and institutional fabric of traditional society."¹²

The foremost allegation in Francis's *Leviathan and Its Enemies* was not, however, leveled against liberalism itself but rather against the conservative establishment. These conservatives were, in his view, unable to counteract the liberal managerial leviathan besetting them.¹³ Their attempts at accommodating these new power structures proved futile, since the conservative establishment could not offer resistance to "these new and continuing forces of acceleration and to those elements of the managerial elite actively promoting and using them."¹⁴ Francis's diagnosis of conservatism's inability to neutralize the liberal seizure of society and his notion of an elite takeover mark a clear distinction between his conceptualization of what conservatism ought to be and the conservative establishment in his day.

To combat the technocratic liberal elite, Francis suggested that the American right should focus on a hitherto unacknowledged subset of the American electorate: "the Middle American Radicals" (MARs). Building on the sociological research of Donald Warren in the 1970s, Francis identified this group of resentful white Americans – generally without a college education, coming from the middle and lower classes – as a crucial component in the resurgence of national conservatism.¹⁵ In an essay about the MARs in the early 1980s, Francis saw this cohort of Americans as "a sociopolitical force now coalescing into a class and perhaps into a new elite that will replace the managerial elite."¹⁶ His view was that this group was not so much an ideologically oriented movement as a segment of the population that felt betrayed by, and therefore opposed, the liberal elite's emphasis on cosmopolitanism and its alliance with both the owners of capital and the underclass.¹⁷ Their political attitude was, according to Francis, best characterized by "domestic ethic that centers on the family, the neighborhood and local community, the church, and the nation as the basic framework of values."¹⁸ In short, MARs represented the ideal electorate for advancing Francis's paleoconservative agenda, which saw cultural particularism – and even ethnonationalism – as important dimensions of its ideology.¹⁹

¹¹ Matthew Rose, *A World after Liberalism: Philosophers of the Radical Right* (Yale University Press, 2021), 118–123.

¹² Samuel T. Francis, *Leviathan and Its Enemies* (Washington Summit Publishers, 2016), 4.

¹³ Rose, *A World after Liberalism*, 123.

¹⁴ Samuel T. Francis, *Leviathan and Its Enemies*, 489.

¹⁵ Rose, *A World after Liberalism*, 123–127.

¹⁶ Francis, *Beautiful Losers*, 68.

¹⁷ Francis, *Beautiful Losers*, 61–62, 66–68, 74.

¹⁸ Francis, *Beautiful Losers*, 74.

¹⁹ See also: Samuel T. Francis, *Revolution from the Middle* (Middle America Press, 1997).

Over time, race became a central feature of Francis's thought, especially following his dismissal from *The Washington Times* in 1995. In fact, his speech at the *American Renaissance* conference in May 1994 already contained significant components of his racist theories. Foremost among them was the idea that the white majority in the United States would eventually lose its status as the dominant group due to demographic changes. He therefore advised the conservative establishment to pursue an explicit race-based strategy that appealed to this segment of the electorate in the following manner: "what we as whites must do is reassert our identity and our solidarity, and we must do so in explicitly racial terms through the articulation of a racial consciousness as whites."²⁰ Although Francis denied allegations of white supremacy, this assertion of white identity and his attempts to support his racist views with murky science were often conspicuously racist.²¹

An important facet of Francis's thinking about the position of white Americans in modern US society and its relation to the non-white populace pertained to immigration. He predicted that this issue would dominate the American political scene and society. Pointing to the managerial class once more, it stood to reason, in Francis's view, that these liberal elites would promote an influx of immigrants. After all, the arrival of immigrants would increase cultural and linguistic heterogeneity, dismantling the older social structure of the American nation. It also ensured the "importation of a new underclass," which gave the managerial class more electoral power to pursue their political agenda.²² This logic was rooted in the idea that society's affluent and poor would conspire together against the interests of the middle class.²³ In an article prepared for the American Renaissance conference of 1998, Francis went so far as to relate immigration not only to "the coming racial revolution" but also to "the erosion of nationality itself in globalist free trade and a One World political architecture," resulting in a "multi-racial, multi-cultural, and transnational swamp."²⁴ Though not historically unique, Francis's theories foreshadowed the great replacement conspiracy theories that have become commonplace among Republican voters today.²⁵

To understand his views on race and immigration, we must examine Francis's conception of how these issues contribute to the decline of civilization. Francis argued that the demographic trend by which white Americans were becoming a minority was detrimental to US society. He held that the United States was witnessing a transfer of power, in which the white population was losing influence to other racial and ethnic groups. Since Francis believed that whiteness was essential to US history, he advocated for the preservation of that

²⁰ Samuel T. Francis, "Why Race Matters," in *Essential Writings on Race*, ed. Jared Taylor (New Century Foundation, 2007), chap. 2.

²¹ See also: Samuel T. Francis, *Ethnopolitics: Immigration, Race, and the American Political Future* (Representative Government Press, 2003).

²² Rose, *A World after Liberalism*, 128–129.

²³ Rose, *A World after Liberalism*, 125.

²⁴ Samuel T. Francis, "Race and the American Identity," in Taylor, *Essential Writings on Race*, chap. 6.

²⁵ David Smith, "How Trump's Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric Is Taking Over the Republican Party," *The Guardian*, December 22, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/dec/22/trump-anti-immigrant-rhetoric-republican-party>. More on Francis's thoughts on immigration can be found in Samuel T. Francis, *America Extinguished: Mass Immigration and the Disintegration of American Culture* (Americans for Immigration Control Publishers, 2001).

supposed heritage.²⁶ In 1995, he contended that the United States was facing a crisis that, if not resolved in favor of white Americans, “will almost certainly result in the loss of white control of the United States within half a century, in the disappearance of white civilization, and eventually in biological extinction.”²⁷ This apocalyptic portrayal of the implications of racial change in the United States demonstrates the sense of urgency that Francis attributed to these demographic transformations.

While reading and analyzing the works of Francis, one cannot help but discern the similarities with modern-day ‘Trumpism.’ Although there is no evidence that Donald Trump was himself influenced by his writings, many of Francis’s ideas have now been adopted by the American radical right. Other scholars have also made this observation. The political scientist Damon Linker characterized Francis’s thought as a “proto-MAGA nationalism,” due to the latter’s formulation of a nationalist-populist ideology. In fact, Linker even compared Francis to the Florentine political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli because of the American writer’s political foresight, claiming that “Francis’s intellectual gift was vision – at the scale of decades. Machiavelli possessed it at the scale of centuries.”²⁸

This particular analogy notwithstanding, it is certainly the case that ‘Trumpism’ and Francis’s political theory significantly overlap. The historian David Greenberg has argued that ‘Trumpism’ represents an amalgamation of populism and paleoconservatism, converging on three main ideological characteristics. First, ‘Trumpism’ particularly advocates for an older and whiter notion of American identity; second, it breaks with the idea that government should limit itself as much as possible; and third, it is openly opposed to free international trade, promoting instead a conception of world politics that sees US national interests in a zero-sum competition with other countries, thereby obstructing international cooperation.²⁹ In these three domains, the paleoconservative thought of Francis has reappeared, albeit in different guises, on the American political scene as the dominant ideological framework of the GOP.

I contend, therefore, that we should reconceptualize George Nash’s notion of the conservative intellectual movement. In his renowned 1976 book, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*, Nash makes the case that conservative intellectuals formed a ‘three-legged stool’ encompassing three main pillars: libertarians, anti-communists, and traditionalists.³⁰ While Nash wrote this book in the 1970s, it could be argued that his description holds true even into the 2010s. However, such a conception neglects the intellectual undercurrents of which Francis was a part. After all, his paleoconservative ideas do not align well with Nash’s model. Yet Francis, and others, such as Thomas Fleming and Paul Gottfried, were deeply embedded in the American right, and any intellectual history of

²⁶ Rose, *A World after Liberalism*, 128–130.

²⁷ Samuel T. Francis, “Prospects for Racial and Cultural Survival,” in Taylor, *Essential Writings on Race*, chap. 3.

²⁸ Damon Linker, “Sam Francis: The Dangerous Apostle of Right-Wing Populism,” *The UnPopulist*, May 4, 2024, <https://www.theunpopulist.net/p/sam-francis-the-dangerous-apostle>.

²⁹ David Greenberg, “An Intellectual History of Trumpism: Populism, Paleoconservatism, and the Ideas Behind a Republican Insurgency,” *Tokyo University American Pacific Studies* 18 (2018): 9.

³⁰ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Basic Books, 1976), xiii.

this movement that ignores such figures remains incomplete. Although Nash rightly argued in the 1970s that the extreme right's "contribution to conservatism as an intellectual force was negligible," a survey of Francis's work demonstrates that this strand of the American right was indeed capable of serious intellectual discussion, however objectionable his views may have been.³¹

Even in the revised edition of *The Conservative Intellectual Movement* published in 2006, attention devoted to paleoconservative intellectuals is scant. In the added chapter on the conservative movement during the thirty-year period after the book's initial publication, Nash only discusses paleoconservatism in the context of its public debates with neoconservatives. Moreover, although Nash revisits his older model by also including neoconservatism and the "Religious Right" as "distinct impulses" of American conservatism at the end of the 1980s, he treats paleoconservatism more as a rebellious and temporary movement than as a structural new school of thought.³² This is consistent with Nash's eschewal of the role that race and racism played among conservative intellectuals, which can be explained by the fact that he himself is a conservative intellectual for whom this topic should be avoided for both strategic and ideological reasons.³³ As a result, Nash's model cannot function as a viable theory to examine the entire intellectual history of the American right.

We should recognize that there was a fourth pillar on the right that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which can be characterized as the populist paleoconservative branch. While paleoconservatism originated as a reaction to mainstream conservatism, it should still be regarded as part of the same political formation. What unites the American right is a critique of liberalism, particularly of its emphasis on egalitarianism. Although this is a negative definition of the right, it nonetheless points to why it is illuminating to analyze the intellectual history of the movement collectively. Incorporating this new pillar into the intellectual history of the American right provides a framework with which to understand the question of the divide between the 'respectable/mainstream' and 'radical/fringe' factions, for this framework acknowledges not only the distinct nature of paleoconservatism as a pillar on its own but also its congruence with the broader right-wing movement. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, recognizing this variant of conservatism allows historians to pose new questions that delve into the intellectual history of the American right and criticize established conceptions about its evolution. It opens new avenues of historical scholarship, which are of great importance given the current political climate in Washington.

The central goal of this article has been to better understand the American right and its internal dividing lines. To this end, this paper has examined the far-right intellectual Samuel T. Francis. By investigating his paleoconservative intellectual milieu, his anti-managerialism, the sociology of so-called Middle American Radicals, and his racial theory of civilizational

³¹ Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*, xi.

³² George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, new ed. (ISI Books, 2006), 359–372.

³³ For a deeper analysis of the problems undergirding Nash's account see: Jennifer Burns, "In Retrospect: George Nash's 'The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945,'" *Reviews in American History* 32, no. 3 (September 2004): 447–462, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30031428>.

decay, this paper demonstrates that the conceptual boundaries often drawn between ‘respectable mainstream’ conservatism and its ‘fringe’ counterpart are increasingly blurred. Since Francis developed a highly detailed theory of society and proposed elaborate strategies for conservatives, it follows that one cannot simply reduce him to an irrational, simple-minded individual. It was precisely by way of scholarship that he attempted to legitimize his extremist worldview. The case of Francis thus serves as evidence of the complex and shifting nature of the American right.

To comprehend this complexity, this paper has suggested that Nash’s ‘three-legged stool’ should be updated to include the populist paleoconservative branch to which Francis belonged. In so doing, it has not only shed light on Samuel Francis as an intellectual but also proposed a model for interpreting the evolution of the American right after the 1990s. In light of ‘Trumpism’ becoming the dominant ideology of the Republican Party, this essay has shown that an intellectual history that excludes figures such as Francis constitutes an insufficient model. Given that Francis prefigured the shift the Republican Party underwent in the 2010s, he warrants greater recognition as a key figure in right-wing political philosophy. Alongside Francis, historians should investigate far-right intellectuals to a greater degree, thereby refining their historical interpretation of the American right’s evolution.

Paper

Angela Calomiris and the *Red Masquerade*: Within and Beyond the Women's Life Writing Genre

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This paper has been adapted from the final thesis for the MA American Studies

In 1942, two Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents knocked on Angela Calomiris' New York City apartment door and told her they had war work for her. Calomiris, a native New Yorker of Greek descent, jumped on the opportunity – of course she wanted to support the war effort. She would go on to become an influential FBI informant within the American Communist Party (CPUSA) whose personal struggles over her sexuality and gender would inform her memoir, *Red Masquerade*.¹ Published in 1950, it came after she had spent seven years as an informant and just one year after she had testified against members of the CPUSA in the Smith Act trial.² Although Calomiris was influential in the Smith Act trial, her memoir—and the category of FBI informant memoirs more generally—has been the focus of only a few scholarly studies, most notably Lisa E. Davis' biography of Calomiris, *Undercover Girl*, and a journal article by historian Veronica Wilson which focuses on Calomiris' patriotic incentive to become an informant.³ While Davis' *Undercover Girl* is the most significant work on Calomiris, its focus on her lesbian identity, her 'masculine' look, and her supposedly exaggerated memoir leave readers blind to the possibility of reading *Red Masquerade* through the lens of women's life writing. It is this oversight in both Davis' biography and Wilson's article which this article aims to correct.

Recent scholarship on women's autobiographical traditions, most notably by literature scholars Bella Brodski and Celeste Schenck, has reexamined the category of women's life writing, analyzing female autobiographical writing through a set of questions focusing on what moves a woman to write about her life, which topics are awarded the most attention, and how women understand their relation to the often masculine-coded genre of autobiography.⁴ Similarly, gender studies scholar Tanya Ann Kennedy focuses on the interconnectedness between cultural and spatial context and female life writing, arguing that it is the dichotomy between a public man and a private woman that creates a labyrinth of gendered expectations and requirements that female writers have to find a way through to discover their own

Notes

¹ Angela Calomiris, *Red Masquerade: Undercover for the F.B.I.* (J.B. Lippincott Company, 1950).

² Lisa E. Davis, *Undercover Girl: The Lesbian Informant Who Helped the FBI Bring Down the Communist Party* (Imagine, 2017).

³ Davis, *Undercover Girl*; and Veronica A. Wilson, "I Chose the Values I Regarded as American': Sexuality, Ethnicity, and FBI Informant Angela Calomiris," *Twentieth Century Communism* 20, no. 20 (May 2021).

⁴ Bella Brodski and Celeste Schenck, eds., *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Cornell University Press, 1988).

representative voice.⁵ This article reflects on this debate concerning what characterizes women's life writing, providing the context from which to analyze an under-represented genre of literature: female-authored informant memoirs. In this way, my article corrects the neglect of these works by placing Calomiris' memoir within the context of scholarship on female informant memoirs, examining its role within the genre of women's life writing. In particular, it provides a critical examination of the extent to which *Red Masquerade* fits into these genres and how considering it in relation to them can add to our understanding of Calomiris' writing. In doing so, it offers a close reading of *Red Masquerade* as a way to intervene in two areas of scholarship: the first, as already noted, concerns the category of women's life writing; the second is a broader debate around Cold War domestic culture. This latter area of scholarship is particularly indebted to Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound*, in which one of the central questions focuses on the impact of the Cold War era on the role of women in the home sphere.⁶ I argue that Calomiris' memoir offers a unique lens through which to examine the lived experience of women in the context that May lays out, foregrounding the Cold War context in ways that allow for a deeper interrogation of the interrelations between gender identity and anti-Communism.

The vast majority of the existing scholarship on FBI informants has focused on male actors and, as a result, has often taken gender and sexuality as a given when it comes to research into the lives of informants.⁷ Veronica Wilson does, however, make Calomiris's alleged lesbian identity central to her 2021 journal article, "I Chose the Values I Regard as American." Leaning heavily on Calomiris' own writings, Wilson contends that Calomiris became an informant to prove that she was a patriotic American and to thus free her from secret investigations into her supposed lesbian identity. Wilson argues that Calomiris used her anti-communism strategically, as a way to hide her lesbian identity during a period of severe homophobia in the United States.⁸ Lisa E. Davis, in her 2017 biography of Calomiris, questions the justification and truthfulness of Calomiris' story in *Red Masquerade*, pointing to money and fame as the main incentives for Calomiris becoming an informant and then writing her memoir. Davis argues that Calomiris "took a chance based on high expectations of even more money, greater fame, and a good job in the photography field through her FBI connections."⁹

While both Davis' biographical work and Wilson's article offer potential queer readings of Calomiris's memoir, they risk neglecting what Martha Vicinus has argued is the complexity of identity. With a focus on the strong pull of one's feeling of belonging within the concepts of class, ethnicity, (nuclear) family, and race, Vicinus argues that one's sexual identity is

⁵ Tanya Ann Kennedy, *Keeping up her Geography: Women's Writing and Geocultural Space in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Taylor and Francis, 2007), part of the Routledge Series: Literary Criticism and Cultural Theory, ed. William E. Cain, 111-156.

⁶ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 2008).

⁷ See Piotr M. Szpunar, "The I's of the Informant: Memoirs of Surveillance Society," *Surveillance & Society* 18, no. 4 (November 2020); and Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, "Informants by the Hundreds: FBI Penetration of the CPUSA," *American Communist History* 21, no. 1/2 (March 2022).

⁸ Wilson, "I Chose the Values I Regarded as American."

⁹ Davis, *Undercover Girl*, 1.

created by a desire to fit into several different kind of groups.¹⁰ Focusing primarily on Calomiris' queer identity in relation to her memoir therefore risks disregarding the full complexity of her identity. Whereas Calomiris did not identify herself as a lesbian in the memoir, Davis does so, drawing on the knowledge that Calomiris was a well-known lesbian woman from Greenwich Village in order to read her lesbian identity into her memoir.¹¹ In contrast to Davis' approach, this paper will apply Vicinus' more complex understanding of intersectional identity in its reading of Calomiris' autobiography. Gender and sexuality will therefore be analyzed together in this article's close reading of the memoir, arguing for a clear connection between the two through Calomiris' consideration of her female as well as masculine-like identity.¹²

To undertake this investigation, this article is structured in three parts. First, it reviews the existing historiography on women's life-writing, drawing on the work of Brodski and Schenck, as well as Kennedy, to identify a set of overlapping characteristics in women's life-writing. Second, Calomiris' memoir will be placed into the context of the Second World War and the Cold War to discern the key influences on the content of her memoir. Third, and most importantly, the historiographically determined set of characteristics of women's life-writing and the findings of the historical contextualization will be combined in a thematic analysis of the memoir, focusing in particular on LGBTQ+ history and Calomiris' relationship to gender and sexuality. In particular, I place the themes of gender and sexuality within *Red Masquerade* in relation to two components that the historiography suggests are characteristic of women's life writing: the creation of a sense of selfhood through masculine norms (drawing on the work of Brodski and Schenck) and the extent to which Calomiris wrote through a set of gendered expectations informed by a public/private divide (as suggested by Kennedy).¹³ I argue that by focusing on how sexuality and gender were written into Angela Calomiris' memoir, it is possible to see how *Red Masquerade* exemplifies a number of features of the women's autobiographical genre, most notably the struggle between 'performing' gender and countering existing gender norms. This paper thus contributes an intersectional analysis to Cold War studies, connecting historical gender research to literary practices.

In the 1980s, women's life writing began to attract increasing scholarly attention, leading in the last twenty years to a consistent argument about its key features. A crucial early work came in 1987, when gender and early modern French scholar Domna Stanton challenged the supposed unimportance of reading about a woman's private life and thoughts. A woman's life, Stanton argues, is, according to the norms of society, supposed to stay within the private sphere and not be brought into public through published texts. Stanton investigates the implications of the female "signature" in those writings that did become public, arguing that this "signature" encompasses the female identity in gender, name, and social understanding. This complicates the reception of female writing because it does not allow for a reading

¹⁰ Martha Vicinus, "The history of lesbian history," *Feminist Studies* 38, no. 3 (2012), 575.

¹¹ Davis, *Undercover Girl*, 1-2.

¹² Davis, *Undercover Girl*, 2.

¹³ The paper will go more in-depth into these scholars in the historiographical review. Brodski and Schenck, "Introduction;" Kennedy, *Keeping up her Geography*.

without gendered predispositions.¹⁴ Subsequently, literature scholars Bella Brodski and Celeste Schenck followed Stanton's lead, but centered their argument around female selfhood and the implications of masculine norms for the creation of this selfhood. Aiming to question female self-representation in autobiographical writing, Brodski and Schenck argue that the genre of autobiographical literature has been shaped through a male lens that women have adhered to.¹⁵ With late nineteenth and early twentieth century women's autobiographical writings as the focal point of her research, Sidonie Smith, professor in English and women's studies, arrived at a similar conclusion in her 1993 monograph.¹⁶

In the early twenty-first century, academic voices on women's life writing continued to echo the ideas put forward in the 1980s. Drawing on the argument that autobiography as a genre had been male dominated, Tanya Ann Kennedy reflects on the implications of a "public/private divide" that has shaped the dominant public man versus the subordinate private woman dichotomy.¹⁷ Stepping out of the assigned private (domestic) sphere that a woman is supposed to adhere to has proven difficult despite changes in gender roles. Kennedy argues that the public/private divide is contextually dependent, and that contextualizing a woman's place in society can be used as a starting point to analyze how the public/private dichotomy is expressed in women's writings.¹⁸

In this field, therefore, the overall understanding of women's life-writing rests on the idea that a woman's identity, representation, and societal place is mediated through dominant male concepts of a woman's life. It is therefore crucial, this scholarship suggests, to provide an analysis of gender norms in any consideration of women's autobiographical works. To make a judgement about the relevance of this approach to Calomiris' memoir, in the next section of this article I read *Red Masquerade* against Brodski's and Schenck's argument that a female author tends to write autobiographical work while identifying herself through common masculine norms and Kennedy's argument for the continuing influence of a public/private divide within women's writing. Before turning attention to this analysis, however, it is important to contextualize Angela Calomiris' informant memoir in relation to two significant historical periods: the Second World War and the early Cold War. Central to these periods in the United States was an emerging atmosphere of conformism, with little accepted room to develop lifestyles outside of what Elaine Tyler May calls the "family-centered culture," as well as an increasing fear of Communism.¹⁹ Within the United States, government policies were informed by an intense fear of Soviet influences and consequently focused on developing a society based on the norm of the stable family, which was believed to be the best barrier against Communism, as well as against broader threats to the established

¹⁴ Donna C. Stanton, "Preface," and "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?," in *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Donna C. Stanton (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Brodski and Schenck, "Introduction."

¹⁶ Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Indiana University Press, 1993).

¹⁷ Kennedy, *Keeping up her Geography*, 1.

¹⁸ Kennedy, *Keeping up her Geography*, 1-24.

¹⁹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 13.

heteronormative order.²⁰ With FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's anti-queer policies of the 1940s and 1950s, individuals, particularly those in public, had to adhere to heteronormative standards for fear of consequences to one's social and financial standing.²¹

In part, this post-war conformism was a reaction to the upheaval of the Second World War, which changed the gendered separation of both the workplace and work itself. More women entered the workforce to fill jobs that were left empty by the men who had gone to fight in the war, and married women's share of the workforce increased. However, this altered position for women lasted only as long as the war went on; they were expected to move back to their expected private domestic duties once the men returned.²² A paradox emerged as women, having had more freedom to enter the workforce, had normalized stepping out of the domestic sphere, but were still confronted by an ideal of post-war conformity that expected them to adhere to the gendered expectations of a woman's domestic place behind the man.²³ As Calomiris was active as an informant both during and after the Second World War, a consideration of these changing gender relations versus the conformist atmosphere therefore provides a useful lens through which to assess her writings.

Calomiris was born in 1916 in New York City, a child of Greek immigrants who had moved to the United States in the early twentieth century. She was, according to her own account, "an underprivileged child" who had to make do with her parents' small incomes and often joblessness.²⁴ As a child, she developed an interest in photography and in the 1940s she joined the Photo League, a left-leaning organization of New York-based photographers who concerned themselves with documenting the struggles of the working-class of New York.²⁵ After being approached by the FBI in 1942, she accepted the request to work for them and subsequently became an informant within the American Communist Party (CPUSA) from 1942 until the 1949 Smith Act trial against the leaders of the Communist Party.²⁶

In her memoir, Calomiris balances dry factual explanations with personal thoughts and feelings to paint a picture of how she experienced these seven years as an informant. With a consideration of her childhood in New York and her trajectory towards the Photo League as the starting point of her book, the structure subsequently relies on a chronological narration of her life from 1942, when she began as an informant. Early in the memoir, discussing how she was always short on finances—largely due to her saving money for new camera equipment—Calomiris' says that "I naturally drifted into Greenwich Village. I enjoyed living in an art center, and I met a great many friendly people with whom I found a lot in common.

²⁰ May, *Homeward Bound*, Introduction, 1-18.

²¹ Douglas M Charles, *Hoover's War on Gays: Exposing the FBI's "Sex Deviates" Program* (University Press of Kansas, 2015).

²² Maurine Weiner Greenwald, review of *Wartime Women: Sex Roles, Family Relations, and the Status of Women During World War II*, by Karen Anderson, and *Women's Work and Family Values, 1920-1940*, by Winifred D. Wandersee, *The American Historical Review* 87, no. 3 (1982).

²³ Mary Brennan, *Wives, Mothers, and the Red Menace: Conservative Women and the Crusade against Communism*, (University Press of Colorado, 2008).

²⁴ Calomiris, *Red Masquerade*, 17

²⁵ Calomiris, *Red Masquerade*, 22-29; and Britannica, *Photo League*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Photo-League>, accessed December 11, 2025.

²⁶ Calomiris, *Red Masquerade*, 11-15.

Like myself, all of them aspired to careers in the arts or professions.”²⁷ Greenwich Village, in the early twentieth century, was, as Davis points out in her biography of Calomiris, the hub for “political radicals and unconventional people of all sorts.”²⁸ Crucially for Davis’ argument, it was where the queer community was able to live more freely and create a strong shared identity. Davis argues that Calomiris’ explanation for why she lived in Greenwich Village during this period was shaped by the “heterosexual masquerade” that Davis argued informed many parts of the memoir. Although Calomiris seemed to have confessed to her lesbian identity, she kept this identity disguised. Davis concludes that the reference to Greenwich Village was a coded reference to her sexuality.²⁹

Building on this, Veronica Wilson has further examined Calomiris’ covert need for heterosexual conformism. Calomiris remarked in the memoir her surprise that the FBI wanted her to be “an American spy right here in America.”³⁰ Calomiris, a child of Greek parents, struggled with her ancestry and, throughout her memoir, tried to overtly present herself as more American than Greek. Wilson argues that this insistence on her own patriotism was also a cover for her lesbianism.³¹ For Wilson and Davis, therefore, supporting the war effort was not Calomiris’ only concern when deciding to say yes to the FBI agents—she also needed to feel accepted as a heterosexual woman.³²

Red Masquerade steers towards what Brodski, Schenck, and Kennedy have argued: women’s life-writing mainly stays within the idea of a woman’s place in the private sphere, adhering to writing about one’s life through gendered expectations within the author’s context.³³ Early in *Red Masquerade*, after having been asked to become an informant, Calomiris reflects on her ability to be a spy, a reflection which helps to showcase her conceptions of gender in relation to prevailing norms of masculinity and femininity. As Colleen English has argued, in this period to be masculine meant being strong and muscular, while to be feminine meant to stay away from any activity that would create such a muscular appearance.³⁴ In other words, to be feminine meant to look frail so as to present one’s adherence to the domestic sphere that women were expected to stay within. It was this “frailty myth” that English contends was at the core of attributing femininity.³⁵ Deeply embedded in the Christian ideology of mid-twentieth century American society, this myth contended that women were not able to enjoy the same physical achievement as men, merely because of their physique being supposedly too weak.³⁶ With a confession of her own masculine attributes by these standards, Calomiris declared that “a statesman guarding secrets might ask me how the Brooklyn Dodgers had made out. He’d hardly plan to come up and see me

²⁷ Calomiris, *Red Masquerade*, 26.

²⁸ Davis, *Undercover Girl*, 22.

²⁹ Davis, *Undercover Girl*, 22.

³⁰ Calomiris, *Red Masquerade*, 16.

³¹ Wilson, “I Chose the Values I Regarded as American’,” 111-112.

³² Calomiris, *Red Masquerade*, 14-21.

³³ Brodski and Schenck, *Life/Lines*; Kennedy, *Keeping up her Geography*.

³⁴ Colleen English, “Separate Spheres and Separate Roles: Christian Beliefs, Medical Ideology, and Women’s Sport and Physical Activity in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century United States,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 39, no. 4 (2022): 350-352.

³⁵ English, “Separate Spheres and Separate Roles,” 351.

³⁶ English, “Separate Spheres and Separate Roles,” 355-352.

some time.”³⁷ With this reference to her more masculine appearance, she concluded it would work in her favor when being a spy. This reference to masculinity is typical of autobiographical works by lesbian women, as they felt a societal pressure to adhere to heteronormative standards and thus covered up their queerness in heteronormative narratives and standards.³⁸

In 1950, in a newspaper interview with her, a journalist overlooked Calomiris’ own attribution of masculinity to her person, describing her appearance as “vest-pocket size” and “tensile and efficient.”³⁹ Here, the journalist moved into a typical feminine interpretation of her looks. In contrast to her own earlier hinting in the memoir at her ‘masculine’ traits, Calomiris’ writing suggested a struggle with how she wanted to present her physical appearance. When reflecting on her childhood appearance, she stated: “my brother and sister were the pride of the family... By painful contrast, I was a wiry little runt,” and an “undersized child,” again reiterating typical feminine attributes of the mid-twentieth century.⁴⁰ Reflecting on the characteristics of women’s life-writing, it seems that although Calomiris alluded to her queer identity by ascribing masculine traits to her person, she seemed to have wanted to stay within the typical feminine traits prevalent in the United States of the 1940s.

Descriptions of Calomiris’ childhood identity as a clown also lend themselves to a queer reading. She explained that she could get away with and achieve a lot by making others laugh, saying: “I found that I could say what I wanted and get what I wanted by making people laugh – a technique that carried me through many an awkward situation in de double life I was to lead for seven years as an adult.”⁴¹ Film and media studies scholar Bettina Papenburg asserts that analyzing laughter through a queer lens allows us to consider how it contests and potentially shifts power balances between marginalized and dominant social groups. This supports her claim that queer people could employ humor to protect themselves from scrutiny over their sexuality.⁴² With a focus on late twentieth-century conceptions of women and laughter, political scientist Patrick Giamario asserts that women were perceived as unable to laugh delicately and with the right incentive, and thus laughter as a concept was dominated by a masculine spirit that created humor designed to make men laugh, not women.⁴³ Calomiris’ discussion of clowning therefore gestures towards her non-heteronormative character. Her use of humor to get what she wanted seems to be a step into the masculine realm.

Calomiris’ memoir bears out Sidonie Smith’s argument that, in women’s life writing, to construct a sense of self, an author will write against gendered norms to thwart existing

³⁷ Calomiris, *Red Masquerade*, 16-17.

³⁸ Monica B. Pearl, “Lesbian Autobiography and Memoir,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lesbian Literature*, ed. Jodie Medd (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 169-187.

³⁹ Harvey Breit, “Talk with Miss Calomiris,” *New York Times*, November 26, 1950, <https://www.nytimes.com/1950/11/26/archives/talk-with-miss-calomiris.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

⁴⁰ Calomiris, *Red Masquerade*, 19.

⁴¹ Calomiris, *Red Masquerade*, 19.

⁴² Bettina Papenburg, “Introduction,” in *Gender: Laughter*, ed. Bettina Papenburg, Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks (Macmillan Reference USA, 2017), Gale eBooks.

⁴³ Patrick Giamario, *Laughter as Politics: Critical Theory in an Age of Hilarity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 123-129.

dominant ideals.⁴⁴ For example, Calomiris asserted that “girls were draft-proof in the war, and we enjoyed greater freedom inside the Party. Communist officials weren’t suspicious of us. I could always ask a dumb question and get away with it.”⁴⁵ With this passage, Calomiris elaborated on the explanation of how she secretly gained information for the FBI without the CPUSA noticing it. The statement pointed to her awareness of how she could exploit 1940s gender ideals to her advantage. During the mid-1940s, the war had created a picture of an ideal woman whose life revolved around either getting ready for the men to return, or, when the men had returned, caring for those men. In this conception of a woman’s duties, the ideal characteristics that a woman was expected to adhere to were those of subordination and naivety.⁴⁶ The passage above presented Calomiris’ awareness of what was expected of a 1940s woman, and, as she confessed to her readers, demonstrated that she knew how to gain agency through this awareness. Although the quotation shows that Calomiris adhered to typical gender tropes, it is her awareness of her use of it and her clear goal with which she utilized it that supports Smith’s argument.⁴⁷

In light of the gender expressions and expectations within *Red Masquerade*, the content of the book seems highly contradictory. Although Calomiris demonstrated an awareness of the gendered expectations and seemed to have known what she was doing when she was adhering to them, at the end of her memoir, she presents her womanhood and her adherence to femininity as a given. When she writes about her five days in court, testifying against the CPUSA leaders, she spends ample time explaining how she had new clothes fitted, saying that “I was busy – just like a woman, I was busy assembling a wardrobe.”⁴⁸ She talks about her hair, her face, and her overall appearance, which she considers important for the court.⁴⁹ This may arise from a desire to justify her informant years and to portray herself as a dignified woman who adhered to the gendered social standards of the time.⁵⁰ Now behaving the way that was expected of her as a woman, Calomiris seemingly tries to come to terms with her skeptical friends who, astonished to find out about her informant years, questioned the ethics behind her work.⁵¹ Calomiris presents herself as a typical woman, which suggests that she wants to be seen as merely doing what was asked of her. Reflecting on the two characteristics of women’s life writing, as established by Brodski, Schenck, and Kennedy, Calomiris adheres to the gendered expectations that informed how she wrote about her own place within the informant story.⁵² Moreover, since Calomiris’ allusions to her queer identity were veiled, many readers would have taken her life story at face value as a ‘typically feminine’ memoir, which was what she seemed to have wanted.

⁴⁴ Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body*.

⁴⁵ Calomiris, *Red Masquerade*, 45.

⁴⁶ Melissa A. McEuen, *Making War, Making Women: Femininity and Duty on the American Home Front, 1941-1945* (University of Georgia Press, 2011), 202.

⁴⁷ Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body*.

⁴⁸ Calomiris, *Red Masquerade*, 253.

⁴⁹ Calomiris, *Red Masquerade*, 252-254.

⁵⁰ McEuen, *Making War, Making Women*. 202-217.

⁵¹ Calomiris, *Red Masquerade*, 261-268.

⁵² Brodski and Schenck, *Life/Lines*; and Kennedy, *Keeping up her Geography*.

By analyzing *Red Masquerade* in relation to the genre of women's autobiographical literature, this article has provided new insights for scholars examining female life writing; also, by foregrounding the themes of gender and sexuality it offers original perspectives for those examining female informant memoirs. Central to my argument has been the claim that despite Calomiris' desire to use the memoir to present herself as reflective of the gendered expectations of the 1940s, a close textual reading suggests veiled signs of her queerness and a display of more typically 'masculine' attributes. This builds on Papenburg's argument that these kinds of veiling practices are common for queer persons in contexts in which queerness is not accepted.⁵³ This highlights the ways in which female life writing can simultaneously 'perform' gender and provide women with the tools to subvert gendered norms. This becomes particularly complicated in the case of an informant memoir which is inevitably interpolated by the norms of Cold War anti-communism, a fact which suggests new ways to approach Elaine Tyler May's examination of the interrelation between Cold War norms and domestic gender roles. My findings offer scholars new and original ways to deconstruct the overlapping connections between gender, sexuality, and the Cold War's impact on US society and politics.

⁵³ Papenburg, *Gender: Laughter*.

Paper

From Tea Party Movement to MAGA: The Rhetorical and Performative Evolution of American Populism (2009–2016)

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This paper was written as part of the thesis for the MA Applied History

On February 19, 2009, CNBC commentator Rick Santelli called on live television for a “Chicago Tea Party,” criticizing government mortgage bailouts. His outburst resonated with viewers, quickly becoming the rallying cry for the Tea Party Movement. The term “Tea Party,” referencing the colonial protest of 1773 against British taxation, had circulated before, but the suggestion by Santelli transformed scattered anti-tax sentiments into a nationally visible movement.¹ From the outset, it was more than a political campaign: it was a performative spectacle, using rallies, symbols, and media visibility to dramatize populist grievance.²

The political ascent of Donald J. Trump between 2015 and 2016 likewise fused populism with performative spectacle. For Trump, it was captured in the slogan “Make America Great Again,” framing the present as a moment of crisis and the future as the restoration of a ‘lost golden age.’³ Following Paul Taggart and Benjamin Moffitt, populism portrays politics as a struggle between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite,’ mobilizing opposition through nostalgic and utopian appeals while dramatizing crisis.⁴ These stylistic departures reveal a shared populist logic. The Tea Party Movement thus serves as a crucial comparative case, with its performative successes and limitations shaping the conditions under which MAGA thrived.

Despite their similarities, the two movements diverged sharply in their political trajectory. While the Tea Party Movement, once a potent grassroots force, faded with the political rise of Trump, MAGA not only endured but expanded, culminating in Trump’s second presidential victory in 2024.⁵ Examining this divergence, this article

Notes

¹ Vanessa Williamson, Theda Skocpol, and John Coggin, “The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism,” *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (March 2011): 25, 26, 37, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271000407X>.

² Anthony DiMaggio, “The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation,” written by Benjamin Moffitt, *Populism* 1, no. 2 (2018): 212-3, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25888072-00001018>; Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford University Press, 2016), 21, 35-6, 76, 99-100, 117, 135, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvqsd8>.

³ Cassie Spodak, “How the Trump Hat Became an Icon,” CNN, February 17, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/17/politics/donald-trump-make-america-great-again-iconic-hat/index.html>.

⁴ Paul Taggart, “New populist parties in Western Europe,” in *The Populist Radical Right*, ed. Cas Mudde (Routledge, 2016), 160-3, 168, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315514574-17/new-populist-parties-western-europe-paul-taggart>; Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, 76, 99-100, 117, 132-5.

⁵ The Tea Party Movement continues to exist in forms tied to Trumpism, such as the Tea Party Patriots organization, which according to their website, keeps supporting Trump; “Tea Party Patriots,” Tea Party Patriots, accessed June 7, 2025, <https://www.teapartypatriots.org/>.

argues that although both movements relied on similar populist rhetoric and nostalgic framing, they differed fundamentally in structure and style. The decentralized, oppositional character of the Tea Party Movement limited its longevity, whereas the centralized, leader-driven style of MAGA allowed it to expand and consolidate power. In making this argument, this study draws on the classical rhetorical framework of ethos, logos, and pathos. Ethos, understood as the credibility and character projected by a leader, helps explain how figures such as Santelli and Trump cultivated authority. Logos, referring to the structure and internal logic of political claims, allows the analysis to trace how populist arguments are constructed. And pathos, the emotional appeal of rhetoric, is used to understand how emotional nodes help shape populist mobilization.⁶ In addition, the article builds on the theories of populism as a flexible ideology explored by Taggart and populism as a political style centered on performance and mediated crisis as explored by Moffit, providing a framework for analyzing how MAGA evolved stylistically from the Tea Party Movement.⁷ Scholarship on nostalgia and utopian ideals helps to clarify how both movements mobilize visions of lost national greatness, while theories of charismatic leadership, drawing on the work of Clemens van Herwaarden and the Weberian tradition, help explain why the personalized appeal of Trump enabled MAGA to endure where the Tea Party Movement disappeared.⁸

Methodologically, the article employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative analysis (speeches, media, blogs) with quantitative analysis (topic modeling and sentiment analysis in RStudio).⁹ This combination balances interpretive depth with empirical reach: qualitative methods illustrate the rhetorical construction of meaning, while quantitative tools reveal broader affective and thematic patterns. Rather than treating the Tea Party Movement and MAGA as isolated phenomena, this article places them within a single analytical frame to examine how populist rhetoric and performance changed over time. In doing so, it shifts attention from ideology alone to the role of leadership, media spectacle, and emotional appeal in shaping the durability of populist movements.

Both the Tea Party Movement and MAGA arose in moments of perceived national crisis. The Tea Party Movement emerged amid the aftermath of the 2008 financial collapse and growing discontent with government bailouts, captured most vividly in the

⁶ Barbara Emanuel, Camila Rodrigues, and Marcos Martins, "Rhetoric of Interaction: Analysis of Pathos," in *Design, User Experience, and Usability: Design Discourse*, edited by Aaron Marcus (Springer International Publishing, 2015), 418, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20886-2>.

⁷ Taggart, "New populist parties in Western Europe," 160-3, 168.; Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, 76, 99-100, 117, 132-5.

⁸ Clemens van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een leider Charisma en populisme in de politiek* (Aspekt, 2017), 75.; Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell, "'Nostalgia for the future': memory, nostalgia and the politics of class," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23, no. 7 (2017): 613, 623-4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1321034>.; Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 10, 21,

<https://archive.org/details/utopianismverysh0000sarg/mode/2up>.

⁹ See Appendix A.

call for a “Chicago Tea Party” by Santelli.¹⁰ The political rise of Trump between 2015 and 2016 unfolded against the backdrop of deepening polarization, fears of ISIS-led terror, and resentment over globalization, dramatized by his call for a “Muslim ban” and his promise to bring jobs back to America.¹¹ While each movement emphasized different grievances, both drew strength from a wider sense of political alienation. In both cases, discontent converged in populist appeals to restore a lost sense of national greatness.¹²

Both movements also emerged amid shifts in political power, with the Tea Party Movement emerging following the election of Obama in 2009, and MAGA rising during the Trump campaign for the 2016 presidential elections. Periods of political change in the United States have often provoked strong backlash. The structure of the two-party system amplifies this dynamic. When one party dominates, those excluded from power tend to mobilize against it. The Reagan Revolution of 1980 arose amid rising stagflation and Democratic control in Congress, while the victory of Obama in 2008 emerged as a counter to Republican unpopularity during the financial crisis.¹³ Each moment of realignment generated its own reaction, as political and economic upheavals intensified perceptions of crisis.

Cultural anxieties have repeatedly reinforced these political and economic grievances. Perceived threats to established norms, identities, and hierarchies, especially within the historically dominant WASP culture (White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant), have framed immigrant and minority groups, including Irish, Jewish, Chinese, Black, and Indigenous populations, as threats to the economy, social values, and national culture.¹⁴ In this historical pattern of American political backlash, the rise of the Tea Party Movement and, later, MAGA represent populist reactions to the disruptions of political, economic, and cultural change.

The populist evolution from the Tea Party Movement to MAGA can be understood through the intersecting dynamics of rhetoric, media spectacle, and leadership style. Seen in this light, MAGA did not emerge as a rupture but as an extension of the performative tendencies seen within the Tea Party Movement, from decentralized protest to centralized spectacle, and from diffuse grievance to leader-

¹⁰ Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, “The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism,” 26, 35.

¹¹ Lindsay Perez Huber, “Make America Great Again: Donald Trump, Racist Nativism and the Virulent Adherence to White Supremacy Amid U.S. Demographic Change,” *Charleston Law Review* 10, no. 2 (2016): 239-42,

<https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/charlwrev10&id=227&collection=journals#>;
Donald J. Trump, *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America* (Simon & Schuster Us, 2016), 78-9.

¹² Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, “The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism,” 26, 35.; Trump, *Great Again*, 78-9.; Huber, “Make America Great Again,” 239-42.

¹³ Rogers M. Smith, “Identity politics and the end of the Reagan era,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 1, nr. 1 (2013): 120-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2012.758590>.; Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, “The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism,” 25-6.

¹⁴ Nancy Foner, “The uses and abuses of history: understanding contemporary U.S. immigration,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 1 (2019): 6-11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1507553>.; Mobei Zhang, “WASPs,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 1-4, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118663202.wberen692>.

centered politics. Understanding this transformation benefits from investigating the different theoretical perspectives on populism. Taggart emphasizes its ideological dimensions, while Moffitt foregrounds its stylistic and performative character.¹⁵ Taken together, these frameworks suggest that ideology gives populism its content, whereas performance shapes its affective appeal and visibility. Tracing how these dimensions interact helps to explain why some populist movements dissipate while others consolidate into durable political forces. While existing studies in the social and political sciences have examined the Tea Party Movement and MAGA separately, this study brings them into a single analytical frame to trace how populist rhetoric and performance evolved across movements.¹⁶ By combining rhetorical analysis with quantitative methods, it offers an interdisciplinary account of how populist affect and spectacle were transformed from decentralized protest to leader-centered politics.

Populist movements tend to rely heavily on the persona of their spokespersons to project authenticity and connect emotionally with “the people.”¹⁷ Therefore, the following analysis begins with ethos, the character of leadership, as the first lens for comparison. For this research, ethos is understood as a moral virtue, a rhetorical performance of authenticity, and outsider identity. Populist leaders construct ethos by positioning themselves in opposition to political elites, presenting their personal narratives as evidence of credibility and belonging to the ‘common people.’¹⁸ The mechanisms through which ethos were established are examined in the following section. This framing helps explain why the Tea Party Movement failed to generate a unifying figure, while Trump concentrated populist traits into a singular persona, transforming divergent grievances into a durable political brand. As Taggart notes, populism is a flexible phenomenon recognizable through features such as appealing directly to “the people,” constructing crisis, and creating distance from established politics while claiming to be something ‘new.’¹⁹ Comparing three key figures associated with the Tea Party Movement to Trump illustrates why the Tea Party Movement failed to produce a leader who could embody its populist traits, a void that Trump would later fill.

Santelli, whose televised outburst helped spark the Tea Party Movement, never translated his media moment into political leadership, already stating during his 2009 televised on-air appearance that “The last place I’m ever going to live or work is D.C.”²⁰

¹⁵ Taggart, “New populist parties in Western Europe,” 160-3, 168.; Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, 76, 99-100, 117, 132-5.

¹⁶ Previous scholarship has examined both the Tea Party Movement and the political rise of Trump. Studies by Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin highlight the blend of economic and cultural grievances found in the Tea Party, while Ruth Braunstein, Arlie Russell Hochschild, and Lindsay Pérez Huber have analyzed how MAGA mobilized affective and racialized nostalgia. Yet, as scholars such as Barbara Brodman, James E. Doan, and Simon Spiegel note, the connection between nostalgia, utopia, and the performative style of contemporary populism, remains less developed.

¹⁷ Emanuel, Rodrigues, and Martins, “Rhetoric of Interaction: Analysis of Pathos,” 418.

¹⁸ Taggart, “New populist parties,” 160-3, 168.

¹⁹ Taggart, “New populist parties,” 160-3, 168.

²⁰ Rick Santelli, “CNBC’s Rick Santelli’s Chicago Tea Party,” February 19, 2009, posted February 19, 2009, by The Heritage Foundation, YouTube, 4 min., 36 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zp-Jw-5Kx8k>.

Sarah Palin, by contrast, entered the movement with national visibility from her 2008 vice-presidential run for Republican nominee John McCain.²¹ Palin's 2009 memoir *Going Rogue: An American Life* attempted to rebrand her as a populist outsider, yet her close ties to mainstream Republican politics undercut this outsider authenticity.²² As discussed by Taggart, populist movements derive energy from figures who can convincingly oppose established elites.²³ This entanglement made Palin appear part of the very system the movement sought to challenge. Scott Brown briefly appeared more promising, with his election as a U.S. senator in 2010 being hailed a Tea Party victory.²⁴ But once in Washington, Brown aligned with Republican orthodoxy on fiscal and economic issues, alienating the very base that had propelled him forward in the political realm.²⁵ His credibility as an outsider collapsed almost as quickly as it had emerged.

Each figure briefly shaped parts of the movement, but none embodied a unifying outsider ethos. The Tea Party Movement thus remained a fragmented coalition of anger. Trump, by contrast, entered politics with a ready-made persona. Although Trump campaigned as a Republican, his performative style and rhetorical choices often diverged from mainstream party norms. He blended populist grievance, celebrity spectacle, and confrontational media engagement in ways that transformed the internal dynamics of the Republican Party and broadened its appeal by focusing on Trump himself.²⁶ Known as a businessman-celebrity from the show *The Apprentice*, which aired from 2004 to 2017, and his best seller *The Art of the Deal*, Trump projected decisiveness and success.²⁷ Where Santelli refused leadership, Palin carried insider baggage, and Brown compromised, Trump presented himself as the embodiment of the American dream, a self-made outsider who 'gets things done.'

This image was to a large degree a constructed one. For example, Russ Buettner and Susanne Craig demonstrated that Trump benefited heavily from the real estate empire of his father and that many of his own business ventures failed.²⁸ Yet the myth of Trump as a self-made, no-nonsense businessman resonated more deeply than the disputed claims, evidenced through his presidential victory in 2016 and again in 2024. This cultivated ethos gave Trump an authenticity and authority that Tea Party Movement figures never managed to achieve. His authenticity was not grounded in factual biography but in the affective style of his direct, unscripted, and confrontational communication. This aligns with the notion of populist performance in Moffitt, where the persona of the leader becomes the primary site of political meaning.²⁹ The rhetorical

²¹ Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 32-38.

²² Sarah Palin, *Going Rogue: An American Life* (HarperCollins, 2009), 219-24.

²³ Taggart, "New populist parties in Western Europe," 160-3, 168.

²⁴ Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 32-38.

²⁵ Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 36.

²⁶ Pete Tucker, "Did the Kochs Bring Us President Trump?," *HuffPost*, December 1, 2016,

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-the-kochs-brought-us-president-trump_b_583df558e4b002d13f7a8771.

²⁷ Russ Buettner and Susanne Craig, *Lucky Loser How Donald Trump Squandered his Father's Fortune and Created the Illusion of Success* (Penguin Press, 2024), 1-5; Trump, *Great Again*, 78-9.

²⁸ Buettner and Craig, *Lucky Loser*, 1-5.

²⁹ Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, 21, 35-6, 76, 99-100, 117.

ethos of Trump, amplified through constant media exposure, fused the roles of businessman, celebrity, and savior into a coherent brand that embodied the grievances of his audience. In this sense, Trump did not just possess ethos but performed it, transforming authenticity itself into a political spectacle.

Yet charisma alone cannot sustain a movement. While ethos highlights the importance of character, the message, its logical construction, and the way it is communicated and circulated through media - the logos, in classical terms - is equally important.³⁰ Both the Tea Party Movement and MAGA relied on populist rhetorical devices such as nostalgia, utopianism, and a sense of crisis. Yet the two appear to have employed these in distinct ways, with the rhetoric employed by the Tea Party Movement emerging in decentralized opposition, while the messaging from MAGA became concentrated around Trump himself. Building on the definition of Taggart, populist rhetoric connects politics to “the people” while distancing itself from elites, constructing crisis, often with nostalgic undertones, and blending elements from different ideological camps.³¹ In the media environment, this rhetorical logic is inseparable from the message and the way it circulates. Both movements used accessible, emerging media to articulate these themes, but they did so in distinct ways that reveal how message and medium reinforced each other.

For the Tea Party Movement, logos centered around constitutional nostalgia. As noted, its very name evoked the Boston Tea Party of 1773, casting the present as a betrayal and the future as a utopian return to ‘true’ American principles of small government, fiscal conservatism, and liberty.³² Calls for lower taxes, reduced public spending, and opposition to government bailouts formed the core of its ideological identity.³³ Yet what began as an economic critique of government overreach, crystallized in the televised outburst of Santelli, soon took on cultural and moral dimensions. Fiscal restraint became a symbol of individual responsibility, self-reliance, and patriotic virtue.³⁴ In this way, the economic message merged with a broader populist message in which defending the ideals of small government and fiscal conservatism meant defending the moral integrity of the nation.

Trump relied on a vaguer and more personalized nostalgia. “Make America Great Again” pointed to no single historical moment. Its power lay in evoking a lost golden age that resonated with a large group of predominantly white, middle- and working-class Americans, whose sense of cultural displacement from globalization and demographic change was intertwined with political and economic anxieties.³⁵ Unlike the emphasis on fiscal purity by the Tea Party Movement, the rhetoric employed by Trump

³⁰ Emanuel, Rodrigues, and Martins, "Rhetoric of Interaction: Analysis of Pathos," 418.

³¹ Taggart, "New populist parties in Western Europe," 160-3, 168.

³² Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 26.

³³ Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 28, 32.

³⁴ Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 33.

³⁵ Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, "The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism," 27.

was less about policy and more about identity. ‘Greatness’ became a flexible symbol of strength, success, and restored pride, channeled through his own persona.

The media strategies each movement employed deepen the contrast between the two. The discourse of the Tea Party Movement spread through blogs, forums and rallies.³⁶ Crisis was framed through bailouts, corruption, and government overreach, producing a watchdog-style critique that resonated widely but lacked a unifying voice.³⁷ In contrast, Trump became the focal point of the MAGA message, concentrating the arguments and claims of crisis through his personal brand. Twitter became a primary stage, where crisis narratives were broadcast directly and unmediated.³⁸ Traditional media amplified this, as exemplified by the televised Hillary Clinton debates watched by millions.³⁹ Whilst Tea Party Movement rhetoric was dispersed among multiple actors, MAGA streamlined it into one figure, Trump, whose message and persona were inseparable.

Quantitative analysis underscores this difference. Topic modeling of the Tea Party Movement affiliated blog The Market Ticker by Karl Denninger between 2009 and 2010 (see Figure 1 and Figure 2) reveals a rhetoric dominated by crisis.⁴⁰ The two primary axes of critique target the political establishment, indicated by the terms “Obama,” “Bernanke” (referring to Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke),

Most Prominent Topics in Market Ticker 2009

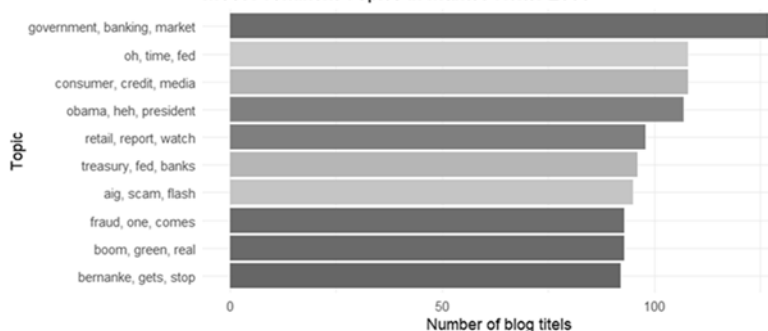


Figure 1. Most prominent topics based on blog titles from *The Market Ticker* in 2009. Own calculation, see Appendix A. Source: “Archive Listing,” The Market Ticker, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://market-ticker.org/akcs-www?archive-list=Market-Ticker>.

Most Prominent Topics in Market Ticker 2010

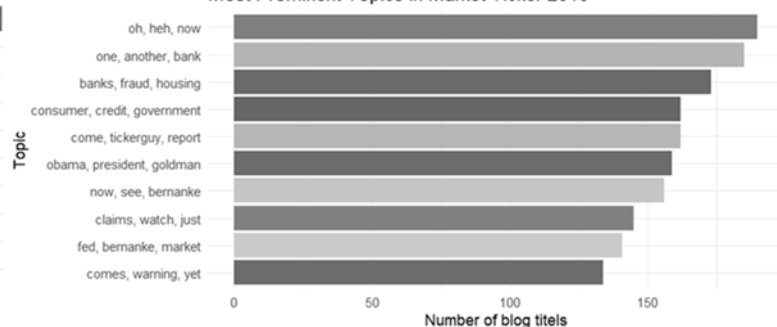


Figure 2. Most prominent topics based on blog titles from *The Market Ticker* in 2010. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: “Archive Listing,” The Market Ticker, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://market-ticker.org/akcs-www?archive-list=Market-Ticker>.

³⁶ “Archive Listing,” The Market Ticker, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://market-ticker.org/akcs-www?archive-list=Market-Ticker>; “FAQs,” Trump Twitter Archive, accessed February 2, 2025, <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/faq>; “Redistributing Knowledge,” Redistributing Knowledge, archived April 25, 2010, at the Wayback Machine, https://web.archive.org/web/20110903063740/http://redistributingknowledge.blogspot.com/2010_04_25_archive.html.

³⁷ Scott Brown, *Against All Odds: My Life of Hardship, Fast Breaks, and Second Chances* (HarperCollins, 2011), 365, 371.; Palin, *Going Rogue*, 143-144, 384-5, 402.; Santelli, “CNBC’s Rick Santelli’s.”

³⁸ Sara Polak, “#Unpresidented: The Making of The First Twitter President,” in *Violence and Trolling on Social Media: History, Affect, and Effects of Online Vitriol* (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 57.; Trump Twitter Archive, “FAQs.”

³⁹ NBC News, “The Third Presidential Debate: Hillary Clinton And Donald Trump (Full Debate) | NBC News,” live stream, October 20, 2016, posted October 20, 2016, by NBC News, YouTube, 1:55:58, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smkyorC5qwc>.

⁴⁰ While this analysis focuses on The Market Ticker due to space constraints, a comparative exploration of Redistributing Knowledge (another Tea Party blog active in 2009–2010) produced similar results, particularly in the prevalence of oppositional and grievance-oriented rhetoric. For details on this dataset and methodological considerations, see Appendix A.

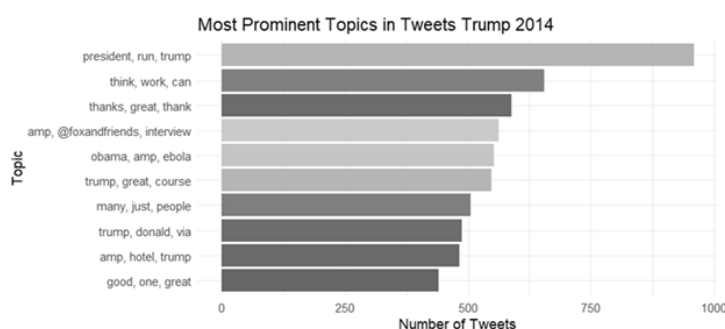


Figure 3. *Most prominent topics based on Tweets from Trump in 2014.* Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: “FAQs,” Trump Twitter Archive, accessed February 2, 2025, <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/faq>.

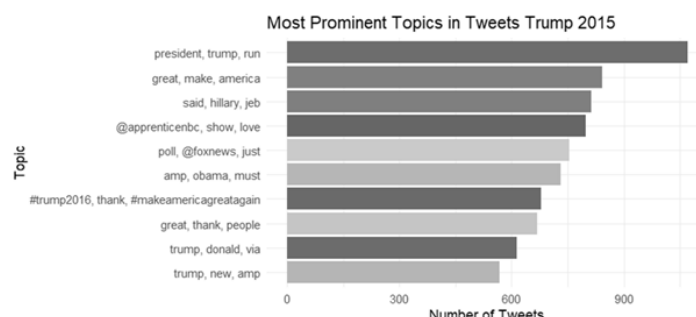


Figure 4. *Most prominent topics based on Tweets from Trump in 2015.* Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: “FAQs,” Trump Twitter Archive, accessed February 2, 2025, <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/faq>.

“banking,” “fraud,” “scam,” and “market.” The message was collective and issue-driven, emphasizing systemic corruption rather than a singular solution. The Twitter feed of Trump between 2014 and 2015 (see Figure 3 and Figure 4) tells a different story. While echoing similar crisis themes as exemplified by terms such as “Obama” and “Hillary,” the discourse is now overshadowed by Trump and his presidential campaign, indicated by terms such as “trump,” “run,” and “president.” The logos here was not simply “America is in crisis,” but “Trump is the answer.”

This reveals a fundamental difference. The Tea Party Movement sought to construct a collective ethos and an issue-driven logos, but Trump collapsed that distinction. His logos became his ethos. The logic of his rhetoric was not just that problems existed, but that he alone was the solution. By fusing ideology with personality, Trump transformed populist logos from a diffuse protest into a personalized promise.

Yet persuasion in populism depends not only on character and message but also on emotional appeal, or pathos, which helps explain why both movements resonated with large audiences.⁴¹ While the economic, political, and cultural context helps explain why populism gained traction, its emotional connection with supporters lies in performance and affect. The concept of populism as political style, defined by Moffitt, underscores this performative dimension. Populism thrives not only on what leaders say but how they dramatize crisis and master media logic, with its force imbedded in staging crisis so it can be collectively felt.⁴² The origins of the Tea Party Movement illustrate this dynamic. Santelli’s 2009 rant did not just articulate economic grievances, but dramatized crisis on live television.⁴³ Santelli turned frustration into a shared event, legitimizing outrage as a political emotion. This raw, unpolished performance ignited mobilization and marked the beginning of a movement. The emotional register of the Tea Party Movement was thus one of resentment and betrayal, directed not just at economic mismanagement but also at perceived cultural decline and moral decay. This shared emotion helped participants feel connected and reinforced the sense of collective frustration with the political establishment.

⁴¹ Emanuel, Rodrigues, and Martins, “Rhetoric of Interaction: Analysis of Pathos,” 418.

⁴² Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*, 21, 35-6, 76, 99-100, 117.

⁴³ Santelli, “CNBC’s Rick Santelli’s,” at 3:16-25.

In contrast, Trump expanded his performative logic into a sustained, continuous presence. Whereas Santelli acted as a one-time catalyst, Trump became the spectacle himself with a dominant presence at rallies, debates, and social media. For example, his 2014 tweet “Are you allowed to impeach a president for gross incompetence?” was retweeted over 237,000 times, and by 2016, Twitter had become a key medium shaping the news cycle in real time.⁴⁴ Trump was not merely part of the media landscape but the central focus around which both attention and mobilization revolved. Unlike the Tea Party Movement, which relied on multiple figures to generate episodic drama, Trump concentrated this energy into a singular, charismatic persona that unified leader and movement.

Here, the concept of charismatic leadership, as theorized by Clemens van Herwaarden, provides a framework for understanding this dynamic. While ethos analyzed the construction of leader credibility, charisma emphasizes the relational and affective dimension of leadership, or how followers emotionally respond to and invest in a leader. According to Van Herwaarden, charisma is not just a personal trait but a relational, mediated phenomenon. Followers attribute extraordinary, even transcendent, qualities to leaders, placing trust in their capacity for revolutionary change.⁴⁵ Tea Party Movement figures like Santelli, Palin, or Brown, could spark enthusiasm, but none maintained the constant presence or relational authority needed for durable charisma. Trump, by contrast, was constantly present across the media - through daily tweets, televised debates, and rallies that drew tens of thousands of attendees - creating a feedback loop of recognition and validation, turning reactive outrage into hopeful trust in his ability to “make America great again.”

This difference is also reflected in the emotional tone of the rhetoric employed by both movements. Sentiment analysis of Tea Party Movement affiliated blog The Market Ticker (see Figures 5 and Figure 6) shows predominantly negative sentiments expressed, with the “negative” emotion outpacing the “positive” emotion.⁴⁶ This aligns

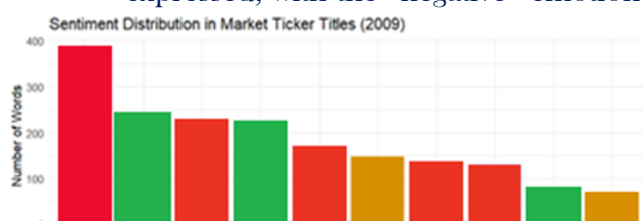


Figure 5. Sentiment distribution based on blog titles from *The Market Ticker* in 2009. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: “Archive Listing,” *The Market Ticker*, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://market-ticker.org/akcs-www?archive-list=Market-Ticker>.



Figure 6. Sentiment distribution based on blog titles from *The Market Ticker* in 2010. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: “Archive Listing,” *The Market Ticker*, accessed March 21, 2025, <https://market-ticker.org/akcs-www?archive-list=Market-Ticker>.

⁴⁴ “FAQs,” Trump Twitter Archive.; Shradha Dinesh and Meltem Odabaş, “8 Facts about Americans and Twitter as It Rebrands to X,” Pew Research Center, effective July 26, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/07/26/8-facts-about-americans-and-twitter-as-it-rebrands-to-x/>.

⁴⁵ Clemens van Herwaarden, *Liefde voor een leider Charisma en populisme in de politiek* (Aspekt, 2017), 75.; Van Herwaarden draws on multiple theories of charismatic leadership, including the foundational work of Max Weber, to develop his analysis of modern populist leadership in the case of Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn.

⁴⁶ Like topic modeling, while this analysis focuses on *The Market Ticker*, a comparative exploration of *Redistributing Knowledge* produced similar results. For details on this dataset and methodological considerations, see Appendix A.

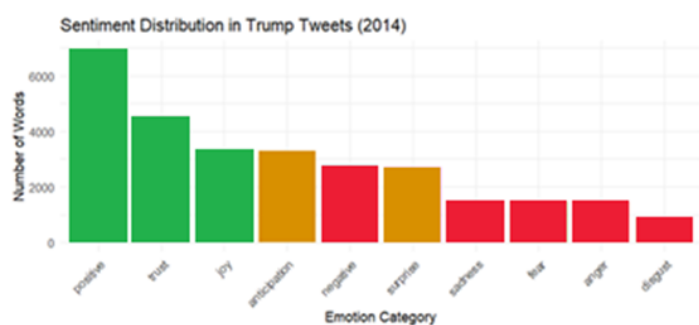


Figure 7. Sentiment distribution based on Tweets from Trump in 2014. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: “FAQs,” Trump Twitter Archive, accessed February 2, 2025, <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/faq>.

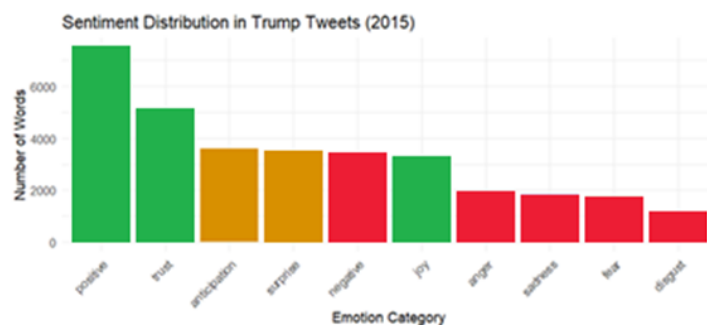


Figure 8. Sentiment distribution based on Tweets from Trump in 2015. Own calculations, see Appendix A. Source: “FAQs,” Trump Twitter Archive, accessed February 2, 2025, <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/faq>.

with topic-modeling results. The Tea Party Movement discourse was mostly oppositional, defensive, and rooted in grievance. While elements of hope and trust were present, negativity played a large role in the emotion expressed by the movement. The Twitter feed of Trump from 2014 and 2015 (see Figure 7 and Figure 8) shows a different affective register. While moments of attack on the political establishment remain, the dominant sentiments expressed were “positive,” followed by “trust.” These emotions complemented the underlying negativity, reinforcing a narrative of trust in Trump as the solution. His rhetoric mobilized resentment, but also hope and loyalty, cultivating devotion through belief in his personal capacity to deliver change.

Both the Tea Party Movement and MAGA can be understood as expressions of American populism, grounded in overlapping anxieties about economics, culture, and political legitimacy. At their core, both are driven by nostalgia and by a utopian promise of renewal. This research has shown that while the two movements share these features, they also diverged in a crucial way through the performative style of their populism. By analyzing these movements through the lens of populist rhetoric and performance, this paper has traced a shift from decentralized protest to centralized spectacle. The Tea Party Movement, leaderless and dispersed, struggled to establish a lasting unifying ethos or pathos. Its rhetoric was dominated by reactive anger and distrust, and its performances were episodic.

In contrast, Trump successfully fused populist energies around his own persona. His rhetoric transformed the message of crisis into a personal promise of redemption, blending anger with positive assurance and trust. Trump became the spectacle itself, broadcasting a continuous performance across media ecosystems that made his persona inseparable from the movement. In doing so, Trump redefined the emotional logic of right-wing populism in the United States, turning pathos itself into a personal performance of redemption.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the cases themselves. They suggest that populism should be studied as a dynamic interplay between ideology and performance. Its resonance depends not just on what it says, but also how it is presented through style, spectacle, and the media. This comparison also highlights the centrality

of charismatic leadership in determining the trajectory of populism. Decentralized movement-based populism can spark disruption but struggles to endure. Leader-centered populism, by contrast, can consolidate grievances into a more coherent and durable political force.

This evolution has broader democratic stakes. A political landscape where the leader is the spectacle risks subordinating democratic deliberation to personalized performance, leaving institutions weakened and political accountability blurred. Further research should therefore examine other parallels, both in the U.S. and internationally, exploring how this combination of charismatic leadership, mediatized spectacle, and emotional appeal is transforming democracies worldwide. In tracing the evolution from the Tea Party Movement to MAGA, this paper has shown that American populism is an adaptive, performative, and deeply emotional style whose appeal lies as much in its spectacle as in its substance.

Appendix A

For the quantitative component of this paper, RStudio was employed to conduct topic modeling and lexicon sentiment analysis. Code was developed with the assistance of ChatGPT as a programming aid and cross-checked with documentation from the Comprehensive R Archive Network (CRAN), see also <https://cran.r-project.org/>, to ensure methodological accuracy. While the full scripts are not included here due to space constraints, they are available upon request.

The dataset for the Tea Party Movement in this article is drawn from the blog The Market Ticker (2009–2010). In some cases, only the titles of posts were preserved rather than the full texts, which constitutes a limitation. In the broader master's thesis, a second blog, Redistributing Knowledge by Keli Carender, was also analyzed and showed comparable patterns, strengthening confidence in the findings. For the purposes of this paper, the analysis focuses exclusively on this single blog due to space constraints.

All visualizations are generated directly from RStudio outputs. Sentiment categories are derived from established lexicons, though grouping into color-coded categories is a manual decision aimed solely at improving readability.

Paper

Psychologizing the Presidency: Willem Oltmans, Richard Nixon, and the 1968 Presidential Election

Louis van de Mortel | Leiden University

This paper was written as part of the internship 'dagboekencollectie Willem Oltmans' at the Dutch National Library (KB) for the MA North American Studies

On March 6, 1968, Dutch freelance correspondent Willem Oltmans joined the campaign trail of Richard Nixon in New Hampshire. Nixon had just announced his candidacy for the Republican nomination and Oltmans was hoping to arrange an interview with him for the 'Nederlandse Televisie Stichting' (NTS), the Netherlands' public television organization at the time. Oltmans was also there to cover the campaign, taking notes of his impressions in the diary he always kept with him. Earlier that day, he had written of his resolve to have an "actual" conversation with Nixon, whom he considered to be a serious contender in the presidential race.¹ An opportunity arose when the Nixon campaign landed at an airport in Keene and their transportation was delayed. While the campaign team and their company of correspondents waited on the runway, Oltmans found himself talking to NBC journalist John Chancellor and the man who would go on to win the election later that year.

Something happened during this conversation that left a lasting impression on Oltmans. Writing in his memoirs, Oltmans recalls how, at one point, Nixon turned to him, placed a hand on his shoulder, and said: "I would like to tell you, as a Dutchman, how we Americans followed a mistaken course in Asia. [...] When the Netherlands undertook police actions in Dutch Indonesia and fought against Sukarno, we Americans should have sent the Marines in to help. If we had done so, we could have avoided the current war in Vietnam."² As someone who had vocally opposed the Netherlands' campaign against Indonesian independence and considered Sukarno a personal friend, Oltmans was shocked to hear this. Moreover, how could a presidential candidate in 1968, having witnessed all the turmoil that was being caused by the war in Vietnam, still believe that sending troops halfway across the globe was a good idea?³ A day later, Oltmans was on his way back to his home in New York. The NTS ultimately decided against the interview he had proposed to arrange, not seeing in Nixon's campaign the same potential and significance as their freelance correspondent did. Oltmans also commented in his diary that he had become so dispirited by the kind of politics he was witnessing that he no longer wished to stay.⁴

Notes

¹ Willem Oltmans, *Memoires 1967-68* (De Papieren Tijger, 2002), 261-262.

² Oltmans, *Memoires 1967-68*, 262.

³ Oltmans, *Memoires 1967-68*, 262.

⁴ Oltmans, *Memoires 1967-68*, 264, 270.

In the leadup to the elections, Oltmans found a way to publicize his remarkable exchange with Nixon. He recounted it to Drew Pearson, who subsequently quoted Oltmans in his popular syndicated newspaper column “Washington Merry-Go-Round” on October 29, just a week before the election.⁵ The story continued to receive attention as the media speculated about what Nixon’s presidency would bring, making its way into the November 25 issue of *Life Atlantic* in an article titled “What to expect from Nixon.” This article used the incident with Oltmans as an example of the impulsiveness of an “earlier Nixon,” predicting that he would choose his words more carefully once in office.⁶

Oltmans himself was much more pessimistic about Nixon, believing he was unfit to serve as president. Based on a close examination of material drawn from the *Willem Oltmans Collection* at the KB National Library of the Netherlands, this article explores how Oltmans arrived at and expressed his skepticism about Nixon’s capabilities. In addition to his experiences in New Hampshire, Oltmans’ opinions about Nixon were shaped by his personal background, his professional interests, and developments taking place in the field of journalism during the 1960s. This article argues that these factors led Oltmans to evaluate Nixon’s fitness for the presidency through the lens of psychology. The newspaper clippings, articles, letters, and journal entries Oltmans collected in his diaries from 1968 to 1971, as well as his memoirs and books, reveal how Oltmans engaged with insights and methods that were emerging from this popular and relatively new field of study. He came to believe that psychologically profiling an individual could help explain, and perhaps even predict, their behavior. In the leadup to the 1968 election, Oltmans inquired into Richard Nixon’s psychological profile, and what he found continued to shape his views on Nixon in the years that followed. This article, therefore, examines how the practice of psychological profiling shaped Willem Oltmans’ assessments of Richard Nixon during the 1968 election cycle and beyond.

Taking Oltmans’ perspective on Nixon’s psychology as a case study, this article therefore contributes to scholarship on the emergence of psychological profiling in 1960s political journalism and on the ‘psychologization’ of Richard Nixon during his 1968 campaign and presidency. Psychologization is defined as a tendency to emphasize psychological factors and motivations when interpreting behavior. Following the Second World War, politics and politicians were increasingly psychologized in the United States by both academics and journalists. This trend, as well as the controversies and debates that came with it, have been well-documented, most recently in John Martin-Joy’s *Diagnosing From a Distance: Debates over Libel Law, Media, and Psychiatric Ethics from Barry Goldwater to Trump* (2020). The psychologization of Richard Nixon in particular has also received significant scholarly attention. David Greenberg’s *Nixon’s Shadow: The History of an Image* (2003) and Zachary Jonathan Jacobson’s *On Nixon’s Madness: An Emotional History* (2023) examine the various personas that have been thrust upon and manufactured by this enigmatic politician. These authors address

⁵ Willem Oltmans, *Memoires 1968-1970* (De Papieren Tijger, 2003), 61.

⁶ “What to expect from Nixon,” *Life Atlantic*, November 25, 1968.

the overwhelming number of psychological inquiries that have been made into Nixon throughout his life. By focusing on Oltmans, this article offers a unique perspective on the emergence of psychological profiling and the psychologization of Nixon. Oltmans was living and working in the United States during the period being examined, but his international background and primarily Dutch audience shows that there was also an international dimension to the rise of psychological profiling in American politics.

To explain how psychological profiling shaped Willem Oltmans' assessment of Richard Nixon, the article is divided into three sections. First, it discusses the history of psychologically profiling political leaders in the US and how this shaped popular attitudes and journalism leading up to the 1968 elections. It argues that Oltmans' interest in psychology was reflective of wider trends in American journalism but also enhanced by his personal background. Second, it examines the concerns surrounding Nixon's psychological fitness for the presidency and how Oltmans sought to address them during the 1968 election cycle. It argues that Oltmans pursued psychoanalytic methods for predicting a candidate's performance in the White House because he believed politicians like Nixon were overwhelmingly dishonest in how they presented themselves to the public. Third, it evaluates Oltmans' reliance on graphology as a tool for predicting how Nixon would behave as president. It argues that the graphological analysis Oltmans consulted lacked scientific rigor and served to confirm his already narrow view of Nixon's personality and ability. In short, by analyzing the works of Willem Oltmans, this article illuminates why political journalists took an interest in the psychology of presidential candidates in the late 1960s. It also illustrates how the emergence of psychology and psychoanalysis during this period gave way to sensationalized and unreliable profiles of political figures.

On the morning of the US election in 1968, Oltmans commented in his diary that none of the candidates inspired much confidence that they would be able to meet the monumental challenges and responsibilities that came with the presidency. "After reading Robert F. Kennedy's article in *McCall's* on the Cuban Missile Crisis," he wrote, "one shivers to think how either of these guys [Nixon or the democratic nominee, Hubert Humphrey] would have met the threat of nuclear war."⁷ Nixon stood out as the most troubling candidate for Oltmans, and the following day he surmised: "Nixon made the election. It will mean war."⁸ There were a number of reasons why Oltmans believed Nixon would both escalate the war in Vietnam and prove incapable of dealing with the various challenges and crises that came with the presidency. These reasons rested on assessments that he made and adopted about Nixon's psychology and personality.

Oltmans' remarks reflected a concern about the psychological state of presidential candidates that was widely shared. Executive power had expanded significantly since the start of

⁷ Willem Oltmans, Diary Entry, 5 November 1968, DWO 614, Willem Oltmans Diary Collection, KB National Library, The Hague, Netherlands.

⁸ Oltmans, Diary Entry, 5 November 1968.

the Cold War, contributing to the escalation of a seemingly endless conflict in Vietnam. The Cuban Missile Crisis had demonstrated that a world leader of unsound mind could easily bring about a global disaster. Postwar America was also experiencing a boom in organized psychiatry and psychology. The number of mental health professionals and patients had increased dramatically in the previous two decades. Consequently, issues related to psychology and mental health had become part of mainstream conversations.⁹

Oltmans' diaries are illustrative of a culture that was inclined to see the world through the lens of psychology. He was an avid reader of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, two of the most innovative and popular psychologists of the twentieth century, whom he regularly cited in his entries. He collected numerous newspaper clippings and magazine articles that dealt with psychology or psychologized popular issues. His interest was both personal and professional. In his personal life, Oltmans used insights from psychology and psychoanalysis to come to terms with his troubled childhood, relationship problems, and homosexuality. Professionally, these fields helped him understand the personalities and cultures he encountered as a journalist covering international politics and diplomacy. When it came to relying on psychological thinking, Oltmans went further than most. Nevertheless, his pursuit of psychological tools and explanations coincided with the popular embrace of this innovative new field of study.

The practice of psychologically profiling American politicians reached its peak during the 1960s and 1970s, but its history starts much earlier. Martin-Joy traces the origins of this phenomenon to the exile of psychoanalysts from Nazi Europe. Developed by Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth century, psychoanalysis is a theory and form of therapy that investigates the interactions between the conscious and unconscious mind. It was popularized in the United States by Jewish psychologists from Europe who had fled Nazism during the 1930s and 1940s. Trained in the tradition established by Freud, these refugees taught psychoanalysis at universities across the country and joined the war effort as intelligence analysts. Between 1942 and 1945, psychoanalysts working for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) focused their efforts on creating a psychological profile of Adolf Hitler.¹⁰ Walter Langer, who led the project and wrote the final report, admitted that their profile was superficial and fragmented because they had to rely on secondhand accounts of Hitler's youth, personal life, and public appearances. Nevertheless, he was enthusiastic about the alternative methods that were being developed to profile individuals from a distance and saw great potential for future applications.¹¹

Coming out of the political extremism and mass destruction of the Second World War, there was significant academic and popular interest in the mindsets that had accepted and upheld authoritarianism. The question of Hitler's emergence became the basis of an influential sociological study, *The Authoritarian Personality*, published in 1950. Sociologist Theodor

⁹ John Martin-Joy, *Diagnosing from a Distance: Debates over Libel Law, Media, and Psychiatric Ethics from Barry Goldwater to Donald Trump* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 28.

¹⁰ The Office of Strategic Services was the precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency.

¹¹ Martin-Joy, 19-22.

Adorno and his co-authors adopted many of the themes developed in the OSS profile and relied heavily on Freud's theory of psychoanalysis as they sought to explain Hitler's psychological motivations and mass appeal.¹² Martin-Joy argues that much of the interest in Hitler was shaped by fears about people's continued susceptibility to authoritarian personalities. In the United States, this fear became most apparent when Barry Goldwater ran for the presidency in 1964. Goldwater was a staunch conservative with views that were alarming to many Americans. As Martin-Joy points out, he also possessed "a habit of making simplistic, provocative statements off the cuff," which "endeared him to many conservative followers but troubled moderates in both parties."¹³ Several observers started to question Goldwater's mental stability and associated his extreme remarks and populist appeal with an authoritarian personality type.

The inflammatory language Goldwater used during his acceptance speech for the Republican presidential nomination on July 17, 1964, caused a media frenzy. His statement that "[e]xtremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. Moderation in the pursuit of justice no virtue" made headlines for its totalitarian overtones. The speech prompted magazine publisher Ralph Ginzburg to seek professional confirmation of what he already suspected: Goldwater was out of his mind. He sent over 10,000 surveys to psychiatric professionals across the country, asking them to comment on whether they thought Goldwater was psychologically fit to serve as president. Over 1000 psychiatrists declared him unfit in their responses. Although most respondents refused to diagnose Goldwater because they were unable to interview him in person, many others offered their professional opinion nonetheless. They suggested that Goldwater suffered from severe personality defects, including paranoia and a Godlike self-image.¹⁴ Ginzburg published the survey results alongside an article that analyzed Goldwater's supposedly authoritarian and fascist personality type using the psychoanalytic concepts put forth by Freud and Adorno.¹⁵

The Goldwater case raised immediate questions about the ethical and legal issues involved when journalists and psychiatrists commented on the psychological state of politicians. After losing the election, Goldwater successfully sued the magazine *Fact*, which had published Ginzburg's article. The American Psychological Association's (APA) ethics committee had already started to express concerns about the appropriateness of popular magazine articles about psychology-related issues in 1947.¹⁶ The controversy surrounding the Ginzburg article prompted a debate about their professional guidelines, which eventually led to the creation of the APA's controversial Goldwater Rule in 1973. This rule mandates that psychiatrists refrain from diagnosing when they are asked to comment on public figures based on the premise that a

¹² Martin-Joy, 71-72.

¹³ Martin-Joy, 63-64.

¹⁴ Martin-Joy, 66-68.

¹⁵ Martin-Joy, 74-75.

¹⁶ Martin-Joy, 34.

professional diagnosis requires a personal examination and the subject's consent.¹⁷ Although journalists were more careful following the *Fact* lawsuit, the popularity of psychologically profiling public figures endured, and politicians remained the most popular targets. Many commentators soon turned their attention to Goldwater's Republican successor, Richard Nixon, who remains one of the most psychoanalyzed politicians in US history to this day.

There are a number of reasons why Nixon's psychology became such a prominent topic of discussion during his 1968 campaign and presidency. As Greenberg writes, "[t]he psychoanalysis of Richard Nixon marked a neat convergence of man and moment." Nixon had entered the White House at a time when psychiatric diagnosis and inquiry were no longer reserved for the mentally ill. As the number of Americans receiving psychiatric care rose throughout the 1960s, mental health professionals and the public started to perceive such inquiries as useful for those who seemed relatively well-adjusted too.¹⁸ According to Greenberg, Goldwater's outlandish behavior had led to rather straightforward characterizations of a crazed man, but the more guarded Nixon "invited – even demanded – psychoanalytic interpretation." With his history of awkward media appearances, full of Freudian slips and "alternating bouts of caged-in restraint and explosive anger," Nixon became a "textbook case of the psychoanalytic precept that repressed feelings affect people's behavior in unplanned ways."¹⁹

Nixon's association with McCarthyism and conservatism also shaped his political image in ways that drew psychological scrutiny. The psychologizing of political figures has a bipartisan history, demonstrated by the fact that Lyndon Johnson was also the target of armchair diagnoses and frequently accused of being a narcissist during his presidency. For Goldwater and Nixon, however, it was not just their personalities that were being psychoanalyzed but also their politics. In his influential 1964 essay titled *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, historian Richard Hofstadter argued that the post-McCarthy Right as a whole continued to embody dangerous psychological tendencies. Using Freudian concepts like paranoia, anxiety, and projection, Hofstadter's essay led the charge in a scholarly pathologization of postwar American conservatism.²⁰ Even though Nixon had moved away from the more explicitly paranoid style of conservatism and McCarthyism by 1968, he still employed many of the tactics that Hofstadter had drawn attention to. As Jacobson points out, Nixon's long history of conspiratorial populism, in which he preached that his opponents were part of an elite cabal responsible for stealing America away from the masses, was still shaping his politics in the White House.²¹ Accordingly, scholars continued to evaluate Nixon's political personality in psychiatric terms.²²

¹⁷ Benedict Carey, "The Psychiatric Question: Is It Fair to Analyze Donald Trump From Afar?" *The New York Times*, August 15, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/16/health/analyzing-donald-trump-psychology.html>.

¹⁸ David Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 6.

¹⁹ Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow*, 6.

²⁰ Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964, <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>.

²¹ Zachary Jonathan Jacobson, *On Nixon's Madness: An Emotional History* (John Hopkins University Press), 3.

²² Jacobson, 178-179.

The interest in Nixon's psychology was reinforced by concerns about the immense challenges that awaited him in the Oval Office. Observers like Oltmans believed that Nixon would struggle under that weight. Johnson's initially popular presidency came to a tragic end as the public turned on his Vietnam War policies. Nixon would be inheriting this conflict, along with a host of other issues and responsibilities. In the weeks that followed Nixon's victory, Oltmans collected a number of newspaper clippings of articles and columns that questioned whether Nixon would be able to handle the pressures of the presidency. On November 29, he took note of a story in *Newsweek* claiming that Nixon had been treated for exhaustion by psychiatrist Dr. Arnold Hutschnecker while serving as a senator in the early 1950s. The story had been broken by Drew Pearson, the same journalist who had published Oltmans' story of his interaction with Nixon on the campaign trail, and received significant media attention.²³ It contributed to doubts about Nixon's psychological fitness.²⁴

Oltmans' critical opinion of Nixon's personality and capabilities was sharpened by his background in the world of international politics. Having covered various diplomatic conflicts and interacted with statesmen in both Europe and Asia, American politicians struck Oltmans as relatively unprincipled and close-minded, especially in their diplomacy. In an interview from February 1968, he described American decision-making in Vietnam as "stupid" and lamented US officials' inability to communicate across cultures and understand the position that other countries found themselves in.²⁵ Oltmans put significant stock in qualities such as sincerity and openness, which he interpreted as vital components of effective leadership and diplomacy. He took his experiences on the campaign trail in March 1968 as proof that Nixon fell dangerously short of these ideals. In addition to the presidential candidate's alarming endorsement of interventionism in Indonesia, Oltmans got to witness a Nixon campaign speech. He responded in his diary: "What a difference, they are incomparable, there is with when Sukarno spoke to his people – a difference in humanity." Oltmans conceded that "in politics, Sukarno may of course have been wrong," but he was nevertheless sympathetic to Indonesia's revolutionary leader and first president.²⁶ Oltmans had spent time in Sukarno's inner circle while working as a diplomatic correspondent in Indonesia and had gotten to know him on a personal level. He believed Sukarno was an honest and well-intentioned statesman, who was misunderstood and demonized by his international counterparts.²⁷

Nixon, by contrast, was engaging in the "dirty game" of American electoral politics.²⁸ Reacting to that same campaign speech, Oltmans characterized Nixon as "shrewd and dishonest"

²³ Oltmans, *Memoires 1968-1970*, 75.

²⁴ Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow*, 6.

²⁵ Willem Oltmans, Newspaper Clipping, DWO 613, Willem Oltmans Diary Collection, KB National Library, The Hague, Netherlands.

²⁶ Willem Oltmans, Diary Entry, 6 March 1968, DWO 600, Willem Oltmans Diary Collection, KB National Library, The Hague, Netherlands.

²⁷ Willem Oltmans, *Mijn vriend Sukarno* (Uitgeverij het Spectrum, 1995), 11-12, 30.

²⁸ Oltmans, Diary Entry, 6 March 1968.

for blaming Johnson for Vietnam without offering any real solutions.²⁹ Newspapers and magazines would later confirm his assessment. One article titled “Nixon: his problems – and ours,” for instance, described Nixon as a “hollow man lacking inner conviction, with no touch of genius or original thought, and with an uncertainty of judgment of other men,” which Oltmans underlined and saved in his diary.³⁰ For Oltmans and many of his fellow observers, Nixon epitomized a dangerous development in American politics. As Greenberg writes, Nixon developed a Machiavellian reputation as he rose through the ranks of the national political system during the 1940s and 1950s. Whether it was his Red-baiting or his infamous Checkers Speech, liberal critics saw in Nixon “the quintessentially inauthentic mid-century man, whose opportunism, when harnessed to his mastery of propaganda, threatened American democracy.”³¹ They identified Nixon as “a new breed of American politician,” who had brought the insidious sales techniques of television and advertising into politics.³²

Psychoanalysis offered a way to see beyond the manipulative images this new breed of politician hid behind. Once in office, Nixon became the subject of a range of psychobiographies. These are studies of someone’s life that seek to understand how childhood experiences and unconscious motives shape their character. “Like other interpreters of Nixon,” Greenberg writes, “the psychobiographers sought a greater purchase on the authentic in a world dominated by political image making and obsessed by exteriors.”³³ Jacobson adds that psychobiographies served as a stabilizing force, since they sought to explain worrisome behavior. Political figures from across the political spectrum, such as Johnson and Goldwater, were judged by many as unreliable and of unsound mind. In Jacobson’s words, these psychobiographies were tools “to bring to light the rational complexities – the ‘complexes’ – behind such powerful men, to find reason in the seemingly unreasonable.”³⁴

Oltmans was interested in whether psychological profiles like those created by the psychobiographers could also help predict behavior. In his 1979 book *Amerika Valt* (America is falling), he reflected on his search for an effective method to evaluate the psychological fitness of potential officeholders and active politicians. This search had been prompted by his concerns about Nixon in 1968 but was also informed by his observations of the 1964 election. Oltmans recalls how Goldwater was heavily scrutinized for his hawkish views on the Vietnam War. With the Cuban Missile Crisis still fresh in everyone’s mind, his explicit commitment to defeating North Vietnam at all costs and his casual remarks about utilizing atomic weapons spurred debates about whether he was psychologically fit for office. Opponents characterized Goldwater as a crazed warmonger. His outlandish statements were what caused psychiatric professionals

²⁹ Oltmans, Diary Entry, 6 March 1968.

³⁰ Willem Oltmans, Newspaper Clipping, DWO 614, Willem Oltmans Diary Collection, KB National Library, The Hague, Netherlands.

³¹ David Greenberg, “Nixon’s Image: A Brief History,” in *A Companion to Richard M. Nixon*, ed. Melvin Small (Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2011), 524.

³² Greenberg, “Nixon’s Image,” 524-525.

³³ Greenberg, *Nixon’s Shadow*, 6.

³⁴ Jacobson, 169.

and journalists like Ralph Ginzburg to speak out. Martin-Joy argues that this contributed greatly to his landslide loss that year.³⁵ In *Amerika Valt*, Oltmans pointed out that Lyndon Johnson had successfully campaigned on a more moderate course for Vietnam, yet ended up enacting many of the policies that Goldwater was being criticized for when he escalated the war and signed off on extensive bombing campaigns in North Vietnam.³⁶ Accordingly, he suggested that the American electorate would have benefitted from a more thorough psychological evaluation of a candidate like Johnson, explaining that this could have predicted the way he would act once in office.³⁷

Oltmans pursued graphology as a method of psychological evaluation because he believed it could uncover precisely those attributes that candidates like Johnson and Nixon concealed with their clever politics and public relations strategies. Graphology was a rather controversial field of study premised on the theory that a systematic analysis of one's handwriting can reveal personality traits. In 1967, Oltmans had started taking his partners and close friends to Dutch graphologist Henk C. Bruinsma to have their handwriting analyzed. Oltmans came to believe that the insights these analyses gave into their life and personality were accurate and of great value. Bruinsma led a graphological research bureau in Amsterdam that helped companies analyze the handwriting of job applicants. In the leadup to the US election night, Oltmans arranged for Bruinsma to be brought on Dutch national television to offer his expert analysis of each presidential candidate's handwriting and evaluate whether they were suited for the presidency.³⁸

Oltmans later wrote a short piece for *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* ('Newspaper of the North') in which he interviewed Bruinsma about his work, the conclusions he drew on election night, and what he expected from Nixon as president. Bruinsma relayed that he perceived Hubert Humphrey as having the most mature and suitable personality for the presidency, while George Wallace seemed to be psychologically unprepared and unequipped for office. Nixon's handwriting signaled that he was a determined, serious, and sometimes impenetrable man, whose tough exterior made him seem more secure than he actually was. Bruinsma also argued that Nixon lacked the imagination to react effectively on the spot and could easily be influenced by someone with a "stronger personality." According to Bruinsma, Nixon still carried a number of traumas from his youth with him and could, therefore, be expected to react aggressively. "In conflict situations," he explained, "Nixon may do dangerous things. I therefore fear what this man will do." He told Oltmans that if he were asked by a company like the Royal Dutch Airlines whether they should hire Nixon for a senior function, he would advise against it.³⁹

³⁵ Martin-Joy, 64.

³⁶ Willem Oltmans, *Amerika valt* (Loeb & Van der Velden, 1979), 31.

³⁷ Oltmans, *Amerika valt*, 32.

³⁸ Oltmans, *Amerika valt*, 32.

³⁹ "Grafoloog Bruinsma Concludeert: 'Nixon kan in conflictsituatie gevaarlijke dingen doen,'" *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden*, 12 November 1968,

The graphological takedown of Nixon made for an effective headline, albeit one lacking in credibility. Whereas Ginzburg's psychiatrists might have jumped to conclusions about Goldwater that typically would have required a closer and more professional examination, graphology had no scientific foundation at all. Moreover, Bruinsma did not deviate from what were already the popular assessments of public figures' personalities when he analyzed their handwriting. In his analysis of a selection of famous signatures, conducted for an article in Dutch magazine *De Spiegel*, Bruinsma observed that the Dalai Lama's signature reflected "inner harmony, civility and sensitivity," while John F. Kennedy's reflected ambition, enterprise, empathy, and the ability to find the right tone when speaking to people.⁴⁰ Bruinsma's insights did not contribute anything new to the popular understanding of Nixon's personality either.

Despite all this, Oltmans remained enthusiastic about Bruinsma's findings. His personal experiences with Bruinsma had perhaps made him biased about graphology. It was not the first time he let fringe psychological research guide him. Oltmans believed thoroughly in the potential of parapsychology and was a close friend and confidant of Gerard Croiset, a famed Dutch psychic who helped solve missing person cases. Oltmans was also inclined to interpret events in a way that confirmed parts of Bruinsma's analysis. In October 1969, Oltmans went back to Bruinsma to obtain a copy of his full report on Nixon's handwriting. He picked out a number of the qualities he had observed most clearly during Nixon's first months in office, which now appeared to have been prophetic. Nixon's lack of innovation, unnatural and performative demeanor, and seemingly unreasonable and uncertain decision-making were all drawn out in the report.⁴¹ Writing in his memoirs many years later, Oltmans also wondered whether Henry Kissinger was the "stronger personality" that Bruinsma had predicted could greatly influence Nixon. Additionally, he argued that much of Nixon's conduct during the Watergate scandal had been accounted for in Bruinsma's assessment of his handwriting.⁴²

Oltmans let the rather cynical and selective psychological profile he constructed around Nixon dominate his opinion of the man and his ability to function as president. Consequently, he failed to see the potential for a positive outcome when Nixon pursued a policy Oltmans himself had often advocated for. During a 1968 lecture tour in the United States, as he hammered down on the importance of more honest diplomacy and cross-cultural communication, Oltmans frequently stated his support for the normalizing of Cold War relations. He asked one student journalist: "How are we going to live if we can't establish communication between China and the U.S.?"⁴³ Throughout his career, he had made a point of

<https://www.delpher.nl/nl/kranten/view?query=%22nixon+kan+in+conflictsituatie%22&coll=ddd&identifier=ddd:011022149:mpeg21:a0277&resultsidentifier=ddd:011022149:mpeg21:a0277&rowid=1>.

⁴⁰ Willem Oltmans, Newspaper Clipping: "De VIP en Zijn Handtekening," 13 July 1968, DWO 610, Willem Oltmans Diary Collection, KB National Library, The Hague, Netherlands.

⁴¹ Willem Oltmans, Graphological Report on Richard Nixon, DWO 621, Willem Oltmans Diary Collection, KB National Library, The Hague, Netherlands.

⁴² Oltmans, *Memoires 1968-1970*, 72 & 177.

⁴³ Willem Oltmans, Newspaper Clipping: "World's Troubles in Mankind's Soul," 1 November 1968, DWO 610, Willem Oltmans Diary Collection, KB National Library, The Hague, Netherlands.

reaching out to the nations and world leaders the West had isolated, arguing that they should be accepted back into the fold. Yet, on July 15, 1971, when Nixon announced that he was going to visit China, Oltmans was not celebrating. Two days later, he wrote a letter to his editor, Cees Meijer, in which he expressed his belief that Nixon's trip would further destabilize the global order by antagonizing the Soviet Union. "Nixon does not understand (and know) what he is doing," Oltmans wrote. "He has no grasp of the situation in Asia, as the talk I had with him on the 6th of March, 1968, in New Hampshire shows."⁴⁴ As Nixon's trip to China was controversial at the time, Oltmans' worries about the destabilizing effects of the trip were far from unique. Nevertheless, his letter betrayed a pessimism about Nixon's abilities and intentions that leaned heavily on the one experience Oltmans had with him, supplemented by a speculative interpretation of his character.

Oltmans was not unique in his embrace of a narrow understanding of Nixon's psychology. The psychological profiling of politicians from a distance presented challenges that required innovative approaches, but also professional modesty. Greenberg acknowledges that the psychobiographers' studies of Nixon and other politicians, "unquestionably enriched public understanding." However, he emphasizes that some journalists and psychoanalysts had studied their subjects inadequately, rendering psychobiography a "parlor game" in which "nuanced readings were rare [and] sensational pronouncements were common."⁴⁵ In the wake of the Watergate scandal, when the "real" Nixon was revealed to the American public through the White House tapes, moreover, "the psychobiographers' judicious exploration of Nixon's mind devolved into breathless speculation in the press and among the public."⁴⁶

Oltmans' exploration of graphology as a means for examining the psychology of potential officeholders foreshadowed a debate that would take place among psychiatrists and psychohistorians during Nixon's downfall. Dr. Arnold Hutschnecker, the psychiatrist who had treated Nixon, made the well-timed case for instituting psychological examinations for potential officeholders in his book *Drive for Power* (1974). Oltmans befriended Hutschnecker in the early 1970s and went on to endorse this idea, even though neither of them were ever able to resolve how such an examination would work.⁴⁷ In *Amerika Valt*, Oltmans consulted a number of psychiatric professionals, including the Nixon psychobiographers Dr. Bruce Mazlish and Dr. David Abrahamsen, about this question. They all answered that it would be incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to design a fair and effective screening or test for officeholders.⁴⁸

Oltmans nevertheless continued to advocate for a better understanding of the important role that psychology plays in politics, especially among world leaders. While he agreed that Nixon's personality warranted much attention, Oltmans' focus on psychology was also based on

⁴⁴ Oltmans to Cees Meijer, 17 July 1971, DWO 643, Willem Oltmans Diary Collection, KB National Library, The Hague, Netherlands.

⁴⁵ Greenberg, *Nixon's Shadow*, 6.

⁴⁶ Greenberg, "Nixon's Image," 528.

⁴⁷ Willem Oltmans, *In het land der blinden* (Papieren Tijger, 200), 178.

⁴⁸ Oltmans, *Amerika Valt*, 33.

broader concerns he had about America's political culture and the power of the presidency. In an interview he gave in February 1968, Oltmans pointed out that "what America is doing today is almost decisive for the well-being of the rest of the world," and expressed his worries about how the elections in America had become a "circus," not taken seriously by voters or politicians. He contrasted this with the more sensible politics of his home country, the Netherlands.⁴⁹ Later that year, he also described the US presidency as "the worst, most impossible, most inhuman job anyone can ever possibly have."⁵⁰ According to Oltmans, the US presidency demanded a degree of character and competence that most citizens were failing to consider when they cast their votes.

Oltmans was a provocative and forward-thinking journalist for his time, who foresaw a significant role for psychological profiling in American politics, but his basic concern with presidential psychology was widely shared. As this article has demonstrated, psychology was emerging as an academic field and found prominence in the popular culture of postwar America, where it offered compelling explanations for the rise of authoritarian personalities. Rising Cold War tensions and unprecedented nuclear capabilities also put into perspective just how decisive the presidency had become for the future of the world. Even though Nixon's personality and fitness for office were questioned throughout his career and during the 1968 election cycle, Oltmans still saw him as someone who had escaped adequate psychological scrutiny. His concerns about Nixon were sharpened by his personal and professional background. This article has argued that Oltmans was part of a trend that saw scholars and journalists explore the possibilities of psychologically profiling and screening potential officeholders. Oltmans' reliance on graphology demonstrated that he had more confidence than many of his peers in the tools available to examine the psychology of politicians from a distance. This article has illuminated how Oltmans shared many of the shortcomings that other journalists and psychobiographers fell to as they sought to explain Nixon's behavior as president.

As a journalist focused on international politics and diplomacy, Oltmans became a lifelong critic of numerous US presidents and their foreign policy. He frequently resorted to psychology as he sought to explain the controversial and destructive choices they made. In one of his final books, *Who are the No.1 War Criminals?* (2001), Oltmans reaffirmed the critical opinion of Nixon's capabilities that he had developed in 1968.⁵¹ He also stated that he was still in favor of psychologically screening US presidents and lamented that nothing had come of Hutschnecker's initial plea.⁵² But much has changed since then.

⁴⁹ Willem Oltmans, Newspaper Clipping: "Viet Involvement Called Communist Trap," 10 February 1968, DWO 598, Willem Oltmans Diary Collection, KB National Library, The Hague, Netherlands.

⁵⁰ Willem Oltmans, Newspaper Clipping: "FWWC Guest Says 'Greatest Trouble In Souls of Men'," DWO 613, Willem Oltmans Diary Collection, KB National Library, The Hague, Netherlands.

⁵¹ Willem Oltmans, *Who are the No.1 War Criminals?* (Papieren Tijger, 2001), 58.

⁵² Oltmans, *Who are the No.1 War Criminals?*, 31.

During Donald Trump's controversial 2016 presidential campaign, the debates that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s with regards to the Goldwater Rule and evaluating candidates' psychological fitness for the presidency were re-opened. This time, however, professional criticisms of Trump's self-seeking and authoritarian personality failed to sway the electorate, with some of his supporters even expressing admiration for these traits. As Trump's current administration destabilizes the global order and descends even further into authoritarianism, Oltmans' plea that Americans rethink their electoral politics and explore the potential of psychology has a newfound relevance. As such, the question of what role, if any, psychological profiling should have in American politics is again worth addressing.

Paper

The Fight for Abortion Rights

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This paper was written for the course 'Democracy in Action: Radical Cultures and Protest Movements in Modern America' for the BA English Language and Culture

Abortion rights have been a deeply polarizing issue in the United States for decades, eliciting passionate debates on ethics, morality, and legality. While much of the existing literature on abortion rights has emphasized federal jurisprudence, national advocacy networks, and the influence of landmark Supreme Court decisions, this study intervenes in the scholarly debate by foregrounding the significance of localized, state-level activism. By examining the case of Kentucky, it demonstrates how grassroots coalitions, strategic media engagement, and targeted legal advocacy can effectively contest and overcome deeply embedded conservative ideologies. In doing so, this research complicates prevailing narratives that frame reproductive rights gains as primarily achievable through national channels, offering instead a model of context-specific mobilization capable of advancing reproductive justice in politically adverse environments.

Scholars have explored abortion rights from a variety of disciplinary and thematic perspectives. Landmark cases such as *Roe v. Wade* (1973), which established the constitutional right to abortion, as well as its later reversal in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), have been extensively analyzed in legal scholarship for their implications for privacy, bodily autonomy, and federalism. Legal scholars, such as Reva Siegel and Mary Ziegler, have also traced the constitutional arguments surrounding abortion and the evolving judicial interpretations that have shaped national policy.¹ From a socio-political perspective, the abortion debate has been linked to broader cultural and ideological divides in American society. Scholars such as Kristin Luker, in *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, and Jennifer Holland, in *Tiny You*, have examined how views on abortion often reflect deeper moral frameworks related to gender roles, family values, and religious doctrine.² In particular, the role of conservative evangelical Christianity has been a recurring theme in understanding the anti-abortion movement's rise to political power and "by the early 1980s, the Christian Right had adopted abortion as a central rallying issue, and evangelical leaders used it to galvanize a previously apolitical constituency into sustained political activism."³ Studies have also focused on grassroots feminist and reproductive justice activism, highlighting how marginalized communities have mobilized in defense of reproductive rights,

¹ Reva B. Siegel, "Sex Equality Arguments for Reproductive Rights: Their Critical Basis and Evolving Constitutional Expression," *Emory Law Journal* 56 (2007): 815-38; Mary R. Ziegler, *Personhood: The New Civil War Over Reproduction* (Yale University Press, 2025).

² Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (University of California Press, 2013); Jennifer L. Holland, *Tiny You: A Western History of the Anti-Abortion Movement* (University of California Press, 2020).

³ Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 200.

especially in conservative regions.⁴ From a public health and social justice perspective, researchers have documented how restrictive abortion laws exacerbate health disparities, especially for low-income individuals, people of color, and those living in rural areas.⁵ Scholars such as Loretta Ross and Dorothy Roberts have expanded the conversation through the lens of reproductive justice, arguing that true reproductive freedom includes not only the right to abortion but also the right to have children, to not have children, and to parent in safe and healthy environments.⁶ Studies have also shown that abortion restrictions often lead to delayed or unsafe procedures, increasing physical and psychological risks for patients.⁷

This article contributes to and extends this body of scholarship by focusing on the relationship between grassroots activism, media framing, and shifting public opinion in a deeply conservative state. In contrast to the national scope of much previous research, this study offers a localized, case-specific analysis of how pro-abortion rights advocacy overcame entrenched opposition in Kentucky — a state historically aligned with anti-abortion politics. By employing a mixed-methods approach and focusing on coalition-building and strategic communication, this research highlights the dynamic, on-the-ground mechanisms through which reproductive rights have been defended and advanced even in politically hostile environments. Within a broader national conversation, the state of Kentucky stands as a model, reflecting the complexities and nuances of the abortion rights debate.

This article focuses on why voters in a staunchly conservative state turned out in significant numbers in 2022 to reject a ballot measure aimed at removing constitutional protections for abortion. It argues that voters in Kentucky rejected the ballot curtailing abortion rights because a powerful coalition of grassroots activists, legal advocates, and media efforts successfully shifted public opinion and mobilized constituents by highlighting the real-life impacts of restrictive laws and framing reproductive rights as fundamental to personal freedom and healthcare access. Crucially, these efforts were not isolated but embedded in strategic alliances between national organizations and local advocates, which enabled resource sharing, coordinated messaging, and sustained legal pressure. The debate over the ballot unfolded within a state socio-political landscape characterized by ideological polarization, legislative maneuvering, and grassroots activism.⁸ In particular, the state's conservative political climate and strong religious influence have fueled opposition to abortion rights, leading to the proliferation of anti-abortion sentiment among policymakers

⁴ Jennifer Nelson, *More Than Medicine: A History of the Feminist Women's Health Movement* (New York University Press, 2015), 164–181; Zakiya Luna, *Reproductive Rights as Human Rights: Women of Color and the Fight for Reproductive Justice* (New York University Press, 2020), 102–123.

⁵ Diana Greene Foster, et al., *The Turnaway Study: Ten Years, a Thousand Women, and the Consequences of Having—or Being Denied—an Abortion* (Scribner, 2020), 145–167; Jamila Peritt and Monica R. McLemore, “Reproductive Justice and Preventing Maternal Mortality,” *Obstetrics and Gynecology Clinics of North America* 48, no. 2 (June 2021): 247–255.

⁶ Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (University of California Press, 2017), 9–14; Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (Vintage Books, 1997), 5–18.

⁷ Diana Greene Foster, et al., 78–101; Ushma D. Upadhyay et al., “Denial of Abortion Because of Provider Gestational Age Limits in the United States,” *American Journal of Public Health* 104, no. 9 (2014): 1687–1694.

⁸ Daniel A. Smith and Dustin Sparks, “Ballot Measures and Polarization in American State Politics,” *State Politics & Policy Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (2019): 247–269.

and the electorate.⁹ Additionally, socio-economic disparities and healthcare access issues have disproportionately affected marginalized communities, exacerbating existing barriers to reproductive healthcare services.¹⁰ Situated within a historically conservative and religious socio-political environment, Kentucky exemplifies how ideological polarization, legislative restrictions, and socio-economic inequality intersect to shape policy around reproductive rights. The state's pronounced disparities in healthcare access — particularly for marginalized communities — further complicate the landscape, making Kentucky a critical case study for understanding the multifaceted barriers to abortion access. The abortion rights debate in Kentucky therefore offers a unique lens through which the broader national discourse on reproductive healthcare can be examined. By elucidating the historical evolution, legal framework, and socio-political factors influencing abortion rights, this research also informs policy discussions, advocacy efforts, and public discourse surrounding reproductive healthcare access.

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the abortion rights debate in Kentucky. Qualitatively, the focus is on analyzing sources from key stakeholders — such as legislators, activists, healthcare providers, and members of the public — to understand their perspectives, experiences, and motivations regarding abortion rights. Meanwhile, quantitative analysis involves a statistical examination of legislative voting patterns or public opinion survey data to identify trends and correlations. A diverse range of data sources are utilized to gather comprehensive insights into the abortion rights landscape in Kentucky. Data sources include academic literature, demographic data, public opinion surveys, and media coverage of abortion-related issues, such as demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau, polling data from organizations like Gallup or Pew Research Centre, and media coverage from newspapers, television, and online outlets. The research employs both qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques to extract meaningful insights and patterns from the collected data. Qualitative data analysis involves content analysis to identify key themes, trends, and patterns within the literature. These recurring themes include religious influence, women's rights advocacy, or healthcare access disparities. Quantitative data analysis utilizes statistics to examine legislative trends and public opinion data. This analysis also allows for an exploration of the relationship between demographic factors (such as age, gender, or political affiliation) and attitudes towards abortion rights among Kentuckians. Across the case study, particular attention is paid to how alliances between local Kentucky organizations and national advocacy groups structure legal strategies, media campaigns, and grassroots mobilization.

Kentucky's long-standing conservative political climate has significantly hindered the advancement of pro-abortion rights legislation.¹¹ The dominance of conservative ideologies,

⁹ Andrew R. Lewis, *The Rights Turn in Conservative Christian Politics: How Abortion Transformed the Culture Wars* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 112–134.

¹⁰ Liza Fuentes, et al., “Inequity in US Abortion Rights and Access: The End of Roe Is Deepening Existing Divides,” *Guttmacher Institute*, July 18, 2023.

¹¹ Al Cross, “Kentucky's Political Shift to the Right,” *The Kentucky Gazette*, January 2020.

coupled with the influence of anti-abortion groups, has made passing pro-abortion rights legislation a complicated task.¹² Kentucky's long-standing conservative political climate has significantly hindered the advancement of pro-abortion rights legislation.¹³ Previous attempts to advance such measures were met with fierce opposition, as lawmakers grappled with ideological divides and pressure from conservative constituents.¹⁴ For instance, in 2019, Kentucky's legislature passed one of the nation's most restrictive abortion laws, SB 9, banning abortions after fetal cardiac activity is detected, typically around six weeks of pregnancy. This law was signed by Governor Matt Bevin, a staunch conservative and vocal opponent of abortion.¹⁵ The bill faced immediate legal challenges and was blocked by a federal judge, but it exemplified the state's legislative trend towards limiting abortion access.¹⁶ In another example, 2019 also saw the introduction of SB 50, requiring physicians to inform patients undergoing medication abortions that the procedure could potentially be reversed.¹⁷ This is a claim widely discredited by medical professionals, "reflect[ing] the general trend for antiabortion policy to be grounded in unsound science and to promote misinformation."¹⁸ This bill, supported by conservative lawmakers and anti-abortion advocacy groups, was criticized by reproductive rights advocates as misleading and dangerous.¹⁹ Furthermore, the state's political climate has been shaped by influential organizations, such as the Kentucky Right to Life Association, which has actively lobbied for restrictive abortion laws and supported conservative candidates who align with their anti-abortion stance.²⁰ These groups have substantial sway over the political discourse and have successfully mobilized voters and resources to oppose pro-abortion rights initiatives. Together, these forces underscore how deeply embedded anti-abortion sentiment is in Kentucky's politics—setting the stage for ongoing legal battles and continued ideological conflict in the state.

The conservative grip on Kentucky's legislature is also evident in the rejection of attempts to expand reproductive health services. Proposals to improve access to contraception and comprehensive sex education have often been obstructed, reflecting a prevailing conservative view that emphasizes abstinence and traditional family values.²¹ Embedded within the social and cultural fabric of Kentucky are deeply ingrained beliefs rooted in evangelical Christian morality, traditional gender roles, abstinence-based sexual

¹² Lewis, 112-134.

¹³ Alana Watson, "How Kentucky Became One of the Hardest States for Abortion Access," *NPR*, April 21, 2022.

¹⁴ Deborah Yetter, "Kentucky Lawmakers Defeat Proposal to Expand Abortion Access amid Strong Opposition," *Louisville Courier Journal*, February 15, 2019.

¹⁵ Jared Goffinet and Evan Gorman, "Ky Gov. Bevin Signs 4 Anti-Abortion Bills," *14 News*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.14news.com>.

¹⁶ Deborah Yetter, "Kentucky's Only Abortion Clinic Resumes Seeing Patients as 'Fetal Heartbeat' Law Blocked," *Courier Journal*, March 16, 2019.

¹⁷ M. Smith, et al, "Kentucky's abortion landscape, 2010 to 2019: an analysis of pre-Dobbs abortion disparities in a rural, restrictive state," *Lancet regional health* 19 (2023), 100441.

¹⁸ Sara K. Redd, et al., "Medication Abortion 'Reversal' Laws: How Unsound Science Paved the Way for Dangerous Abortion Policy," *American Journal of Public Health*, 113. No. 2 (2023): 202-212.

¹⁹ Deborah Yetter, "Kentucky's Controversial Abortion 'reversal' Law Takes Effect Thursday," *Courier Journal*, June 26, 2019.

²⁰ Addia K. Wuchner, "We Congratulate Our Right to Life Endorsed Candidates and All of Tuesday Night's Primary Election Winners!" *Kentucky Right to Life*, May 24, 2024.

²¹ Tessa Stuart, "The GOP Is Coming after Your Birth Control (Even If They Won't Admit It)," *Rolling Stone*, September 18, 2023.

ethics, and faith-based family ideals, all of which frame abortion as morally wrong and women's reproductive choices as subject to religious and social control.²² The discourse surrounding abortion is reflective of this complex backdrop, with differing viewpoints entrenched within communities across the state.²³ While some advocate for reproductive autonomy and access to comprehensive healthcare, others vehemently oppose abortion, citing moral and religious grounds.²⁴ This societal divide has fostered a climate of polarization, further exacerbated by the politicization of reproductive rights issues. The strong religious influence in Kentucky also plays a significant role in shaping public opinion on abortion. The state has a high percentage of residents identifying as evangelical Christians (49% to be exact), a group that often hold anti-abortion views.²⁵ Churches and religious leaders frequently participate in the public debate, framing abortion as a moral issue. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention, one of the largest religious organizations in the country, has been vocal in its opposition to abortion, often organizing rallies and advocacy campaigns to promote pro-life legislation.²⁶ Traditional family values also contribute to the cultural resistance against abortion. In many rural communities, there is a strong emphasis on maintaining traditional gender roles and family structures.²⁷ This cultural norm often translates into support for policies that restrict abortion and promote alternatives such as adoption.²⁸ For instance, crisis pregnancy centers, which are typically faith-based organizations that advocate for carrying pregnancies to term, are widespread in Kentucky and receive substantial support from local communities and government funding.²⁹ Despite the predominant conservative views, some groups and individuals are advocating for reproductive rights and access to comprehensive healthcare. Organizations such as the Kentucky Health Justice Network aim to provide support and resources for individuals seeking abortions, often in the face of significant social stigma and opposition.³⁰ These advocates argue for reproductive autonomy, emphasizing the importance of personal choice and access to safe medical procedures.

Despite persistent efforts, the advancement of abortion rights in Kentucky has repeatedly been thwarted by a deeply entrenched conservative legislature and powerful anti-abortion advocacy groups. Previous attempts to pass pro-abortion rights legislation were met with staunch resistance from anti-abortion factions, leading to legislative gridlock and the stalling of reform efforts. Bills aimed at safeguarding reproductive freedoms faced considerable hurdles in a legislature dominated by conservative voices, effectively stifling progress and perpetuating the status quo of restrictive abortion laws. One notable example occurred in 2023, when HB 711 was introduced to expand access to abortion by seeking

²² Andrew L. Whitehead, "Politics, Religion, and Public Opinion about Abortion in Appalachia: The Case of Kentucky," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 3 (2018): 526–539.

²³ Whitehead, 526–539.

²⁴ Whitehead, 526–539.

²⁵ "Religious Landscape Study," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, May 12, 2015.

²⁶ Leah Savas, "Abortion Abolitionists Speak out at Southern Baptist Convention," *WORLD*, June 20, 2023.

²⁷ Mary Anglin, "Lives on the Margin: Rediscovering the Women of Appalachian Kentucky," *Southern Exposure* 22, no. 2 (1994): 34–41.

²⁸ Anglin, 34–41.

²⁹ Laura C. Morel, "'It's a Public Health Risk': Nurse Decries Infection Control at US Anti-Abortion Crisis Center," *The Guardian*, February 2, 2023.

³⁰ "What We Do." Kentucky Health Justice Network.

rape and incest exceptions up to 15 weeks.³¹ This bill was intended to increase accessibility, and to ease the heavy restrictions placed on women's rights to abortion in the aftermath of *Roe v. Wade* being overruled. However, it was quickly met with vehement opposition from anti-abortion legislators and organizations, such as Students For Life Action, which argued that expanding provider access would undermine efforts to restrict abortion.³² The bill never advanced beyond committee discussions, highlighting the significant barriers faced by pro-abortion rights advocates. In 2024, another attempt to protect abortion rights was made with the introduction of HB 428, which seeks to repeal the 2019 and 2022 laws that implemented a total abortion ban in Kentucky.³³ The bill aims to protect women's healthcare and is supported by reproductive health advocacy organizations, including the ACLU and Planned Parenthood. The bill has, however, seen significant pushback from the pro-life organization Kentucky Right to Life.

Efforts to repeal or modify existing restrictive abortion laws from the past have also encountered significant obstacles. For example, attempts to overturn the 2017 "Ultrasound Informed Consent Act," also known as HB 2, which requires women seeking an abortion to undergo an ultrasound and listen to a detailed description of the fetus, were met with strong pushback.³⁴ Proponents of the repeal argued that the law was intrusive and intended to emotionally manipulate women, but anti-abortion advocates defended it to ensure informed consent. The repeal efforts failed to gain traction in the conservative-dominated legislature, leaving the restrictive law in place. These repeated failures reflect the immense structural and ideological obstacles that continue to prevent meaningful progress on abortion rights in the state—underscoring how entrenched opposition has shaped Kentucky's legislative approach to reproductive health.

In Kentucky, deep-seated conservative power and anti-abortion opposition have blocked legislative progress on abortion rights, but grassroots groups and advocacy organizations continue mobilizing through legal challenges, public education, and direct support to push for change. While local organizations form the backbone of this resistance, their effectiveness increasingly depends on sustained partnerships with national legal and advocacy organizations – an alliance model that becomes a defining feature of Kentucky's reproductive rights movement. Through community outreach, education initiatives, and grassroots organizing, these advocates have worked tirelessly to shift public perception, garner support, and mobilize constituents in support of abortion rights. One key player in the movement is the Kentucky HealthJustice Network (KHJN), which provides practical support and advocacy for reproductive health services, in the form of an abortion support fund.³⁵ This fund helps cover travel expenses, lodging, and procedure costs for individuals who need to

³¹ Sarah Ladd, "GOP Lawmaker Files Bill to Add Rape, Incest Exceptions to Kentucky Abortion Ban," *Kentucky Lantern*, February 27, 2024.

³² Mattison Brooks, "Legislation Alert: Kentucky Introduces HB 711, to Expand Abortion Access in the State," *SFL Action*, March 12, 2024.

³³ Austin Schick, "State Rep. Lindsey Burke Files Bills Aimed at Abortion Access," *Spectrum News 1*, January 31, 2024.

³⁴ Thomas M. Messner, "Federal Appeals Court Upholds Kentucky's Informed Consent Ultrasound Law," *Lozier Institute*, January 14, 2023.

³⁵ "Abortion Support Fund," *KHJN*.

travel long distances to access abortion services. Their work, however, extends beyond financial assistance; they also engage in community education efforts to inform the public about reproductive rights and healthcare options, aiming to reduce stigma and increase understanding.

Another significant organization is the ACLU of Kentucky, which has “actively been involved in litigation for nearly all abortion rights cases in Kentucky over the past four decades.”³⁶ The ACLU has often challenged restrictive abortion laws in court, arguing for the protection of reproductive freedoms under state and federal constitutions. For instance, the ACLU played a pivotal role in challenging the 2019 “Fetal Heartbeat bill” (SB 9), which was ultimately blocked by a federal judge.³⁷ Their legal advocacy helps to push back against restrictive legislation and maintain access to abortion services. Grassroots activism is also a critical component of the movement. Groups like Planned Parenthood Advocates of Indiana and Kentucky (PPAIK) engage in grassroots organizing to mobilize supporters and advocate for reproductive rights. PPAIK hosts rallies, conducts phone banks, and organizes lobby days where constituents meet with their legislators to discuss the importance of abortion access.³⁸

These efforts aim to build a strong base of support and exert pressure on lawmakers to consider pro-abortion rights policies. Education initiatives have been another strategic focus for the movement. Organizations such as the Kentucky Coalition for Reproductive Justice (KCRJ) conduct workshops and seminars to educate communities about reproductive justice, encompassing a broader perspective that includes issues of race, class, and gender.³⁹ By framing abortion rights within the larger context of social justice, KCRJ works to build coalitions across different advocacy groups and highlight the intersectionality of reproductive issues. These efforts collectively represent a growing, multifaceted movement working to shift public opinion, challenge systemic barriers, and lay the groundwork for future policy change.

Media coverage has also played a pivotal role in shaping public discourse surrounding abortion rights in Kentucky. Through news articles, opinion pieces, and investigative reports, media outlets provided a platform for advocates to amplify their message, raise awareness about reproductive rights issues, and challenge lingering stigmas and misconceptions. Major newspapers such as the Louisville Courier Journal and Lexington Herald Leader have played a significant role in informing the public about the complexities of abortion laws and the personal stories behind the statistics. For instance, investigative reports detailing the impact of restrictive abortion laws on women’s health have highlighted the challenges faced by those seeking reproductive healthcare. These reports often include interviews with healthcare providers and patients, providing a human face to the issues and fostering empathy and understanding among readers. An investigative report by the Lexington Herald Leader debunked the notion that most women regret having abortions. The study found that “95

³⁶ “Reproductive Freedom Project,” *ACLU of Kentucky*, September 20, 2023.

³⁷ “We’re Filing Suit after Passage of 6-Week Abortion Ban, Senate Bill 9,” *ACLU of Kentucky*, March 27, 2019.

³⁸ “Planned Parenthood Stands with Students in March for Our Lives,” *Planned Parenthood of Indiana and Kentucky, Inc.*, March 24, 2018.

³⁹ “Outreach,” *Kentucky Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice*.

percent of women reported that it was the right choice for them – and 84 percent of women said they had either positive feelings or no feelings at all about their choice.”⁴⁰

Editorials and opinion columns have also been instrumental in shaping public opinion. Prominent journalists and public figures have used these platforms to advocate for reproductive rights, discussing the implications of restrictive laws and urging for more progressive policies. For example, opinion pieces by reproductive rights advocates in local newspapers have argued against the constitutionality and morality of laws such as the 2019 “heartbeat bill” (SB 9), calling for greater protection of women's autonomy. One such opinion piece by the *Louisville Courier-Journal* reflects on the cruelty of the Kentucky abortion ban, highlights the personal stories of Kentuckians living under this ban, and urges voters in Kentucky to make their voices heard by calling their legislators.⁴¹ Overall, public opinion has shifted, as seen in a fact sheet published by the Pew Research Center. It shows that while support for abortion rights has remained relatively stable from 1995 to 2024, it is at an all-time high now at 63%.⁴² Moreover, it shows that 76% of young people aged 18 to 29 support abortion rights, promising a rise in support of abortion rights as time passes.⁴³ Media efforts have contributed to a gradual shift in public opinion towards greater acceptance of abortion rights. Increased coverage following the fall of *Roe v. Wade* brought abortion issues into mainstream discourse, while strategic campaigns—such as one featuring sexual assault survivor Hadley Duvall—resonated with voters and helped reframe the narrative around abortion access.⁴⁴

These efforts are reflected in polling data showing that 62% of Kentuckians opposed the state's near-total abortion ban in 2023.⁴⁵ Educational campaigns that explain the legal, medical, and social aspects of abortion have demystified the issue and countered misinformation.⁴⁶ As public opinion shifts, advocates have leveraged media platforms to galvanize constituents and encourage political action.⁴⁷ Calls to action in articles, social media posts, and broadcast segments urge supporters to contact their legislators, attend rallies, and vote for pro-choice candidates.⁴⁸ This mobilization is crucial in creating tangible political pressure for legislative reform. As public awareness grows, sustained media engagement is essential in turning discourse into policy change.

National developments in abortion politics have influenced Kentucky's abortion rights movement, intensifying advocacy efforts in response to mounting federal threats. One

⁴⁰ Jared Gilmour, “Do Many Women Regret Abortions? New Study ‘debunks’ That Perception Experts Say,” *Lexington Herald Leader*, January 13, 2020.

⁴¹ Kim Greene, “Kentucky Abortion Ban Is Relentlessly Cruel, New Legislation Must Protect Women’s Health Care,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, February 13, 2024.

⁴² “Public Opinion on Abortion,” *Pew Research Center*, May 13, 2024.

⁴³ “Public Opinion on Abortion.”

⁴⁴ Lex McMenamin, “Abortion Advocate Hadley Duvall Never Wanted to Be Political. Now She's Touring the Country for the Harris Campaign,” *Teen Vogue*, October 24, 2024.

⁴⁵ Sylvia Goodman, “Kentucky’s Near-Total Abortion Ban Takes Center Stage in Gubernatorial Election,” *NPR*, September 22, 2023.

⁴⁶ Jessica Ravitz, “What These Abortion Educators Want You to Know,” *CNN*, May 25, 2022.

⁴⁷ Deana A. Rohlinger, *Abortion Politics, Mass Media, and Social Movements in America* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 89–112.

⁴⁸ Deana A. Rohlinger, “The Strategic Use of Political Communication by Abortion Rights Advocates,” in *Abortion Politics, Mass Media, and Social Movements in America* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 92–105.

such example is the appointment of conservative Supreme Court justices and the resurgence of anti-abortion legislation in other states, which have served as catalysts for mobilizing support and galvanizing advocates in Kentucky. In 2022, the looming threat of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned sparked renewed urgency among activists, prompting a reinvigoration of advocacy efforts at the state level. Furthermore, high-profile events, such as reproductive rights rallies, provided opportunities for solidarity and collective action, fostering a sense of unity and purpose within the movement. The appointments of Justices Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court created significant concern among abortion rights advocates nationwide, including in Kentucky. These appointments shifted the balance of the Court towards a more conservative stance, raising fears that *Roe v. Wade* could be overturned or severely weakened, which it eventually was. As one study aptly put it “it was only a matter of waiting until a case came forward that clearly violated the viability standard of the existing constitutional protections.”⁴⁹ In response, Kentucky activists intensified their efforts to protect abortion rights at the state level, recognizing the increased risk of federal protections being dismantled. Additionally, states like Texas and Alabama passed highly restrictive abortion laws, such as the Texas Senate Bill 8, which banned most abortions after about six weeks of pregnancy and allowed private citizens to sue anyone who performed or aided and abetted an abortion.⁵⁰ These national flashpoints helped to galvanize local advocates, who recognized the growing need to build resistance within Kentucky’s borders—laying the groundwork for intensified grassroots organizing and legal strategies in the post-Roe era.

These legislative moves in other states have served as both a warning and a motivator for Kentucky advocates. Ona Marshall, founder of the Kentucky Reproductive Freedom Fund (KRFF) and co-owner of one of Kentucky’s last two abortion clinics, even explicitly stated: “We could follow the lead of other states that are moving to protect reproductive rights.”⁵¹ Clearly, developments in other states have inspired Kentucky advocates to pursue similar strategies to safeguard reproductive rights. Seeing the tangible effects of such laws on women’s health and autonomy elsewhere underscored the urgency of their own local advocacy. The potential overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court acted as a wake-up call for many in the reproductive rights community. Activists in Kentucky ramped up their efforts by organizing educational campaigns, lobbying state legislators, and preparing for a post-Roe landscape. For instance, the ACLU of Kentucky and Planned Parenthood began working more closely on contingency plans to ensure that women in Kentucky would still have access to necessary reproductive health services. As soon as trigger laws went into effect in Kentucky following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, the ACLU of Kentucky alongside

⁴⁹ Johnson Candace, “Drafting injustice: overturning *Roe v. Wade*, spillover effects and reproductive rights in context,” *Feminist theory* 25, no. 1 (2024): 122–127.

⁵⁰ Neelan Bohra, “Texas Law Banning Abortion as Early as Six Weeks Goes into Effect as the U.S. Supreme Court Takes No Action,” *The Texas Tribune*, August 31, 2021.

⁵¹ Sarah Ladd, “Ky Abortion Rights Advocates Mark Milestone, Lament State’s Barrier to Ballot Initiatives,” *Kentucky Lantern*, August 1, 2024.

Planned Parenthood sued in the Jefferson Circuit Court, arguing “rights to privacy, bodily autonomy, and self-determination [to] protect the right to abortion.”⁵²

National reproductive rights rallies, such as those organized in response to restrictive abortion laws or Supreme Court decisions, also had a significant impact on the local movement in Kentucky. These rallies often featured speeches from prominent advocates, provided platforms for sharing personal stories, and served as public demonstrations of widespread support for abortion rights. After the passage of the “heartbeat bills” in several states, Kentucky saw an increase in local rallies and protests, where advocates called for the protection of reproductive freedoms.⁵³ Strategic legislative and legal maneuvers also played a pivotal role in advancing the cause of abortion rights in Kentucky. Advocates worked to identify legislative champions, cultivate relationships with lawmakers, and mobilize support for pro-abortion rights legislation as demonstrated by the ACLU of Kentucky’s Reproductive Freedom Project, which organizes volunteer lobbyists, coordinates legislative testimony, and leads statewide campaigns to restore reproductive access and improve maternal health outcomes.⁵⁴ Key initiatives, such as the introduction of bills to repeal restrictive abortion laws and protect reproductive freedoms, served as rallying points for the movement, generating momentum for reform. Simultaneously, legal challenges were mounted against existing restrictions, leveraging the courts as a battleground for advancing reproductive justice. Through strategic litigation and advocacy, advocates sought to dismantle barriers to access, challenge discriminatory policies, and secure legal protections for abortion rights.

Advocates have also been proactive in identifying and supporting legislators who are committed to advancing reproductive rights. These legislative champions play a critical role in introducing and promoting pro-abortion rights bills. For instance, Kentucky State Representative Mary Lou Marzian has been a prominent advocate for women's reproductive health, consistently introducing bills aimed at expanding access to abortion and other reproductive services. Her efforts include proposing legislation to repeal existing restrictive laws and to ensure that abortion remains accessible.⁵⁵ For abortion-rights advocates, ensuring the legislative success of champions like Marzian depends upon building strong relationships with lawmakers. Advocacy groups like Planned Parenthood and the ACLU of Kentucky regularly engage in lobbying efforts to educate legislators about the importance of reproductive rights. The ACLU has even published a “lobbying guide” for civilians, so they know how to contact their legislators.⁵⁶ These organizations also host informational sessions, provide expert testimony during committee hearings, and organize legislative visits where constituents can meet with their representatives to discuss the impact of restrictive abortion laws. Advocacy groups also focus on mobilizing public support for pro-abortion rights legislation. This involves organizing rallies, creating awareness campaigns, and encouraging

⁵² “EMW Women’s Surgical Center V. Daniel Cameron – Challenge to Kentucky Abortion Bans,” *ACLU of Kentucky*, July 13, 2023.

⁵³ “Rally in Support of Reproductive Freedom Held at Ky. Capitol,” *WKYT*, February 14, 2024.

⁵⁴ “Reproductive Freedom Project,” *ACLU of Kentucky*, July 26, 2024.

⁵⁵ Deborah Yetter, “Women Can Just Report Their Pregnancies to the State, Fed-up Lawmaker Says,” *Louisville Courier Journal*, June 27, 2022.

⁵⁶ “Lobbying Guide,” *ACLU of Kentucky*.

citizens to contact their representatives. For example, when legislation to protect reproductive freedoms is introduced, groups like the Kentucky Health Justice Network launch campaigns to generate public backing and political pressure. These campaigns often include social media drives, petition signing, and public demonstrations. Additionally, introducing bills to repeal restrictive abortion laws has been a central strategy. For instance, in 2020, advocates supported a veto aimed at repealing SB 9 that banned abortion after the detection of a fetal heartbeat.⁵⁷ This served as a rallying point for abortion rights activists and kept abortion rights in the public eye.

At the heart of the campaign for abortion rights in Kentucky lay the power of grassroots activism and mobilization. Grassroots organizations, reproductive justice coalitions, and community-based groups mobilized constituents, organized rallies, and engaged in direct action to raise awareness and demand change.⁵⁸ Through door-to-door canvassing, phone banking, and community outreach initiatives, activists engaged with voters, shared personal stories, and dispelled myths surrounding abortion.⁵⁹ Additionally, grassroots efforts extended beyond traditional advocacy tactics, encompassing a diverse array of strategies, including storytelling, activism, and cultural organizing. This multifaceted approach fostered a sense of solidarity, resilience, and collective empowerment within the movement, driving momentum and galvanizing support for abortion rights. Activists have employed traditional grassroots tactics like door-to-door canvassing and phone banking to engage directly with voters. For example, during election seasons and legislative sessions, volunteers from organizations such as Planned Parenthood Advocates of Indiana and Kentucky (PPAIK) go door-to-door in key districts to discuss candidates' positions on reproductive rights and encourage voter turnout.⁶⁰ Phone banking campaigns similarly aim to reach thousands of constituents to provide information and mobilize support for pro-choice legislation.⁶¹ Furthermore, grassroots groups organize community forums, town hall meetings, and educational workshops to inform the public about reproductive rights and abortion access. These initiatives create spaces for open dialogue, allowing community members to ask questions, share experiences, and learn from experts. For instance, events hosted by the Kentucky Coalition for Reproductive Justice (KCRJ) often feature healthcare providers, legal experts, and activists who can address common misconceptions and provide accurate information.⁶² This multi-faceted, community-based approach has not only built momentum for reproductive rights but has laid the groundwork for sustained resistance and policy advocacy—efforts that increasingly intersect with legal and electoral strategies to secure long-term protections.⁶³

⁵⁷ Jack Brammer, "Lawmakers Passed Controversial Abortion Bill on Session's Last Day. Beshear Just Vetoed It," *Lexington Herald Leader*, April 24, 2020.

⁵⁸ National Women's Law Center, *State of Abortion Access: Kentucky*, 2023.

⁵⁹ Katie O'Connor, "Grassroots Activism Fuels Kentucky's Fight for Abortion Rights," *Rewire News Group*, November 2, 2022.

⁶⁰ "Get Involved," *Planned Parenthood Advocates of Indiana and Kentucky*, 2022.

⁶¹ Danielle Kurtzleben, "How Volunteers Are Mobilizing Voters in Red States on Reproductive Rights," *NPR*, October 30, 2022.

⁶² "Events and Education," *Kentucky Coalition for Reproductive Justice*.

⁶³ Rachel Rebouché, *After Roe: The Lost History and Uncertain Future of Abortion Law* (NYU Press, 2023), 142–145.

Grassroots activism in Kentucky's abortion rights movement has relied on a wide array of creative, strategic, and community-based tactics to mobilize public support and pressure lawmakers. One powerful tactic used by grassroots activists has been storytelling. By sharing personal experiences with abortion, individuals help to humanize the issue and break down stigma. Campaigns like "1 in 3" (referring to the statistic that one in three women will have an abortion in her lifetime) encourage people to share their stories publicly, whether through social media, community meetings, or public testimonies.⁶⁴ These stories can be incredibly impactful in shifting public opinion and fostering empathy. Grassroots efforts also include cultural organizing through art, music, and theater. Activists use creative mediums to reach broader audiences and convey their messages in compelling ways. For example, public art projects like murals or installations can highlight the importance of reproductive rights, while theatrical performances and music events can create emotionally resonant experiences that engage the community and inspire action.⁶⁵ Organizing rallies and protests is a core component of grassroots activism. Events like the annual "March for Reproductive Freedom" in Kentucky draw large crowds and media attention, demonstrating widespread support for abortion rights. These public demonstrations not only raise awareness but also create a sense of solidarity and collective power among participants.⁶⁶

Activists sometimes also engage in direct action campaigns to draw attention to specific issues or legislative battles. This can include sit-ins at legislators' offices, public die-ins to symbolize the consequences of restrictive abortion laws, and other forms of civil disobedience. These actions are designed to provoke public and media attention, putting pressure on lawmakers to consider pro-choice policies. Strategic alliances and coalitions played a critical role in amplifying the impact and reach of the abortion rights movement in Kentucky. Collaborative efforts between advocacy organizations, healthcare providers, legal experts, faith-based groups, and community stakeholders fostered a broadly based coalition united in the pursuit of reproductive justice. By sharing resources and expertise, and coordinating advocacy efforts, these alliances leveraged collective power to advocate for policy reform, challenge systemic injustices, and advance the cause of abortion rights.

Strategic alliances between national organizations and local advocates have played a crucial, ongoing role in strengthening Kentucky's reproductive rights movement through shared resources, legal support, and unified advocacy.⁶⁷ Collaborative efforts often take the form of joint campaigns and advocacy initiatives. For example, during the fight against the 2019 "heartbeat bill", a coalition of organizations, including KHJN, Planned Parenthood, the ACLU, and local grassroots groups, launched a unified campaign to oppose the legislation.⁶⁸ This included coordinated lobbying efforts, public demonstrations, social media campaigns, and community education events. The combined effort amplified their message and

⁶⁴ "1 in 3 Campaign - Our Abortions. Our Stories. Our Lives," *1 in 3 Campaign*.

⁶⁵ Tessa Solomon, "9 Artworks That Respond to the Fight for Abortion Access," *ARTnews.com*, May 6, 2022.

⁶⁶ Andrea Medina, "Hundreds Rally across Ohio, NKY in Support of Abortion Rights," October 3, 2021, <https://www.fox19.com>.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Nash, et al., "State Policy Trends 2020: Reproductive Health and Rights in a Year Like No Other," *Guttmacher Institute*, January 2021.

⁶⁸ Katie O'Connor, "How Kentucky's Abortion 'Heartbeat Bill' Sparked a Legal and Political Firestorm," *Rewire News Group*, March 15, 2019.

demonstrated widespread opposition to the bill. Alliances allow for the sharing of resources and expertise, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the movement. National organizations like Reproductive Freedom for All and the Center for Reproductive Rights provide legal, strategic, and financial support to local groups.⁶⁹ This support can include funding for specific initiatives, legal advice for court cases, or strategic guidance for advocacy campaigns. For instance, when challenging a particularly restrictive law, local groups might receive legal assistance from national organizations, ensuring that their arguments are robust and well-supported.⁷⁰ The combined efforts of these alliances have been instrumental in pushing for policy reform. By presenting a united front, these coalitions have been able to exert significant pressure on legislators to consider and sometimes adopt more progressive policies. For instance, sustained advocacy by these coalitions contributed to the temporary blocking of several restrictive laws, highlighting the power of collective action.⁷¹ Strategic legal challenges have led to several important victories that protect reproductive rights. For example, the coalition-led legal challenge against the “Ultrasound Informed Consent Act” (HB 2) resulted in a federal judge temporarily blocking the law, thus safeguarding women's autonomy and access to abortion services for at least a time.⁷² These coalition victories not only protect reproductive rights in the moment but also establish important legal precedents—demonstrating the long-term power of collective action and paving the way for future reforms.

The triumph for abortion rights in Kentucky represents a landmark achievement. This study argues that this outcome was not a spontaneous or isolated event, but the product of a multifaceted and well-coordinated campaign in which grassroots organizations, legal advocates, healthcare providers, and media strategists played critical roles. Their work challenged restrictive laws and mobilized voters by exposing the real-world impacts of abortion bans, particularly on marginalized communities. This case complicates dominant reproductive rights scholarship that centers federal courts or national movements, showing instead how localized, context-sensitive activism can generate systemic change. By highlighting the success of legal efforts led by groups like the ACLU, this research contributes to legal scholarship on state-level litigation post-Roe. It also engages social movement theory by illustrating how grassroots strategies—storytelling, canvassing, and direct action—can build political power in conservative contexts. In the realm of media and communication studies, the campaign underscores the influence of local journalism and digital platforms in countering misinformation and shifting public discourse. The Kentucky case offers a valuable model for scholars and advocates, illustrating how coordinated, community-rooted strategies can advance reproductive rights even in hostile environments.

⁶⁹ “Our Work in Kentucky,” *Center for Reproductive Rights*.

⁷⁰ “Supporting Local Advocacy Through Strategic Legal Action,” *Reproductive Freedom for All*, 2023.

⁷¹ “Timeline: Blocking Anti-Abortion Laws in Kentucky,” *ACLU-KY*, 2022.

⁷² *EMW Women’s Surgical Center, P.S.C. v. Beshear*, 373 F. Supp. 3d 807 (W.D. Ky. 2019).

Paper

“Seeker After Truth?": Universities and Academic Freedom during the Second Red Scare

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This paper was written for the course 'History: North America' for the BA International Studies

“A teacher may be ever so sincere in his belief in Communism, but can he at the same time be a sincere seeker after truth [...] My answer [...] is no”, declared Raymond Bernard Allen, President of the University of Washington, in January 1949.¹ His view was not an isolated one; during the Second Red Scare, also known as the period of McCarthyism, several academics were terminated, restricted, intimidated, and surveilled by actors in the United States government. This phenomenon was not limited to academics with confirmed Marxist affiliations and worldviews; it also targeted those only suspected of communist sympathies.² The historiography on McCarthyism reveals a debate about the necessity and extent of Senator Joseph McCarthy's activities. While many historians characterize the process as a threat to academic freedom and freedom of speech, with some describing it as a “witch-hunt,” other historians take a more positive view of McCarthy's action.³ They argue that the penalty for suspected communist activities, even in the absolute worst case, was the loss of a government position – something which they consider a privilege and not a right – and thus “McCarthy's actions did not deprive any citizens of any traditional American liberties.”⁴ This article reinforces the former view by analyzing public discourse surrounding two case studies in American higher education.

Given the Second Red Scare, the early 1950s has been described by scholars as “one of the most threatening periods in regard to attacks on professors.”⁵ Besides essentially “wiping out the communist movement” in the United States, Senator McCarthy's attacks on intellectuals had a profound effect on US education, including higher education.⁶ A period of “academic insularity,” the 1950s even prompted some academics to testify against their own colleagues,

Notes

¹ “Education: Penalty for Secrecy,” *Time*, January 31, 1949, <https://time.com/archive/6785435/education-penalty-for-secrecy/>.

² Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 5-11.

³ David H. Price, *Threatening Anthropology* (Duke University Press, 2004), 2-6, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822385684>.

⁴ Stephen J Sniegowski, “Joseph R. McCarthy and the Historians,” *Modern Age* 29, no. 2 (1985): 140, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1301760524>.

⁵ Philo A Hutcheson, “Why Tenure Needs Protection in These Troubled Times,” *Counterpoints* 517 (2018): 114, <https://doi.org/10.2307/45178159>.

⁶ Andrew Hartman, “The Communist Teacher Problematic: Liberal Anticommunism and the Education of Bella Dodd,” in *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 73–89.

allowing academic freedom to decay.⁷ Educators and researchers perceived to have communist backgrounds were attacked on several fronts. As they were becoming public targets of the anti-communist agenda, academics were investigated by McCarthy's House Committee on Un-American Activities, interfering with their careers and, in several cases, ending with termination of their employment.⁸ Furthermore, scholarly research has suggested that a number of them engaged in self-censorship, suppressing their political and philosophical views as they feared for their job security.⁹ In a covert fashion, certain organizations within the United States government also engaged in surveillance and pursued the investigation of academics they identified as potential communist threats.¹⁰ In this article, I argue that the severe McCarthyite assault on US academia in the 1950s was intensified and uniquely shaped by public debates.

In the context of academic McCarthyism, Ellen Schrecker argues that the most useful academic works are the ones that take advantage of individual case studies.¹¹ I therefore make my argument by focusing on two cases of academics being terminated for perceived communist belonging. First, I examine the 1949 termination of three professors from the University of Washington, a case regarded as precedent-setting for anti-communist involvement in higher education.¹² Second, I analyze the 1953 case of Gene Weltfish, an Ivy-league anthropologist, who was surveilled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and later terminated from her institution.¹³ These cases are representative of the era's unique challenges and implications for the academic community, offering an ideal prism through which we can analyze public reactions to McCarthyism in academia. The case of the terminations at the University of Washington is relevant as the discourse surrounding it sheds light on the underlying anti-communist ideologies which facilitated this nation-wide phenomenon, showcasing the polarizing nature of the topic. The Weltfish case helps us understand the extent of the opaque surveillance conducted by governmental entities such as the FBI, violating the right to privacy of academics. My analysis therefore challenges the view that McCarthyism merely resulted in loss of privileges. By analyzing the public reactions to these events, this paper pulls into focus the hostile environment of US higher education which academics were forced to navigate in the 1950s. More broadly, these case studies demonstrate the transformative role of McCarthyism in American higher education.

⁷ Irving Louis Horowitz, "Culture, Politics, and McCarthyism," *The Independent Review* 1, no. 1 (1996): 102, <https://doi.org/10.2307/24560908>.

⁸ Livia Gershon, "How One Group of Teachers Defended Academic Freedom," *JSTOR Daily*, December 29, 2016, <https://daily.jstor.org/how-one-group-of-teachers-defended-academic-freedom/>.

⁹ Hartman, "Communist Teacher Problematic", 73.

¹⁰ Tim Sieber, "McCarthyism, Academia, and Anthropology: The Old and the New," *North American Dialogue* 8.1, no. 1 (2005): 8-14.

¹¹ David R Holmes, *Stalking the Academic Communist* (University of Vermont Press, 1989), viii-ix.

¹² Julian Nemeth, "The Case for Cleaning House: Sidney Hook and the Ethics of Academic Freedom during the McCarthy Era," *History of Education Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (July 19, 2017): 409-413, <https://doi.org/10.1017/heq.2017.17>.

¹³ Price, *Threatening Anthropology*, 109-34.

The University of Washington and the ability to seek the truth

A 1949 chain of events led to the termination of several professors at the University of Washington. The justification of their dismissal was not rooted in deficiencies in their teaching or research abilities, nor in professional misconduct; even the university administration admitted there were no such issues. Instead, they lost their position due to suspected affiliation with the Communist Party.¹⁴ A major orchestrator of these events, through his foundational ideological works and advocacy, was Sidney Hook, an academic himself and professor at New York University.¹⁵ Initially a Marxist philosopher, Hook is regarded by some historians as the single most influential opponent of communist teachers during the second red scare.¹⁶ Hook himself viewed Senator McCarthy negatively; at the same time, however, he continued to hold a fierce opposition to Soviet-style communism, recognizing the ideological divide between Marx's ideals and the practices of the USSR.¹⁷ Although he condemned Senator McCarthy's activities, for example saying that McCarthy is a "a heavy liability to the friends of American democracy and international freedom", Hook was nonetheless a leading anti-communist advocate in the peak years of McCarthyism.¹⁸

In October 1948, the university Committee on Tenure and Academic Freedom began conducting hearings on the case of several professors whom they accused of communist activities.¹⁹ This came as a result of the Joint Legislative Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities of the Washington Legislature, also known as the Canwell Committee, investigating the university for communist involvement earlier the same year.²⁰ During the university hearings, professors Joseph Butterworth and Herbert J. Phillips admitted to their membership of the Communist Party. Professor Ralph H. Gundlach refused to answer potentially incriminating questions, arguing that he was under no obligation to discuss his political affiliation.²¹

The result of the hearings was mixed. On the one hand, the faculty committee expressed serious concerns about communists in academia; echoing the rhetoric of the university president, who sought to discredit Marxist professors by questioning their ability, the committee expressed their doubts about whether communist researchers could remain autonomous despite their

¹⁴ Nemeth, "The Case for Cleaning House", 410.

¹⁵ Nemeth, "The Case for Cleaning House", 401-9.

¹⁶ Hartman, "Communist Teacher Problematic", 74.

¹⁷ Hoover Institution, "Sidney Hook (1902-1989)," "Sidney Hook" Hoover Institution (Stanford University, 2025), <https://www.hoover.org/events/sidney-hook-1902-1989>.

¹⁸ "Sidney Hook (1902-1989)," *Journal of Democracy*, 2020, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/sidney-hook-1902-1989>; David Sidorsky and Robert Talisse, "Sidney Hook," ed. Edward N. Zalta, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sidney-hook/>.

¹⁹ "Factual Resumé of the University of Washington Case," *The American Scholar* 18, no. 3 (1949): 323, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41205207>.

²⁰ Nancy Wick, "University of Washington Marks 50th Anniversary of Anti-Communist Investigations With," University of Washington, 2025, <https://www.washington.edu/news/1998/01/02/university-of-washington-marks-50th-anniversary-of-anti-communist-investigations-with/>.

²¹ Nemeth, "The Case for Cleaning House", 410.

views.²² Nonetheless, citing the institution's tenure code, the committee stated that they could only dismiss the professors for incompetency, incapacity, neglect of duty, or for committing certain felonies.²³ Finding themselves in a delicate dilemma, torn between the constraints of bureaucracy and their personal anti-communist convictions, the committee members decided that the "university would be in clear violation of its own rules," should they fire the professors without any real evidence of misconduct.²⁴

For a moment, it seemed that the institution of academic tenure would save the professors from the Second Red Scare. The Board of Regents did not, however, uphold the committee's decision, and Professors Gundlach, Phillips, and Butterworth were terminated from their positions at the university.²⁵ Herbert T. Condon, the Secretary of the Board, wrote to Professor Phillips that "after extended discussion and deliberation the Board of Regents voted to adopt the President's recommendation for your dismissal from the faculty of the University of Washington as of February 1, 1949."²⁶ President Allen insisted that he did not believe that the terminations were part of a witch hunt; in fact, he said he regarded it as a question of professional ethics.²⁷ "Communist Party membership disqualifies a teacher from professional service. Because he is not free, I hold that he incompetent to be a teacher," he argued.²⁸

Some academics publicly condemned the dismissals, such as Dr. Harold Taylor, another New York-based university president. As head of Sarah Lawrence College, he claimed that the decision was dangerous and employed a selective way of finding the truth, highlighting that the anti-communist rhetoric was not as far from Soviet propaganda as Hook or McCarthy would have wanted the public to believe: "It says the test of truth is where it comes from. This is simply the Communist argument in reverse," he argued.²⁹ Highlighting the paradoxical nature of the McCarthyite discourse, Dr. Taylor's reaction serves as evidence of academic resistance in the 1950s against the anti-communist crusade.

A report of the Special Committee of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) provided an account of the dismissals. In the report, it is substantiated that the hearings did not consider the right of the three professors to be judged based on their research and teaching abilities; rather, they were dismissed for being suspected Communist Party members. The AAUP reiterated that the actions of the university administration were unjust and called for

²² Nemeth, "The Case for Cleaning House", 410.

²³ American Scholar Forum, "Factual Resume", 324.

²⁴ Nemeth, "The Case for Cleaning House", 410.

²⁵ Time, "Penalty for Secrecy".

²⁶ Herbert T. Condon to Herbert J. Phillips, "Board of Regents Secretary Herbert T. Condon's Letter to Professor Herbert J. Phillips Notifying Phillips of the University's Decision to Dismiss Him as Faculty in Light of the Findings of the Canwell Committee," Letter, January 27, 1929.
<https://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/digital/collection/pioneerlife/id/26629/rec/17>.

²⁷ Nemeth, "The Case for Cleaning House", 410.

²⁸ "Allen Defends Dismissals of 'U' Professors," *Ellensburg Daily Record*, March 2, 1949,
<https://books.google.nl/books?id=ESEKAAAIBAJ&>.

²⁹ Allen Defends Dismissals of 'U' Professors," *Ellensburg Daily Record*, March 2, 1949,
<https://books.google.nl/books?id=ESEKAAAIBAJ&>.

the academic community to condemn them.³⁰ Professor Gundlach attempted to sue the university, but no lawyer was willing to represent him; he had no choice but to leave academia to work as a psychologist. The other two professors could also not find academic employment following the events; Phillips, dismissed at the age of 56, was forced to take up a job as a laborer. Butterworth, a former Old English professor, could not find another profession during his lifetime.³¹

The hearings prompted Sidney Hook to write his essay “Should Communists Be Permitted to Teach?”³² Hook argued that communism rejected logic, that the Communist Party had a unique monopoly over the lives of its members, dictating every aspect of it, and that it was thus impossible for such a party member to be truly objective in their work as an academic. This was, he claimed, incompatible with the mission of a research institution such as a university, as it should aim to find the truth, not represent party-dictated views. “Anyone is free to join or leave the Communist Party: but once he joins and remains a member, he is not a free mind,” Hook declared, arguing that if academics were loyal to the Communist Party and not to their mission of independent research – “seeking the truth,” as he put it – the university would lose its *raison d’être*.³³ The University of Washington used Hook’s rhetoric and cited his works when defending the decision of the firings.³⁴ Despite his own previous Marxist affiliation, Hook believed – or at least propagated the view – that all communists were aiming to overthrow the US government, making the argument that teachers *can* and *should* be fired, as they were attempting to politically conspire and posed a danger to the state.³⁵

With the debate over the case becoming public, and with the overturning of the committee decision, a powerful message was sent. The case was widely seen as one that would set the national precedent for anti-communist involvement in US higher education; university president Allen himself recognized this.³⁶ Allen felt that it was in fact the duty of the University of Washington to settle the question; “this is a grave responsibility for the University of Washington to bear”, he insisted.³⁷ Historians note the same intentions with regard to Sidney Hook.³⁸ Most importantly, it is widely recognized that Hook’s essay “set the terms of the debate

³⁰ American Association of University Professors, “Academic Freedom and Tenure in the Quest for National Security: Report of a Special Committee of the American Association of University Professors,” AAUP Bulletin 42, no. 1 (1956): 69, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40222004>.

³¹ Nancy Wick, “Anti-Communist Firings Linger on UW’s Conscience 50 Years Later,” *University of Washington Magazine*, December 1997, <https://magazine.washington.edu/feature/anti-communist-firings-linger-on-uws-conscience-50-years-later/>.

³² Hartman, “Communist Teacher Problematic”, 74.

³³ Sidney Hook, “Should Communists Be Permitted to Teach?,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 27, 1949, <https://www.nytimes.com/1949/02/27/archives/should-communists-be-permitted-to-teach-no-says-professor-hook-who.html>.

³⁴ Nemeth, “The Case for Cleaning House”, 410.

³⁵ Hartman, “Communist Teacher Problematic”, 75.

³⁶ Nemeth, “The Case for Cleaning House”, 409-13; Ellen Schrecker *No Ivory Tower*, 97.

³⁷ “University Fires ‘Red’ Professors,” *The Windsor Daily Star*, January 24, 1949, https://books.google.nl/books?id=DRU_AAAAIBAJ.

³⁸ Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 97.

over academic freedom and Communism that would consume American higher education during the McCarthy era.”³⁹ With the public’s acceptance of Hook’s anti-communist discourse regarding the University of Washington case, higher education in the United States entered a new era in which the investigation and persecution of professors was not only seen as possible, but also as moral and necessary.

Gene Weltfish and the Cardinal Sin

A 1953 controversy at Columbia University, which led to the termination of American anthropologist Gene Weltfish, further reveals the human consequences of the anti-communist discourse.⁴⁰ The FBI engaged in the surveillance and intimidation of anthropologists during the Second Red Scare – these activities caused serious disruptions and divisions in the academic community.⁴¹ A large portion of the historiography on academic McCarthyism is related to the field of anthropology; one of the seminal works on McCarthyism in higher education is David Price’s book, *Threatening Anthropology: McCarthyism and the FBI’s Surveillance of Activist Anthropologists*, in which cases such as the termination and surveillance of Weltfish are discussed. In what follows, I build on this work by examining the public discourse surrounding the Weltfish case, enriching the historiography by taking into account a number of public reactions.

Weltfish was an adjunct professor of anthropology at Columbia University, who lectured from 1936 to 1953 and often used her position as an academic to draw attention to causes she believed in.⁴² Known for her 1948 pamphlet *The Races of Mankind*, she was a notable proponent of anti-racism.⁴³ The arrival of the McCarthyite era, however, led to her “professional and personal ostracism.”⁴⁴ As a dedicated feminist and an activist for racial equality, Weltfish participated in the Women’s International Democratic Federation and the Congress of American Women, which were both seen by anti-communists as potentially subversive organizations.⁴⁵ Before 1953, she had shocked some close to Columbia University with her left-leaning views; a speech she gave in 1949 resulted in a number of alumni letters complaining about her activities. At that stage, she was protected by the institution’s leadership – the vice president of the university argued that she was adequately teaching in her positions and was not advocating for communism in the classroom. However, on June 5th, 1952, she accused the US

³⁹ Nemeth, “The Case for Cleaning House”, 13.

⁴⁰ Price, *Threatening Anthropology*.

⁴¹ Sieber, “McCarthyism, Academia, and Anthropology”, 8-9.

⁴² Eva Spier, “Speak Weltfish, Speak Pasternak,” *The Blue and White*, December 10, 2024, <https://www.theblueandwhite.org/post/speak-weltfish-speak-pasternak>.

⁴³ Juliet Niehaus, “Education and Democracy in the Anthropology of Gene Weltfish,” *Visionary Observers: Anthropological Inquiry and Education*. S, 2006, 90.

⁴⁴ Stanley Diamond, ed., “Some Salient Events in the Professional Life of Gene Weltfish,” in *Theory and Practice* (De Gruyter Mouton, 1980), 351–56, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110803211.351>.

⁴⁵ Anne Commire and Deborah Klezmer, “Weltfish, Gene (1902–1980),” in *Dictionary of Women Worldwide : 25,000 Women through the Ages*. Vol. 3, Indices (Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale, 2007), <https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/weltfish-gene-1902-1980>.

military of utilizing germ warfare in the Korean War. As these critical remarks reached the press and the university community, “even Columbia’s relatively liberal administration felt unable to condone” them.⁴⁶

Several actions were taken as a result to disrupt Weltfish’s career. After her critique of the war in Korea, the acting president of her university, Dr. Grayson Kirk, wrote an eleven-page memorandum about the phenomenon he called the “Weltfish Problem.” Kirk wrote that “there can be no reasonable doubt concerning Dr. Weltfish’s communist position,” concluding that the university needed to cut ties with her.⁴⁷ Between 1952 and 1953, she had to testify before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS), where she was questioned about communist affiliations.⁴⁸ It has been suggested by historians that the SISS was “operating in tandem” with McCarthy’s committee and the Permanent House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities. Also referred to as the McCarran committee, named after its chairperson, it investigated several academics accused of having communist affiliations.⁴⁹ The SSI investigation concerning Weltfish was carried out in collaboration with the FBI.⁵⁰ In 1953, she also had to testify before Senator McCarthy’s Governmental Operations Committee.⁵¹

The university, however, did not terminate her contract immediately. Kirk, a skilled university administrator, recognized that a number of members of the faculty committee “would take the position that the University should not be concerned with the outside activities of Dr. Weltfish as long as there is no evidence that these have influenced her teaching and research.”⁵² Instead, as she was employed on a contractual basis at the university, just before the second McCarthy hearing in 1953, she was notified that the university did not wish to extend her contract after seventeen years of employment.⁵³

Historians, most notably Price, have confirmed that the FBI had a major involvement in discrediting Weltfish.⁵⁴ Initially, the FBI started observing Weltfish in the 1930s. In January 1949, George Peter Murdock, the ultra-conservative chair of the American Anthropology Association’s committee on McCarthyism, wrote a letter to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, reporting on a dozen of his own colleagues, stating that they were communists. It is now clear, as a result of Price’s research, that Weltfish was one of them.⁵⁵ The committee that Murdock chaired was originally established to mitigate the damages caused by the anti-communist crusade in the professional community; it was, however, soon undermined by him. Like Professor

⁴⁶ Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 255-56.

⁴⁷ Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 255-56.

⁴⁸ Commire and Klezmer, “Weltfish, Gene”.

⁴⁹ Phillip Deery, “Running with the Hounds: Academic McCarthyism and New York University, 1952-53,” *Cold War History* 10, no. 4 (November 2010): 472, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682740903527692>.

⁵⁰ Price, *Threatening Anthropology*, 122.

⁵¹ Price, *Threatening Anthropology*, 111.

⁵² Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 255.

⁵³ Niehaus, “Education and Democracy in the Anthropology of Gene Weltfish”, 90.

⁵⁴ Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower*, 257.; Price, *Threatening Anthropology*, 111

⁵⁵ Ira Bashkow, “There’s More to Anthropology’s Past than Most of Us Know,” *American Anthropologist* 125, no. 1 (February 2, 2023): 178, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13820>.

Weltfish, eleven out of twelve of Murdock's suspected Communist professors were of Jewish descent.⁵⁶ This connection, although seemingly shocking just a few years after the end of World War II, is just one example of the many ties between McCarthyism and antisemitism. These ties, not only seen in the case of Weltfish but also in landmark events such as the Rosenberg trial, caused anxieties among the American Jewish community.⁵⁷ A month after Murdock's letter the FBI noted that:

Confidential Informant of known reliability, [REDACTED], advised of Communist Party activity at Columbia University. According to the informant two organizations, 'Marxist Society' and the 'Progressive Student Organization,' are the instruments for spreading Communist Party doctrine within the university. Gene Weltfish, a professor, conducts the majority of the Marxist Society activities, according to this informant.⁵⁸

Declassified FBI documents reveal that it was noted when Weltfish signed civil rights petitions; when she gave an interview or published an article; and even when she gave a lecture at a Marxist school. But the investigation was not limited to publicly available sources. It included reading her private correspondence through a mail-watch program. Furthermore, the FBI spied on her home, noting who she lived with and when she was not home; this was likely because of their desire to conduct illegal searches in her absence.⁵⁹

Alongside evidence collected by these intrusive and overreaching investigations, Weltfish's file included testimonies collected by the FBI. One of them, for instance, claimed that Weltfish was definitely connected to the Communist Party and was "doubly dangerous."⁶⁰ The CIA identified her as a communist adversary on several occasions. In 1949, she was noted as a participant in a conference that was part of the "international communist movement."⁶¹ Even after her dismissal, she was identified as a sponsor of front organizations by the CIA.⁶² The FBI certainly also believed, therefore, that Weltfish was a member of the Communist Party. In reality, whether Weltfish was actually a member of the Communist Party remains a question. Her daughter maintains to this day that Weltfish was not a party member and that the sole reason she did not answer questions regarding her party status was out of principle.⁶³

⁵⁶ Bashkow, "There's More to Anthropology's Past than Most of Us Know," 178.

⁵⁷ Morton J. Horwitz, "Jews and McCarthyism: A View from the Bronx," in *Secret Agents: The Rosenberg Case, McCarthyism and Fifties America*, ed. Marjorie Garber and Rebecca Walkowitz (Routledge, 1996), 257-65.; June Melby Benowitz, "Jewish Organisations' Response to Communism and to Senator McCarthy (Review)," *American Jewish History* 94, no. 3 (September 1, 2008): 264-66, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.0.0073>.

⁵⁸ Price, *Threatening Anthropology*, 119.

⁵⁹ Price, *Threatening Anthropology*.

⁶⁰ Price, *Threatening Anthropology*, 112-16.

⁶¹ Central Intelligence Agency, "International Communist Movements 1 September 1949 - 1 January 1950," January 1, 1950, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp83-00415r004200120002-9>.

⁶² Central Intelligence Agency, "The Communist Party of the United States of America," January 1, 1956, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp78-00915r000400390002-3>.

⁶³ Price, *Threatening Anthropology*, 119.

Public reactions to the termination of Weltfish were diverse. In their article the “The Cardinal Sin”, the *Baltimore Afro-American* sparked debate by questioning whether the dismissal of Weltfish was connected to genuine concerns regarding her alleged communist position. Communism, the article argued, was an excuse to disrupt her anti-racist research and publications, such as *The Races of Mankind*. “There can be no forgiveness for those bold enough to punch such a big hole in the bubble of white supremacy,” they conclude, describing this as the “cardinal sin” of Weltfish.⁶⁴ Here we see the significance of the unproven nature of allegations about Weltfish’s communist sympathies; the public reactions recognized that McCarthyism was being used to sideline those who were viewed as a threat by the US government. Minorities and civil rights activists, for example, were prime targets. Weltfish, Jewish and actively using her academic position to educate the public on the scientific argument against racism, fits into this category.

Although viewing the events from a vastly different perspective, similarly critical was the *Daily Worker*, a Chicago-based communist newspaper. The newspaper’s critique provides us with insight into the panic that many Marxist intellectuals in the US experienced during the period of academic McCarthyism. The publication, affiliated with the Communist Party USA, described the case as grounds for popular outrage. Ironically, the FBI often used the very same periodical to gather publicly available information about Weltfish.⁶⁵ An issue in April of 1953 announced:

Dr. Gene Weltfish, the distinguished anthropologist of Columbia University, an outstanding champion of peace, has been dropped from the faculty after 16 years of service. Many thousands in this country will be outraged by this latest evidence of McCarthyism on the campus.⁶⁶

On the other hand, Fulton Lewis, a conservative radio broadcaster, raised concerns about communist influence in American education, describing Weltfish as an educator whose legacy would forever be that she relayed the Russian Cold War narrative about alleged US war crimes in Korea. He concluded his article with the alarmist question: “Would you like your children to be exposed to such blatant commy propaganda?”⁶⁷ Reactions outside of the United States were not all supportive, either. As the paranoia caused by alleged domestic communists grew, its reach – intentionally or not – expanded outside the United States. Canada, for example, had its very own red scare, inspired by American trends.⁶⁸ While she still held her position at Columbia in

⁶⁴ “The Cardinal Sin,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 7, 1953, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=nfglAAAAIBAJ>.

⁶⁵ Price, *Threatening Anthropology*, 113.

⁶⁶ “Dr Weltfish’s Dismissal,” *Daily Worker*, April 2, 1953, https://archive.org/details/per_daily-worker_daily-worker_1953-04-02_30_66.

⁶⁷ Fulton Lewis, “It Is Our Business,” *Warsaw Times*, February 6, 1953, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=ezdHAAAAIBAJ>.

⁶⁸ David MacKenzie and Canadian Historical Association, *Canada’s Red Scare, 1945-1957* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 2001), <https://cha-shc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/5c38afba549c7.pdf>.

1946, Weltfish, as part of her anti-racist academic work, personally traveled to Canada to speak up for the rights of Canadian minorities.⁶⁹ Negative reaction within Canada points to McCarthyism's sweeping influence beyond the United States. One example of this unique Canadian anti-communist discourse can be found in Hungarian diaspora periodical *Kanadai Magyarság*. Edited and printed in Toronto, the journal presented a rather derogatory account of the events:

Gene Weltfish, teacher of Columbia University in New York, similarly remained silent on the question of whether she is a communist. It seems like silence isn't always gold, as – silence or not – Columbia got rid of the red lady. Still, let's not worry for her, she won't have to starve, the Bolshies [*Bolsheviks*] will take care of her.⁷⁰

Although Columbia maintained that the termination of Weltfish's employment was not tied to her suspected communist convictions, the media made the – rather obvious – connection that it was.⁷¹ These sources reveal that both anti-communist and anti-McCarthy arguments were voiced in the discourse surrounding the dismissal of Weltfish. As with the previous case study, it is clear that although certain individuals voiced grave concerns over the breach of academic freedom, these remarks were ineffective in preventing the orchestrators of the second Red Scare from prosecuting academics for their assumed political views. As the Weltfish case highlights, however, the media recognized that academic McCarthyism was about much more than mere loss of privileges; the public, however, appeared to be underwhelmed by these warnings. In fact, we can even observe in both cases that anti-communist ideologists had much more profound influence on decision-makers, even shaping political tensions outside the US.

Conclusion

McCarthyism played a key role in US academia in the 1950s, causing major disruptions to academic freedom at universities across the country. The University of Washington case reveals the ideological background of the phenomenon; Hook's argumentation reveals the driving assumption, namely that communists were completely under the control of the party and thus incapable of objectively following the scientific method.⁷² Three important conclusions can be drawn from this case, all of which support the argument that public debate helped catalyze the McCarthyite assault on US academia. First, we observe that the professors were removed from their positions for reasons completely unrelated to their academic performance. Second, as

⁶⁹ "Rights for Canadian Japanese," *Ottawa Citizen*, January 25, 1946, <https://books.google.nl/books?id=3fwuAAAAIBAJ>.

⁷⁰ "És Bajok as U.S. Egyetemi Tanárokkal," *Kanadai Magyarok*, April 11, 1953, https://library.hungaricana.hu/en/view/KanadaiMagyarsag_USAHUN_1953-1. Translation by author.

⁷¹ "Columbia Fires Gene Weltfish," *National Guardian New York*, April 6, 1953, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/national-guardian/1953-04-04-5-24-nat-guardian.pdf>.

⁷² Hook, "Should Communists Be Permitted to Teach".

recognized both by the orchestrators of the events – mainly, Hook and Allen – as well as historians, the case had much greater implications than the University of Washington. It was, rather, an effort to publicly set a national precedent, allowing for the anti-communist crusade to sweep through American universities in the years to come.⁷³ Third, and finally, the “truth-seeking” rhetoric of Sidney Hook, described as “McCarthyite demagoguery” by James Robinson, was not without critics even at the time.⁷⁴ Although some in academia did, therefore, publicly denounce both the events and Hook’s rhetoric, the academic resistance failed in two distinct ways. First, it failed to prevent the dismissal of their colleagues at the University of Washington. Even more crucially, however, it failed to effectively draw attention to the fallacies in Hook’s and Allen’s argumentation, allowing them to make public claims that led to the establishment of a pernicious national precedent.

The second case substantiates that academic McCarthyism was about more than mere loss of privileges. Clearly, several of Weltfish’s rights were violated. Her university infringed on her right to express herself in her critique of US military involvement in Korea, McCarthy persecuted her for this, and the FBI denied her reasonable right to privacy. Indeed, the professional discreditation and prosecution of Weltfish led to “suffering for years emotionally and financially.”⁷⁵ The Weltfish case also clearly highlights the transformative and significant effects of McCarthyism on academia; it showcases how federal entities, from the FBI to the committees chaired by McCarran and McCarthy, impacted and sabotaged academics. Most importantly, we see that the reactions to the termination of Weltfish were diverse, with various media outlets questioning the motivations of the university administration. Hostile attitudes toward Weltfish were present both outside and within the United States, however, suggesting that McCarthyism was endorsed by a wide variety of individuals and institutions.

The McCarthyite discourse analyzed in the article sheds light on the paranoid and hostile nature of American society in the early 1950s. Ritchie Savage notes that McCarthyite discourse did not manage to “transition from ‘assault’ to ‘political fabric’”⁷⁶ – it thus died out alongside Senator McCarthy’s political career in 1954. It is crucial, however, that we do not regard political disruptions in academia as a thing of the past. Institutions such as Columbia University continue to be attacked by radical politics, including the administration of Donald Trump.⁷⁷ Clay Risen draws parallels between Trumpism and McCarthyism, noting that understanding the cultural

⁷³ Nemeth, “The Case for Cleaning House”, 13.

⁷⁴ James Robinson, “Academic Freedom and the Occupation of Germany and Japan,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 6, no. 4 (December 1974): 56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1974.10413009>.

⁷⁵ Niehaus, “Education and Democracy in the Anthropology of Gene Weltfish”, 91.

⁷⁶ Ritchie Savage, “From McCarthyism to the Tea Party: Interpreting Anti-Leftist Forms of US Populism in Comparative Perspective,” *New Political Science* 34, no. 4 (December 2012): 577, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2012.729743>.

⁷⁷ William Michael Schmidli, “We Can’t Let This Happen Here: The Lessons of Trump for Dutch Higher Education,” *Mare Online* (Leiden University, 2025), <https://www.mareonline.nl/en/background/we-cant-let-this-happen-here-the-lessons-of-trump-for-dutch-higher-education/>.

context of McCarthyite hostilities is important to understanding the modern extreme right.⁷⁸ Similarities are noted not only generally, but also specifically regarding academic McCarthyism and the Trumpist anti-intellectual movement. Professor Emeritus Harry Keyishian, who was terminated from his academic position over six decades ago for refusing to officially declare that he was not a communist, described the education policy of the Trump administration as “more frightening” than McCarthyism. In fact, Ellen Schrecker, a leading historian on McCarthyism, argues that “today’s assault on the university is immeasurably worse than McCarthyism.”⁷⁹ According to her, what was the “nonexistent threat of communist teachers” during the McCarthy era, is now perceived radicalism and antisemitism at US universities.⁸⁰ Further research into political intervention in higher education, with special emphasis on McCarthyism, thus remains crucial. Specifically, more exploration of specific case studies of academics terminated and prosecuted during the era would contribute to the historiography immensely. As the case studies in this article highlight, public resistance against assaults on academic freedom can fail, should they lack unity and fail to raise an appropriate level of awareness; whether a new anti-intellectualism succeeds in sabotaging modern US academia thus depends, in part, on whether we have learnt the lessons of McCarthyism.

⁷⁸ Clay Risen, *Red Scare: Blacklists, McCarthyism, and the Making of Modern America* (Simon and Schuster, 2025), xiii.

⁷⁹ Nathan M Greenfield, “Academic Freedom under Trump? Think McCarthyism, but Worse,” *University World News*, 2025, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20250203210158864>.

⁸⁰ Ellen Schrecker, “Worse than McCarthyism: Universities in the Age of Trump,” *The Nation*, April 3, 2025, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/mccarthyism-universities-trump-attacks/>.

Paper

Too Real to Feel Real: Disrupted Authenticity and the Uncanny in *The Irishman's* Digitally Altered Performances

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This paper is based on a thesis written for the BA American Studies

When *The Irishman* (2019) premiered on Netflix, audiences were not only drawn to its famous cast and director Martin Scorsese's return to the gangster genre, but also to the use of digital de-aging technology. Robert De Niro (Frank Sheeran), Al Pacino (Jimmy Hoffa), and Joe Pesci (Russell Bufalino) portrayed five decades of their characters' lives, without the use of motion-capture headgear. Unlike other Hollywood movies that used recasting or prosthetics that made actors look younger, *The Irishman* sought to combine uninterrupted actor performance with realistic age reversal. Scorsese explained that by the time production began, De Niro, Pacino, and Pesci were too old to convincingly portray their younger selves. At the same time, he believed that the film could only succeed if the technical aspects of the de-aging process were minimized.¹

Scorsese was determined to maintain the integrity and authenticity of the performances without disturbing the actors' natural interaction. He collaborated with Industrial Light & Magic (ILM) and visual effects supervisor Pablo Helman to create a system that made it possible to digitally alter the appearances of the three actors to any age needed.² Helman designed a camera rig that could collect the data needed for digital de-aging while also allowing the director to film in his usual style. The rig featured a standard director's camera at the center and two cameras equipped to shoot infrared images on either side, capturing volumetric facial data.³ Those two cameras collected the same data as tracking motion capture dots would.

After the production team wrapped filming, postproduction began. Because the cameras captured gigabytes of footage, ILM created "Flux," a software that combined the infrared information and main camera footage in order to create masks on the actors' faces.⁴ Those masks served as the foundation for the de-aging process. To properly show the actors aging from their forties to their eighties, ILM had to dive into the massive database of the actors' previous famous roles. The team created picture libraries filled with images of noses, eyes, and mouths, which were then used to construct the de-aged faces for each scene.⁵ Besides that, ILM developed an artificial intelligence system capable of analyzing any given frame and searching through the

Notes

¹ Angela Watercutter, "The Irishman Gets De-Aging Right – No Tracking Dots Necessary," *WIRED*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/the-irishman-netflix-ilm-de-aging/>.

² Watercutter, "The Irishman Gets De-Aging Right."

³ Watercutter, "The Irishman Gets De-Aging Right."

⁴ Watercutter, "The Irishman Gets De-Aging Right."

⁵ Watercutter, "The Irishman Gets De-Aging Right."

image library to find reference images of how the actor should appear. This allowed the team to verify the accuracy of their work.⁶ Although the result seemed seamless at first, it also revealed visual inconsistencies that challenged the created illusion. The use of digital de-aging technology has sparked debates among scholars about authenticity in movies and whether digitally altered actors evoke unsettling feelings among audience members.⁷

Digital de-aging, which is the use of computer-generated imagery (CGI) to make actors appear younger, has emerged as a recurring practice in cinema. No longer kept to experimental productions, de-aging has become a staple in filmmaking, blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy.⁸ The overall increase in the use of digital alterations shows a broader technological and cultural shift in how cinematic authenticity is perceived. Previously, theorists such as Randal L. and Wood L. (2005) have argued that, in order to make a narrative believable, authenticity in film performance depended on physical presence and irreplaceable connection to special events and people they represent.⁹ The rise of digital de-aging challenges this idea by altering the familiar and creating artificial images. This disruption therefore raises questions about the traditional scholarly assumptions of the connections between performance, realism, and audience emotional engagement.¹⁰

As I will demonstrate below in my quantitative analysis and close reading of audience reviews, those responses to *The Irishman* indicate that digital de-aging is far from a neutral tool. Both critics and audience members question whether the effect enhances or undermines the film's realism. While many reviewers on the popular review sites *Letterboxd* and *Rotten Tomatoes* are amazed by the technical achievement, a significant number report unease, distraction, or alienation. Descriptors such as "waxy," "plastic," "distracting," and "creepy" appear repeatedly in audience reviews. Language such as this resonates with the concept of the "uncanny." Sigmund Freud described this term as the unsettling feeling that emerges when something familiar appears altered. Decades later, roboticist Masahiro Mori expanded on this idea in his hypothesis of the "uncanny valley," which explains the discomfort people experience when artificial figures look almost human but not fully and therefore fall into the so-called "valley" on the emotional curve. Taken together, the audience responses and technological frameworks indicate that digital de-aging reshapes authenticity through its ability or failure to convey emotional coherence within performance and narrative. *The Irishman* provides an opportunity to examine how the use of de-aging techniques disrupts or reshapes that authenticity.

⁶ Watercutter, "The Irishman Gets De-Aging Right."

⁷ Christopher Holliday, "Retroframing the Future: Digital De-aging Technologies in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 61, no. 5 (2021).

⁸ CleverStreet Films, "The Evolution of Special Effects in Film Production," *Medium*, August 21, 2023, <https://medium.com/@cleverstreet.films/the-evolution-of-special-effects-in-film-production-745def49fc02>.

⁹ Randall L. Rose and Stacy L. Wood, "Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity Through Reality Television," *Journal of Consumer Research* 32, no. 2 (2005).

¹⁰ Tessa Rixon, "The Potential of Authenticity in Reframing the Relationship between Performance, Audience and Vision Technology in Digital Performance," *Australasian Association for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies*, 2021.

Despite extensive research on digital effects and on the uncanny valley theory in media, for example by Holliday (2021) and Wang et al. (2015), there is still a significant gap between these theories and understanding the emotional effects of digital de-aging in film performances.¹¹ Much of the existing research focuses on animated characters or synthetic humans together with their aesthetics and technological execution.¹² There is a lack of scholarly sources examining how the digital alteration of familiar human actors affects viewers' emotional engagement and sense of authenticity. This article adds to the existing literature by using theories on authenticity and the uncanny valley to analyze audience responses to *The Irishman*.

The development of CGI not only expands cinematic tools but also changes the audience's notions of performance, the human body, and what philosopher Walter Benjamin described as "aura." In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), Benjamin extensively discusses how mechanical reproduction alters the nature of art and performance, directly impacting the concept of authenticity. He argues that even a perfect reproduction of an artwork lacks in its "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."¹³ This presence is essential to the work's authenticity and cannot be captured by reproductions. Benjamin uses the term "aura" to describe this loss. He argues that in the age of mechanical reproduction, the artwork's aura starts to wither. This loss results from the absence of the work's original presence.¹⁴ Technical alterations detach the copy from the original and place it in a new context.

Scholars Katrinka Somdahl-Sands and John C. Finn (2015) extend this discussion into today's digital world. Building on Benjamin's theory, they argue that mediated performances no longer have to result in a loss of "aura."¹⁵ As mediated performances have increasingly taken over live events in the twenty-first century, our understanding of authenticity in performance has also evolved. "Aura" is no longer tied to a singular moment in performance but rather to an ongoing relationship between actor, audience, historical developments, and technology.

Building on Somdahls-Sands and Finn's research, scholars Tessa Rixon et al. (2021) propose three terms that help to understand the way we experience authenticity in technologically enhanced performances. The first term is "truthfulness," which relates to the need for an accurate and appropriate use of visual technology in line with the director's vision, dramatic structure, and overall design of the work.¹⁶ This does not only relate to the realism of the movie but also to the narrative and creative cohesion. The second key concept discussed in

¹¹ Holliday, "Retroframing the Future"; ¹¹ Shensheng Wang, Scott O. Lilienfeld, and Philippe Rochat, "The Uncanny Valley: Existence and Explanations," *Review of General Psychology* 19, no. 4 (2015).

¹² Temenuga Trifonova, "Simulation in Cinema," *Kinema* (Spring 2004); Nick Jones, "Far From Houdini: The 'Magic' of the VFX Breakdown," *Animation* 18, no. 1 (2023).

¹³ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 1969).

¹⁴ Benjamin, *Work of Art*, 4.

¹⁵ Katrinka Somdahl-Sands and John C. Finn, "Media, Performance, and Pastpresents: Authenticity in the Digital Age," *GeoJournal* 80, no. 6 (2015).

¹⁶ Tessa Rixon et al., "Authenticity within Digital Performance: A New Framework to Understand the Relationship between Audience, Vision Technology and Scenography," *Australasian Drama Studies*, no. 79 (2021): 271.

the article is “believability.”¹⁷ Here, authenticity is measured by how naturally technology is integrated with the narrative and reality of the movie. Rixon et al. argue that this involves evaluating whether the use of such technology feels natural and genuine or fake.¹⁸ When visual effects seamlessly integrate with the narrative, they support the film and therefore the immersion of the viewer. But when digital alterations stand out, they risk drawing attention to their artificiality and breaking the immersion. Finally, the third term is “emotional engagement.” A performance may be visually impressive and technically seamless, while at the same time evoking feelings of distraction among an audience. If the viewer feels like digital enhancements are limiting the actors’ expressiveness, this may result in a decreased sense of authenticity.¹⁹ When authenticity breaks down, a feeling of the uncanny can emerge.

Sigmund Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” (“Das Unheimliche,” 1919) analyzes the concept of the uncanny by assessing its semantics and discussing the situations in which this feeling emerges. He defines the uncanny as a specific emotional response of dread and horror to something once familiar that has now become distant or repressed, causing the ordinary to appear strange.²⁰ Freud analyzes two aspects that help understand audience responses to digital de-aging. The first relates to the “double” (“Der Doppelgänger”), a concept developed by psychoanalyst Otto Rank.²¹ Initially it served as a version of ourselves that could protect us. In Freud’s reinterpretation, this figure becomes the uncanny harbinger of death and links to narcissism.²² What one day was a psychological safeguard becomes a frightening presence, reminding us of vulnerability, aging, and mortality. The second aspect of the uncanny relates to the blurred distinction between animate and inanimate forms. Freud uses the impression of waxwork dolls and automata as an example.²³ He draws attention to the uncertainty about “whether an apparently animate being is truly alive, or conversely, whether a lifeless object might be secretly animated.”²⁴ This doubt weakens the boundaries between human and mechanical mimicry. When these borders collapse and repressed beliefs in animism – the idea that objects and images could possess life – are triggered, the uncanny occurs.²⁵

The technological translation of Freud’s theory is called the “uncanny valley,” introduced by Masahiro Mori in 1970.²⁶ Although originally crafted in the context of robotics, the term gained recognition in popular culture due to the rise of androids and realistic computer-generated

¹⁷ Rixon et al., “Authenticity within Digital Performance,” 272.

¹⁸ Rixon et al., “Authenticity within Digital Performance,” 272.

¹⁹ Rixon et al., “Authenticity within Digital Performance,” 272.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” *New Literary History* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1976): 620–626.

²¹ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 630; Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*, trans. Harry Tucker (University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

²² Freud, “Uncanny,” 630.

²³ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 625.

²⁴ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 625.

²⁵ Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” 639.

²⁶ Masahiro Mori, “The Uncanny Valley: The Original Essay by Masahiro Mori,” trans. Karl F. MacDorman and Norri Kageki, *IEEE Spectrum* (2012).

characters.²⁷ It provides insights into how human observers respond emotionally to beings that closely resemble human appearance and behavior. When a robot becomes more human-like, our emotional response becomes increasingly positive until it reaches a trigger point at which the resemblance is close but not exact. It is at this moment that the machine starts to create revolting effects.²⁸ That emotional dip in the curve of familiarity is what Mori called the “uncanny valley.” When filmmakers decide to expand their technological boundaries to replicate human-like behavior, they trigger responses that agree with Mori’s hypothesis.²⁹ With the increased need for lifelike digital characters, the risk of evoking the uncanny grows. One of the early examples of the uncanny effect in a movie that attempted such realistic animation is *The Polar Express* (2004). The film induced discomfort among some viewers.³⁰ The characters, even though animated, look almost real but lack the authentic human aura. This makes them fall into the uncanny valley.

The theoretical frameworks described above highlight a complex interaction between technological changes, authenticity, and audience perception. As digital de-aging lies at a point between reality and simulation, it becomes relevant to study how these theories manifest in audience expressions. De-aging effects reproduce the former appearance of an actor in a way that appears familiar or convincing, yet the audience may see it as a lack of original presence, contributing to the eerie feeling.

The selected scholarship provides an essential background for understanding audience reactions towards digitally manipulated performances. This article will present a quantitative analysis, which leads to a detailed review of recurring patterns among audience responses. After that, the article conducts a qualitative content analysis of audience-generated reviews, using the theories on authenticity and the uncanny discussed above. The analysis focuses on identifying emotional responses and descriptive patterns that reveal how viewers engage with the de-aging techniques. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications of digital de-aging for performance, authenticity, and the future of cinematic realism. Rather than arguing that the CGI simply undermines realism, the article exposes the emotional limits of de-aging technology, showing that audiences perceive authenticity when they can form a genuine connection with the performance.

To analyze how viewers experience digital de-aging in *The Irishman*, this section is structured in three parts. The first part offers an overview of the collected dataset, describing the frequency of uncanny-related words. The dataset for this study consists of ninety-six publicly available audience reviews of Martin Scorsese’s *The Irishman* collected from two major online platforms, *Rotten Tomatoes* and *Letterboxd*. These platforms were chosen because of their large and active

²⁷ Wang, Lilienfeld, and RoCHAT, “Uncanny Valley,” 393.

²⁸ Wang, Lilienfeld, and RoCHAT, “Uncanny Valley,” 393.

²⁹ Wang, Lilienfeld, and RoCHAT, “Uncanny Valley,” 393.

³⁰ Wang, Lilienfeld, and RoCHAT, “Uncanny Valley,” 393.

user bases. Reviews were selected from the audience reviews sections on both sites, which allowed for a broad range of opinions and perspectives.³¹ Although the reviews were collected from two different platforms, this study looks at the dataset as a whole body of reviews. It does not separate findings by platform, nor does it look at differences between audiences. Selective sampling technique was used to choose reviews specifically reflecting on the digital de-aging effects used in the movie. Keywords such as “CGI,” “de-aging,” “digital,” “distracting,” “uncanny,” “uncanny valley,” “weird,” and other related terms were used to find relevant reviews out of all posts available.

Based on the collected data, this article identifies three main patterns in the reviews. These themes are related to visual uncanniness, the mismatch between facial appearance and body movement, and the distracting effect of digital de-aging. To ensure a deeper understanding of how digital de-aging evokes a feeling of uncanniness, the last section closely analyzes four selected reviews. These reviews were chosen because they represent a broad range of opinions, ranging from positive to negative, and provide language descriptives that reveal viewers’ emotions and reactions. Limitations of the study should be acknowledged. While the source material was rich, it only includes reviews of those who decided to post online. As a consequence, these opinions could potentially be more extreme. Moreover, reviews were mixed from two different sites without accounting for the possible differences between audiences and their approach or background. Still, the overlap between language use, review sentiment, and use of uncanny theory within the audience reviews suggests that the findings are valid within the scope of the current research. As those patterns appear organically, they suggest that an uncanny response to digital de-aging is also emerging in real-world contexts, not only through the theoretical framework.

Quantitative analysis reveals that references to the uncanny are visible across audience reviews, though they appear more frequently in negative responses. This suggests that discomfort with the digital de-aging effects is closely related to critical or dissatisfied experiences. The selected reviews are divided evenly between positive and negative: forty-six reviews give the film a rating of three stars or higher, and forty-six reviews rate it two stars or lower. Four reviews do not include any rating. Among the negative reviews, forty-three contain uncanny descriptors, while thirty out of forty-six positive reviews use such language. This suggests that the presence of uncanny words does not assume the automatic rejection of the film. While the analysis provides insights into how many viewers associate the visual effects with feelings of uncanniness, it is important to note that some audiences comment on de-aging effects without using uncanny-related language. Some directly praise the de-aging technology, while others acknowledge gradual adaptation to the visuals together with time passing. Only nineteen reviews in the data set do not include uncanny-related terms. This suggests that audience responses to digital de-aging are

³¹ “The Irishman (2019),” Letterboxd, accessed March 2025, <https://letterboxd.com/film/the-irishman-2019/>; “The Irishman (2019),” Rotten Tomatoes, accessed March 2025, https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_irishman.

multifaceted: technical critiques and emotional reactions often overlap, but not uniformly across viewers.

A thematic analysis of the dataset identifies three recurring themes that reflect how audiences articulate their responses to digital de-aging in *The Irishman*. Those themes can be found in the language used by reviewers to explain their feelings about visual realism, embodied performance, and narrative immersion. The first theme relates to the appearance of the actors' faces or their attributes. They are frequently described with words such as "waxy," "plastic-faced," or "glassy-eyed."³² These descriptions highlight an emotional response toward facial features that appear unnatural, while at the same time emphasizing the traits of the uncanny as defined in academic literature. The comments connect to Freud's discussion of the uncanny, particularly his example of wax dolls whose lifelike surface realism triggers a feeling of unease by blurring the line between animate and inanimate. It makes the familiar feel odd and calls the viewer's trust into question. This effect also aligns with Mori's uncanny valley theory, where artificial figures approach human-likeness and with that become more disturbing. The smoothness of skin in a de-aged character, which is sometimes compared to wax, falls into the valley and undermines the emotional connection. Overall, this theme suggests a failure in creating visual authenticity, which leads to the creation of uncanny feelings. The digital faces appear visually empty, limiting their emotional depth.

The second theme relates to the mismatch between the youthful, de-aged appearance and the physical movements of the actors. Some reviews point out that while technology manages to make the actors look younger, it does not alter the heavier movements of their aging bodies. Comments like "has a young face but the movement of an old guy," "stiff joints," or "move like they are older" reflect the conflict of the face and body.³³ According to several reviews, the mismatch is especially noticeable in action scenes. One of the examples is when DeNiro (Frank) attacks a shopkeeper for shoving his daughter. His moves are slow and heavy, while his face looks young and energetic. In this case, the uncanny feeling is produced by the contrast between digitally youthful faces and aging physical movements. The disconnect between age and motion heightens the overall feeling of strangeness within the audience.

The third theme focuses on how visual de-aging affects the audience's immersion and emotional connection to the film and its characters. This suggests that the uncanny emerges not only as an aesthetic issue but also as an emotional disturbance. Many viewers describe the de-aging effects as "distracting," explaining that it pulled them out of the narrative or made it difficult to be emotionally invested with the characters. Expressions such as "off-putting" and "threw me off" were common among both positive and negative reviews.³⁴ Rather than experiencing the movie as a continuous narrative, audience members could feel disrupted. While the audience recognizes the actors' faces as familiar, the de-aging effects create a sense of inconsistency and

³² "The Irishman (2019)," *Letterboxd*; "The Irishman (2019)," *Rotten Tomatoes*.

³³ "The Irishman (2019)," *Letterboxd*; "The Irishman (2019)," *Rotten Tomatoes*.

³⁴ "The Irishman (2019)," *Letterboxd*; "The Irishman (2019)," *Rotten Tomatoes*.

alienation. Overall, these themes show a multifaceted response among the audience of *The Irishman*. Even though not all viewers will experience the disruption in the same way, the reviews reflect how CGI effects can introduce a barrier between the viewer and the story.

To complement the broader themes identified above and deepen the understanding of emotional reactions and engagement, this section conducts a close reading of a small selection of reviews. The four reviews differ in tone and attitude towards CGI effects in *The Irishman*. They range from positive to mixed to negative reactions. The differences between those four reviews illustrate the complexity of viewer responses.

The positive review states that, “It’s a joy to get another new Scorsese gangster flick with his iconic cast, and the de-aging works remarkably well. The editing as always is also excellent.”³⁵ The reviewer emphasizes enjoyment, giving the movie a rating of four and a half stars. They describe the de-aging effects as working “remarkably well,” which suggests minimal to no disruption to the immersion or feeling of authenticity. Moreover, they see the digital effects as a successful tool rather than a distraction. The viewer does not express any discomfort or uncanniness, instead their comment can be interpreted as an indication of a proper integration between visual effects and performance authenticity. The review highlights the nostalgia around the “iconic cast,” which most likely influences their reception of the movie. This suggests that for some viewers, emotional connection to the cast may be more relevant than technical limitations or the lack of it.

The second review acknowledges the initial disruption but also notes adaptation. It states that, “The de-aging effects are a little jarring for the first 30 minutes or so, tho they fortunately blend into the background after a while.”³⁶ The reviewer gives the film three and a half stars. They admit their issue with CGI effects at first but do not see it as a persistent obstacle to immersion. Instead, they state that the effect softens after a while, which allows them to fully focus on the narrative. The transition period implies the existence of a perceptual border, a point at which the viewer adheres to the visuals and accepts them as a part of the film. Overall, this review illustrates the audience’s capacity to acclimatize to technological mediation, suggesting that the uncanny feeling may occur initially but can diminish as engagement with the narrative deepens.

The third review shows emotional discomfort. The negative review states, “The CGI to make these actors look younger was terrible when it didn’t work, and unnerving uncanny valley when it did.”³⁷ The reviewer expresses strong dissatisfaction with the visual effects and gives the film a rating of one and a half stars. They mention inconsistencies in the quality of the de-aging effects, calling them “terrible.” However, they also emphasize that when the CGI looked

³⁵ Review of “The Irishman,” *Letterboxd*, November 17, 2019, <https://letterboxd.com/blankments/film/the-irishman-2019/>.

³⁶ Review of “The Irishman,” *Letterboxd*, December 10, 2019, <https://letterboxd.com/schaffrillas/film/the-irishman-2019/>.

³⁷ Review of “The Irishman,” *Letterboxd*, November 23, 2024, <https://letterboxd.com/alucar11/film/the-irishman-2019/>.

believable, it caused discomfort. Additionally, their use of the term “uncanny valley” suggests a general awareness of the popular concept and its connection to CGI effects, though not necessarily of its theoretical background. This review thus suggests that reviewers’ awareness of theory or popular culture discourse may influence their approach to the film and its visual effects.

The final review expresses a strongly negative opinion:

Between the weird CGI adjustments to make old people almost look young and the terrible CGI blood, this is one of the worst movies I have ever seen. Imagine the characters from *Polar Express* acting in a gangster movie. Imagine a dozen old washed-up actors taking their last breath while relying on CGI to make them look younger. It was creepy and cringeworthy throughout.³⁸

This review gives the movie half a star and combines aesthetic discomfort with a feeling of repulsion. The reviewer uses highly emotional language, such as “creepy” and “cringeworthy,” to describe their experience. The dissatisfaction is based on the technical quality and emotional rejection created by CGI itself. They notice the mismatch between the de-aged face and older body. The phrases “washed-up actors” and “taking their last breath” suggest that the reviewer finds the visuals both unconvincing and unsettling in their depiction of aging. Furthermore, the review compares the edited actors to characters in *The Polar Express*. This association is significant, as the movie and its CGI effects are known to evoke an uncanny feeling among viewers. The digitally created faces appear nearly lifelike, but their slightly off or inaccurate facial expressions can evoke an unsettling effect on viewers.³⁹ To conclude, this review combines both aesthetic critique and emotional dissatisfaction in order to highlight the discomfort regarding authenticity and uncanniness.

These reviews show how reactions to digital de-aging are not only shaped by technical execution but also by emotional factors. Visual de-aging evokes complex and often conflicting reactions. Rather than showing a uniformly positive or negative perception, the data shows a wide range of responses shaped by the aesthetic quality and emotional impact. Uncanny descriptors are significantly tied to negative reviews but do not universally prevent positive reception. The data shows the presence of uncanny feelings among both groups, indicating the broadness of the issue. However, the fact that these descriptors dominate the negative reviews demonstrates the depth of the problem. It implies that the phenomenon of finding digital de-aging uncanny is an issue that can significantly alter viewing experience.

Moreover, the responses that expressed an uncanny feeling vary significantly, depending on the viewer’s overall sentiment towards the movie. For part of the audience, the eerie feeling might be temporary or context-dependent. For others, it persists throughout the film. The

³⁸ Review of “The Irishman,” *Letterboxd*, December 3, 2019, <https://letterboxd.com/alphado9/film/the-irishman-2019/>.

³⁹ Kendra Cherry, “What to Know About the Uncanny Valley,” *VeryWell Mind*, July 8, 2024, <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-the-uncanny-valley-4846247#toc-origins-of-the-uncanny-valley>.

frequency and nature of uncanny-related words in audience reviews show that de-aging effects may disrupt a viewer's emotional engagement. This analysis indicates that while uncanniness may coexist with film enjoyment, it still disrupts emotional continuity to some degree.

This article adds to authenticity theory by arguing that digital alterations are not only evaluated through their visual credibility but also their emotional resonance. The analysis shows that viewers see “authenticity” as the ability to convey believable and genuine human performance within digital mediation. Some positive reviews praise the technical aspect and are willing to accept the de-aging because it is understood as being persistent with the film structure, nostalgia, and their expectations. However, when visual effects disrupt the viewer's emotional connection to the performance, the result can be a loss of immersion and narrative rejection. Therefore, the boundary between authenticity and the feeling of uncanniness is fluid. It is shaped both by technological implementation and audience perception.

These results show that while the digital alterations are technologically impressive, they can undermine emotional engagement and a sense of authenticity if not fully integrated into the narrative. The uncanny feeling becomes not only a theoretical concern but also a practical one for producers. The issue is both broad and deep, as it involves technical precision, narrative coherence, and the viewer's emotional response. De-aging technology should be carefully evaluated in terms of its consistency and emotional believability. Future applications could benefit from keeping the digital alteration of actors to a moderate level of human resemblance to decrease the level of eerie feeling.⁴⁰ Further research is needed to establish how different demographic groups respond to digital de-aging and whether the familiarity and sentiment towards actors affects the audience's tolerance of CGI. Real-time tracking or interviews, with a separation of audiences based on their awareness of “uncanny,” could complement this content analysis by offering a deeper understanding of uncanny responses.

⁴⁰ Mori, “The Uncanny Valley.”

Book Review

Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The End of Ambition: The United States and the Third World in the Vietnam Era* (Princeton University Press, 2021)

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This paper was written for the course 'Readings in American History' for the MA North American Studies

In *The End of Ambition*, Mark Atwood Lawrence offers a new perspective on how the Vietnam War thwarted American liberal ambitions in both the developing world during the long 1960s. Compellingly written and well-documented with material from US and foreign archives, Lawrence's work provides fresh insights into the implementation of American efforts to promote democracy and development in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

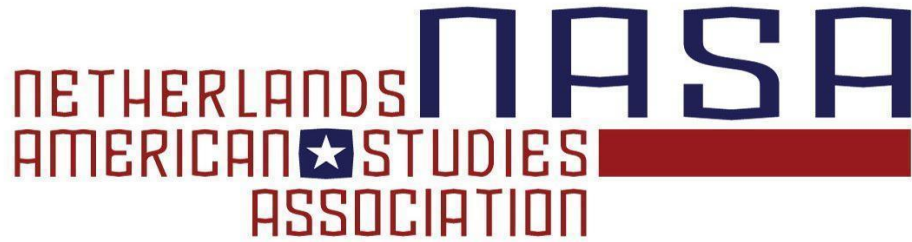
Lawrence makes new contributions to our understanding of US foreign policy toward the Global South, as well as Cold War and Vietnam history more broadly. While scholars such as H. W. Brands and Thomas J. Noer have argued that by the end of his presidency, Lyndon Johnson relinquished his aspirations toward other regions, and Stephen Graudbard has suggested that there was no coherent American foreign policy after 1965, Lawrence's focus is on the challenge of refashioning American policy. *The End of Ambition* examines how the US gradually abandoned its idealistic emphasis on supporting "democratization and economic progress" in nations of the Third World in favor of the preservation of stability. The core argument of the monograph is that the Vietnam War led to the collapse of the liberal ambitions in the Third World that had been promoted by John F. Kennedy. In Lawrence's account, the disintegration of this vision paved the way for the rise of a "new liberal ambition movement in the early 1970s," whose aim was to build US foreign policy in line with human rights.

Lawrence argues that it was during the Johnson administration, whose priorities relied on "order and stability" in the regions classified as part of the "developing" or Third World, that Washington set aside its liberal ambitions. Concurrently, policymakers were confronted with mounting challenges posed by the Vietnam War and its impacts on America's resources. This was compounded by growing anti-Americanism abroad, for example in India, where the government publicly criticized US actions in Vietnam. Lawrence contends that the Johnson administration contributed to the downfall of liberal ambitions that later came to be exemplified by the so-called 'Nixon Doctrine.' For Lawrence, the Johnson administration's ambitions were conflicting because it had no "central guiding principles" to pursue "the ambitious liberalism which resonated so powerfully within American society" during the early 1960s.

Lawrence explores five areas in the global South that were especially relevant for American policymakers: Brazil, India, Iran, Indonesia, and southern Africa. Providing a series of historically and politically informed case studies, Lawrence highlights Johnson's goal

of garnering support from leaders of Third World nations as part of an emerging US “tolerance for authoritarianism.” This is an insightful comparative framework that allows Lawrence to provide a novel perspective on US foreign policy during the period. For example, he argues that Johnson constructed a new relationship with the military regime that ultimately destroyed Brazilian democracy, while simultaneously promoting the development of constructive change and democracy that aimed to counter the perceived dangers of communist movements. Each of the case studies provides a powerful illustration of Lawrence’s argument, serving to showcase the array of challenges faced by decision-makers during that period. The work therefore makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on the Cold War, addressing in particular crucial gaps in the historiography regarding US-Third World relations.

Lawrence gives readers an original and compelling analysis of US engagement in the Global South against the backdrop of the war in Vietnam. He makes a valuable contribution which spans a range of areas including development, domestic politics, and US decision-making as part of US foreign policy. There are, however, a few shortcomings worth noting. In Lawrence’s portrayal of the US as a contested place, it is not that clear how local actors participated in constraining liberal ambitions. In addition to this, the parallel between Vietnam era US policy with US society is difficult to discern due the mention of a wide range of actors. Despite these minor issues, in the present age marked by a resurgence of discourse surrounding American decline. *The End of Ambition* offers a captivating and engaging investigation regarding the direction of America’s foreign policy in the Global South, an area that deserves more attention from scholars.



Call for Papers

Do you also want to publish a paper in the *Netherlands American Studies Review*? That is great news! We are always looking for contributions! Below you can find our submission guidelines. Selection procedures usually take place in March for issue 1 and September for issue 2—we will post specific calls for papers with deadlines to be considered in those selections, so please do keep that in mind when submitting your work. We are open to submissions, however, year-round.

Submission Guidelines

We welcome papers written by bachelor's, master's, and PhD students from Dutch universities. Students do not have to be enrolled in an American Studies program, but submissions must be relevant to at least one of the journal's (sub)fields. Recent graduates can send in work written in the last two years. Students can submit either **book reviews** (500-700 words) or **papers** (2000-5000 words). Papers may be based on a thesis, as long as they meet the word limit.

All submissions must meet the following requirements:

- Submissions must include the author's **name**, **university**, the **title of the course** and **program** it was written for (specifying BA/MA/PhD), and the **semester** it was written in.
- All papers submitted must include an abstract. This abstract must be on a separate page from the body of the article and may not be longer than 250 words.
- Texts must meet the **word count** mentioned above, references and abstract excluded.
- All authors must use **Chicago Style with footnotes** for citations. If you are unfamiliar with this style, please consult www.chicagomanualofstyle.org before submitting.
- Documents must be submitted in Word format (**.doc** or **.docx**).
- Texts must be written in **American English**. Please check your text for spelling and grammar before submitting.

Submissions can be sent to NLAmericanStudiesReview@gmail.com. We make a selection of papers several months before the publication of each issue and will get in touch with you in due course. If we accept your paper, we will start the editorial process. During this process, you are expected to improve and adjust your paper in consultation with several of our editors. If you are curious about our previous issues, please check <http://www.netherlands-america.nl/nasa-review/>.