

April 27, 1965

MEMORANDUM

TO: Norman Thomas, A.J. Muste, Bayard Rustin, Robert W. Gilmore, R. Stuart Hughes, Ed Clark, Roger Lockard, Emily Parker Simon, Alfred Hassler, Charles Bloomstein, Harold Taylor, Stewart Meacham, Benjamin Spock, Todd Gitlin, Clark Kissinger, I.F. Stone, Paul Potter, Dagnar Willem, Lucy Montgomery, Lenore Marshall, Sanford Gottlieb, Stanley Heyman, Everett Mendelsohn, Staughton Lynd, Jerome Grossman.

FROM: Mrs. Gardner Cox, Cambridge, Massachusetts  
Mrs. Anne Farnsworth, New York City  
Martin Peretz, Dept. of Government, Harvard University

We are distressed and shocked to learn of efforts to undermine the March on Washington by people known as leaders of the peace movement. It surely is the case that some or perhaps most of the signatories to the enclosed statement, issued from Robert Gilmore's office and sent out in Turn Toward Peace envelopes on the very eve of the demonstration, had no such intent. But the document in fact had that effect, and in large measure because its language none too subtly but altogether gratuitously and unjustly evoked associations of the March with Communism. How sad it is that the recrudescence of McCarthyism should be signaled by so unlikely a group of people!

The enclosed editorial from the week-end edition of the New York Post, a decent liberal newspaper, makes the point well enough. The respected names are invoked by the Post's editorialist as having "taken clear note of attempts to convert the event into a pro-Communist production." Nor is this an elaborate embroidery upon the original text. For the public memorandum, which significantly fails to say anything about the continued bombings of North Vietnam, raises the spectre of presumably subversive "particular positions expressed by some of the elements in the March." Lest they be misunderstood as to what it is they are suggesting, the declaration concludes with an expression of their willingness to cooperate with "all those groups and individuals who, like ourselves, believe in the need for an independent peace movement, not committed to any form of totalitarianism nor drawing inspiration or direction from the foreign policy of any government." Nothing in the planning and organization of the March warranted this disclaimer.

What is clear from the editorial is that it was not written on the basis of the press release alone. This is not the place to quibble with the assessment of the President's speech; events of the past days, in any event, confirm that both the Post and the statement may have been much too sanguine in their evaluation of his plans in Vietnam. But what is relevant is the editorial's reference to "attempts to convert the event into a pro-Communist production," to "the banners advertised in advance," and to a planned "frenzied one-sided anti-American show." Those responsible for interpolating in this manner on what strikes us as the misguided good intentions of Messrs. Thomas, Muste, Hughes, Taylor et al should be severely rebuked and repudiated for spreading tales having little basis in fact and constituting a slur on the loyalty and basic good sense of the young men and women of Students for a Democratic Society. Whoever gave the Post its information was involved in what was, to be charitable, an exercise in imagination. But that would have been impossible if others had not lent their prestige to a foolish, divisive and destructive tactic, which in the guise of support for the March, was a pre-emptive disassociation in the event that something went wrong in Washington.

That does not merit much respect either. As it happens, the March was a dignified and orderly procession of young people as well as a large number of grass-roots adults identified with SANE, the Friends, TTP, Women's Strike

for Peace, WILPF, some trade unions, and PAX. This was due to the energetic and careful leadership of SDS which imposed a relaxed but firm discipline on the March so that signs would be in good taste and specifically related to the issues, and so that no unduly provocative incidents should take place. We suppose that what troubled the men who felt obliged to cast a pall of discredit on the March was the fact that a number of those who would participate would be extremely radical students, perhaps even some Communists of traditional or Maoist or Fidelista hue, though nothing of the sort was in evidence. This possibility might have been avoided if every marcher had been obliged to take a loyalty oath, but surely not even the most vehement anti-Communist would have proposed that. The March was tarred by individuals who should have been its friends because of their unshakable fears.

But the particular incident that provoked the draft in New York was an SDS press release which referred to the President's 7 April speech as an effort "to con the American people." Now that is not a very tactful or graceful way of putting things, and it may not be right. It is of interest, however, that the very men who are so concerned with totalitarian influences are themselves prepared to censure any activity which falls within what they consider their purview and with which they might disagree. Will not the libertarians allow a plurality of opinion in the peace ranks, and even a plurality of style? Particularly as the commitment of SDS to liberty and democracy is above reproach? Or will any independence on the part of the young be used as an excuse to shower opprobrium on what they do?

Several related matters should be mentioned here. The reprehensible action of Robert Pickus in TTP, Northern California, of denouncing the whole march is yet another in a series of red-baiting incidents, ironic at this time because even defenders of Administration policy have not resorted to that technique of argument. And it is especially unseemly as TTP's energies during the Vietnam crisis seem to be focused not on pursuing the cause of peace but on pursuing the rest of the peace movement. As serious, but more to the point, however, is the alarmist phantasies of people associated with the statement and their attempts to dissuade Senator Gruening from appearing at the Washington Monument rally. The charge, by Gilmore to I.F. Stone, that the students intended to urinate on the White House hardly requires comment. We do not know what was said to Senator Gruening, and we are gratified that Norman Thomas, for all of his misgivings, urged him not to cancel his speech. (It should be noted that the Senator was greeted by an enthusiastic standing ovation both at the beginning and end of his wise and eloquent address.) But the mischief assayed would have done incalculable damage if it had succeeded: the March would have been pushed to extreme, an open invitation to red-bait. the entire peace movement would have ensued and, perhaps, most important, the very best of our young people would have been permanently estranged from the peace leaders they are supposed to respect. As it is, the statement alone has alienated these wonderful young men and women much more than can be afforded.

Even the impressive facts of what transpired in Washington have not caused second thoughts, and the statement of April 16 was being circulated by TTP within the peace movement as late as April 24. April 17 should make us all proud and give us reason for hope. It is a shame that so few of those who signed the release to the press less than twenty-four hours before the March actually began, were not there to participate, as was Dr. Spock, in the largest demonstration against this squalid war to date, in the largest demonstration in our nation's history for a real turn toward peace and a new American attitude toward social change at home and abroad.