

CHAPTER FOUR

“THINGS THAT GO ‘BUMP’ IN THE NIGHT”: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF AN ANTICOMMUNIST HERO

From ghoulies and ghosties
And long-legged beasties
And things that go ‘bump’ in the night,
Good Lord, deliver us!

-- Traditional Scottish Prayer

His body fell, from sixteen stories up, onto the roof of a third-floor passageway at the Bethesda Naval Medical Center. Five minutes later, at 1:55 A.M. on May 22, 1949, hospital personnel arrived on the scene and pronounced him dead. They found him still clothed in his silk pajamas and bathrobe, watch still running despite his fall. His bathrobe sash was tied around his neck, but the sixteenth-floor kitchen, from which window he fell, neither bore signs of struggle nor attempted suicide. Mysterious circumstances notwithstanding, all who knew him said he died a patriot and a staunch anticommunist. Moreover, James Forrestal died a hero.

These are the facts upon which virtually all observers agreed. Beyond these few characteristics, the death and legacy of the nation’s first Secretary of Defense remain shrouded in controversy and conspiracy. From means to motive, scholars and unfettered conspiracy theorists alike disagree on a number of issues, all, seemingly, except his heroism.

For some, his death represents the classic fulfillment of a soldier’s call to duty, no different than a heroic death on the field of battle. For others, Forrestal’s legacy resembles that of a protagonist in a classic Greek tragedy, wherein the hero’s greatest strength ultimately becomes his fatal flaw. For still others, an insidious enemy—figuratively, or, more conspiratorially, literally—felled Forrestal by a stab-in-the-back. This Forrestal is a sort of pulp spy novel’s hero, too strong to have been undone by any natural force or straightforward challenge. These

archetypes remain consistent whether one believes that Forrestal took his own life, as is the unanimous scholarly opinion, or was the victim of some sort of murderous conspiracy. Indeed, even the most reputed account of Forrestal's life and the circumstances surrounding his death, the biography by Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley, reluctantly admits that "Forrestal's death fostered several enduring suppositions."¹ Yet the veracity of these theories is in some ways less important than exploring why and how they developed—and remain—as cultural artifacts of America's peculiar anticommunist Cold War culture.

Indeed, scholars and conspiracists, whether contemporaneous or contemporary, converge in their "heroic" eulogies of Forrestal's life. This suggests a more significant connection between their divergent uses of his death than is yet recognized. Three main source categories relate these events: immediate press coverage and commentary (with the *New York Times* as the exemplar), scholarly, and conspiracist. The "facts" as determined by contemporaneous press coverage, and in particular the tone of that coverage, exhibit the laying of rhetorical groundwork for the development of conspiracy theories by those for whom Forrestal's death must serve a meaningful purpose. As the quote from Townsend and Hoopes demonstrates, not even the expansion of scholarly analysis of Forrestal's death redeems it from the realm of social myth-and-meaning making. Indeed, it is in large part from the development of certain conspiracy theories that one more clearly sees the shared attribution of "heroic" elements to Forrestal's life and—especially—death. From immediate press coverage and through the development of conspiracy theories galore, the mysterious circumstances of James Forrestal's death comprised part of an ongoing social discussion about the nature and definition of a legitimate hero in the historically contingent environment of that anticommunist era.

¹ Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley, *Driven Patriot: The Life and Times of James Forrestal* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1992), 468.

Explaining the fall: Coverage and attribution of Forrestal's death

Over the first few months of 1949, the *New York Times* presented its readers with little clue of what was to come of James Forrestal. On January 11, White House Press Secretary Charles Ross refuted and denounced rumors then circulating around Washington, D.C. hallways that Secretary of Defense Forrestal was on the verge of resignation. The most recent rumor had Forrestal set to resign that very week. The following day the paper quoted Forrestal as saying that this merely reflected the customary second-term political practice. In this, cabinet members routinely submit formal resignations to the newly re-elected president so he has the option of beginning with a fresh slate of advisors on his new term in office. Although widely recognized that Forrestal did not campaign as vigorously for President Harry S Truman's 1948 reelection as did some other cabinet members, the Secretary of Defense nevertheless believed he had no reason to expect President Truman would accept his resignation.²

As the President acknowledged publicly the following day, nothing of truth indicated Forrestal's ouster from the still-reorganizing National Military Establishment (which officially became the Department of Defense in August 1949). Forrestal was Truman's handpicked choice to direct the complex unification of the various U.S. military services under one bureaucratic chain-of-command; virtually all sources agree that Forrestal progressed more ably than might be expected given the unprecedented scope of the project. Perhaps because of his wartime cultivating of the press—evidenced by his friendship with *Times* columnist Arthur Krock—he received almost uniformly positive coverage in the post-war era. One observer labels the press's relationship with Forrestal as uncritical, largely because of their private agreement with

² "Denies Forrestal Quits," *New York Times*, 11 January 1949, p. 15; "Forrestal Says He Expects to Stay in Cabinet as Secretary of Defense," *New York Times*, 12 January 1949, p. 15.

Forrestal's increasingly public anticommunism. Indeed, when Truman spoke against the resignation rumors, he did so by reiterating Forrestal's vital advisory role during those early days of the Cold War.³

As a president following the New Deal liberalism of Franklin Roosevelt—and the attacks upon it by conservatives wielding the rhetoric of domestic American anticommunism like a partisan club—Truman needed public legitimation of his own anticommunist convictions. As witnessed in the preceding chapter, liberals of the post-war era typically conceived of anticommunism as an international commitment, leaving the rhetoric of domestic anticommunism to more conservative voices. Indeed, even Forrestal focused most of his anticommunist energies on the geopolitical Cold War. Just weeks following the resignation rumors, Walter H. Waggoner published an interview with Secretary Forrestal on the state of the post-war world. Forrestal praised Truman for boldly reducing defense expenditures, which Forrestal believed encouraged the Soviets to do likewise and stabilize the bipolar world. Forrestal noted that this as a dramatic improvement over the previous spring, when certain “events” ratcheted up those same tensions. Through Waggoner, Forrestal identified those as: the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia; the Berlin crisis and airlift; and—notably, for the purposes of this chapter—“the mysterious death leap of Jan Masaryk in Prague.” Recalled by some as the “Third Defenestration of Prague,” Masaryk’s fall from an open window seemed suspicious to Forrestal, who indirectly implicated Communist hardliners in the Czech government who opposed the more moderate Masaryk, then Foreign Minister. Forrestal clearly self-identified as a chief anticommunist, answering Waggoner’s question about lingering rumors

³ “Forrestal Stand ‘Plain,’” *New York Times*, 14 January 1949, p. 4; Karen M. Russell, “Building an Anticommunist Consensus: James Forrestal and the U.S. News Media, 1944-49,” Unpublished manuscript, reviewed 25 June 2008. In particular, the reader should note Russell’s conclusion that the press failed in its “watchdog” role (p. 47). Russell is an associate professor of journalism and mass communications at the University of Georgia.

of Forrestal's retirement by asserting: "I will return to private life...when I feel I can be of no further use to the national security."⁴ Although Forrestal credited Truman for reducing the immediacy of the Cold War, his tone and rhetoric nevertheless communicated clearly the need for continued watchfulness.

Then, on March 3, the *Times* ran a front-page headline: "Forrestal to Quit Cabinet on April 1, Washington Hears." It further explained the move in a sub-headline that called Louis A. Johnson, Truman's chief re-election strategist, a "Loyal Truman Man, He Is Said to Have Refused Anything Less Than Defense Chief." The next day, *Times* columnists set in motion the rhetorical chain of events that ultimately resulted in the social construction of a mythological anticommunist hero. On March 4, at the White House's daily press briefing, columnist Anthony Leviero confirmed the seemingly stunning news. Truman announced March 31 as the date for the transition from the nation's first to its second Secretary of Defense. In an unsubtle jab at the administration, Leviero confirmed the news despite the fact that "such speculation [of Forrestal's imminent departure], inspired by sources close to the President right after Election Day, was publicly discouraged repeatedly by the Chief Executive."⁵

More critically, columnist and Forrestal admirer Arthur Krock initiated a public eulogy of Forrestal's service. Hailing him as the "Last of the World War II Cabinet," Krock effectively linked Forrestal's legitimacy to that popular war. By lamenting that Forrestal's "persistent detractors in the press and on the radio will rejoice"—referring almost certainly to Walter Winchell (later a supporter of Joseph McCarthy's anticommunism) and Drew Pearson (later a critic of McCarthyism)—Krock implied that such attacks were unfounded and illegitimate. For

⁴ Walter H. Waggoner, "Forrestal Holds Dangers Lessened," *New York Times*, 2 February 1949, p. 1, 6.

⁵ Anthony Leviero, "President Appoints Johnson As the Successor to Forrestal," *New York Times*, 4 March 1949, p. 1; Also: "Forrestal to Quit Cabinet on April 1, Washington Hears," *New York Times*, 3 March 1949.

Winchell, Forrestal lacked sufficient commitment to domestic anticommunism, while for Pearson, the Secretary characterized of the type of hysterical reactionism that threatened the civil liberties he purportedly defended against communism. Krock acknowledged their withering attacks on Forrestal, seemingly from all sides at once, but clarified that Forrestal only resigned under their rhetorical assaults “because [they] never ceased.” He further asserted that Forrestal often broached resignation, but remained at Truman’s express urging. With this tone, Krock suggested that Forrestal continued in that vital service of his nation’s defense for two primary reasons rhetorically linked as one-and-the-same: opposing his critics’ baseless attacks, and fulfilling his loyal, legitimate, American duty.⁶

The paucity of discussion of the reasons for Forrestal’s seemingly sudden resignation from a life devoted to public service made the following month’s news appear even more shocking. Beginning on April 6, the *Times* published a series of updates on Forrestal’s medical condition following what it first termed a “routine medical check-up and physical examination” at Bethesda Naval Medical Center. The headlines from the weeks that followed were a sort of cinematic slow reveal, gradually publicizing the depth—if not the true nature—of Forrestal’s condition:

Forrestal Is Treated in Naval Hospital for Nervous and Physical Exhaustion (April 8)
Forrestal Tests Go On: Condition of Ex-Defense Head Is Called ‘Quite Satisfactory’ (April 9)
Forrestal Rests ‘Comfortably’ (April 11)
Forrestal Reported In State of Fatigue (April 12)
Forrestal Still Gaining: Recovery... Only a Matter of Time, Doctor Says (April 17)
Forrestal Improving (April 21)
Truman Visits Forrestal...in Hospital (April 24)
Forrestal ‘Looks Fine’: Johnson So Reports, Thinks He May Be Out in Mid-May (April 28)
Forrestal Gains 12 Pounds (May 18)

⁶ Arthur Krock, “In The Nation: The Last of the World War II Cabinet,” *New York Times*, 4 March 1949, p. 20. For more discussion on Pearson and Winchell, see also: Russell (passim), Arnold Rogow (*James Forrestal*, 1963), or Hoopes and Brinkley (*Driven Patriot*, 1992).

And then, suddenly:

Forrestal a Suicide at Naval Hospital (May 22)⁷

With full coverage beginning the following day, the *New York Times* set about eulogizing Forrestal as a hero, one who died in loyal and patriotic service of his country—or, in the rhetoric of authentic Americanness. Walter Waggoner’s article carried as one of its sub-headlines the words of President Truman: “He Was a War Casualty as if He Died at Front.” Referencing Forrestal’s seemingly tireless work, first as undersecretary—then Secretary—of the Navy during World War II and later as Secretary of Defense during the reorganization, this statement serves as Truman’s rhetorical pardon for any culpability Forrestal may have had in his own death. Just as a soldier is not held to account for his own death on the battlefield, neither would Truman blame Forrestal for working himself to the breaking point in the defense of his nation, most recently against communism. This statement also explicitly joined Forrestal’s death with his patriotism, as did statements by such authorities on Americanness as Herbert Hoover, Bernard Baruch, and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Each agreed in their own way that Forrestal died as a soldier in war, the most loyal of civic servants. Eisenhower considered Forrestal a “citizen of heroic mold,” while the *Times*’s more formal eulogy, carried on page 22 of that day’s paper, explained that Forrestal’s “tragedy is directly traceable to his overwork on behalf of his country.”⁸

In fact, the *Times* reported these very circumstances in explaining Forrestal’s hospitalization. What the headlines termed “nervous and physical exhaustion” or “fatigue,” the articles clarified as “occupational fatigue,” a sort of civilian shell shock, a “physical and emotional reaction that came from fighting too long without respite.” Forrestal lost twenty-five

⁷ *New York Times* headlines from 6 April through 22 May 1949.

⁸ “Mourned in Britain,” *New York Times*, 23 May 1949, p. 3; “James Forrestal,” *New York Times*, 23 May 1949, p. 22; Walter H. Waggoner, “Forrestal Killed in 13-Story Leap,” *New York Times*, 23 May 1949, p. 1, 3.

pounds in the days before his admission to Bethesda Naval Medical Center for unspecified treatment, but the *Times* reported often of his “progress” in regaining that weight and “recovering” from his occupational fatigue. In further defending this “rest” as legitimate for a heroic public servant of Forrestal’s stature, the *Times* argued that “his untiring efforts and self-sacrifice have earned for him the gratitude and respect of his fellow-citizens, and the rest he so richly deserves.”⁹

Unsurprisingly, the *Times* columnists thus extended the rhetoric of heroic soldier-patriot in their coverage of his death. A special column by Harold B. Hinton, one of Forrestal’s last professional secretaries, expounded the causal link between Forrestal’s legendary work habits, the pressures of presiding over various wars—including World War II, the “turf” wars within the National Military Establishment, and the Cold War—and Forrestal’s demise. Hinton suggested that the anticommunist battle wholly consumed Forrestal in his final days of public service, right up until his resignation took effect on March 31, 1949: “[T]here was never a day when he could not be absolutely certain the struggle with the Soviet Union would not turn into a conflict of bombs and bullets.”¹⁰

As the *Times* transitioned its coverage to Forrestal’s funeral and burial, the mythology of a hero continued emerging. In one *Times* article, Bernard Katzen, the head of the Republican Club, argued Congress should posthumously award Forrestal the Medal of Honor for his bravery and courage under (presumably rhetorical) fire; the headline read, “High Honors Held Due to Forrestal.” The *Times* similarly followed discussion of Forrestal’s interment at Arlington National Cemetery, that final honor for self-sacrificing, patriotic American soldiers. Yet, while

⁹ “Forrestal Is Treated in Naval Hospital,” “Forrestal Rests ‘Comfortably’”; “The Patient at Bethesda,” *New York Times*, 13 April 1949, p. 28; “Forrestal Still Gaining...”; “Forrestal Gains 12 Pounds”.

¹⁰ Harold B. Hinton, “Burden of Defense Bore on Forrestal,” *New York Times*, 23 May 1949, p. 2.

Anthony Leviero reported plans for “simple rites,” Walter Waggoner depicted the actual ceremony of Forrestal’s funeral service as, “Forrestal Buried With Hero’s Rites.” Explicitly emoting both tragedy and hero-worship, Waggoner reported that “Forrestal received a military hero’s burial...in the resting place of Americans who have given their lives for their country.” To what specific conflict Forrestal gave his life—whether military (World War II?), internal (unification?), or geopolitical (Cold War anticommunism?)—Waggoner left his readers to decide.¹¹

Not even sober scholarly opinion, with the benefit of half-a-century’s objectivity, fully escapes this hero rhetoric when describing the legacy of James Forrestal. Biographers Townsend Hoopes and Douglas Brinkley confirm Forrestal’s heroism, albeit in a decidedly different rhetorical sense. Where the *New York Times* recorded the contemporaneous eulogizing of Forrestal as a (Cold) war hero, most scholarly opinion—as represented by Hoopes and Brinkley—portrays Forrestal along the lines of a tragic hero of the classic Greek dramatic genre. In their concluding analysis of his life and death, Hoopes and Brinkley write of Forrestal as a “figure of fate in the classic sense,” comparing him to the heroes of various works of fiction. In this view, Forrestal reflected “a character in a Theodore Dreiser tragedy, or the hero of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.” They extend the analogy by offering that “John O’Hara, John Dos Passos, and George Backer all wrote novels whose central figures were modeled on Forrestal.” The most critical element of this perspective on Forrestal’s legacy is the notion that the very strengths for which Forrestal won praise during his life became his tragic and fatal flaws. Hoopes and Brinkley consistently portray Forrestal as a man driven by a keen intellectual patriotism, borne

¹¹ “High Honors Held Due to Forrestal,” *New York Times*, 25 May 1949; Anthony Leviero, “Forrestal Burial to be at Arlington,” *New York Times*, 24 May 1949, p. 1; Walter H. Waggoner, “Forrestal Buried With Hero’s Rites,” *New York Times*, 26 May 1949, p. 15.

out in his everyday actions by way of a legendary work ethic—hence the title of their authoritative biography, *Driven Patriot*.¹²

This theme replays itself in a variety of settings throughout the pages of their biography. It culminates in the exhaustion of the hero's "extraordinary physical stamina and disciplined drive." Like the title character in Sophocles' "Chorus from Ajax," the hero's intense lifestyle propelled him to great success. Yet, stricken like Ajax with debilitating madness, Forrestal reconciled suicide as the only acceptable outcome once his body betrayed his habits. Ultimately, Hoopes and Brinkley postulate, Forrestal's extraordinary devotion to public service later impelled him to set down the pen he had used to copy a stanza from the "Chorus," walk unnoticed from his room on the sixteenth floor of the Bethesda Naval Medical Center, into the kitchen across the hallway, and toward the unprotected window from which he fell—not to disgrace, but to his fate. This was not the suicide of a coward seeking escape from his burdens, but the irrational choice of one who could no longer serve his country with the same, once legendary commitment.¹³

Nevertheless, a slight literary twist deploys Forrestal instead as the hero protagonist of a pulp spy novel. Just as the circumstances and public knowledge about his death allowed for the legacy's manipulation into the construct of a heroic soldier, Forrestal's demise may be reinterpreted in light of the burgeoning anticommunist hysteria that bred all manner of conspiracy theories—culminating most recognizably in McCarthy's unverified claim of widespread communist infiltration of the federal government. All great conspiracies, like McCarthy's list, begin with at least a kernel of truth; the real debate is where the conspiracy ends

¹² Hoopes and Brinkley, *Driven Patriot*, 472-4.

¹³ Hoopes and Brinkley, *Driven Patriot*, 464-80.

and the myth-making begins. For Cornell Simpson, a lay historian who allegedly began his investigation into the conspiracy surrounding Forrestal's death in the mid-1950s, Forrestal exists as a hero of the pulp fiction genre, a dime-store spy novel's protagonist too powerful and too righteous to be undone by natural or straightforward causes.

In the introduction to his well-crafted conspiracy theory, *The Death of James Forrestal* (1966), Simpson claims that for almost a decade publishers rejected his tome as "too controversial, too 'dangerous.'" One should not confuse Simpson's work as scholarly; rather, from unattributed quotes such as this example, to its lack of source documentation and the mysterious origins of its Western Islands Publishers, numerous characteristics place it as archetypal conspiracy mythology. Taken at his word, Simpson drafted the work in the mid-1950s, following a number of watershed moments in the Cold War and domestic American anticommunism. Chief among these are four events that followed Forrestal's death in relatively quick succession: the "loss" of China to Mao's Communists, the Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb thanks in part to the treasonous espionage of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the outbreak of the Korean war, and the onset of Joseph McCarthy's accusatory brand of domestic anticommunism. All of these rekindled the peculiarly American Red Scare hysteria during the time when Simpson pieced together the puzzle of James Forrestal's suspicious death, a critical context. As the author engaged in the essentially social process of constructing a myth, he did so influenced by his surroundings—a particularly powerful era of anticommunism. Furthermore, by the time Simpson found a publisher for his (enduring) suppositions, the United States had witnessed both the Cuban Missile Crisis and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy by a gunman (presumably a lone gunman, although this conspiracy lies far beyond the parameters of this chapter) with demonstrable ties to the Soviet Union. Like the hero of a spy novel, then,

Simpson's Forrestal fell from the kitchen window not because his own mind and body betrayed him, but because he was, perhaps not unlike Simpson's manuscript, "too dangerous."¹⁴

This genre's hero is undone by external, not internal, forces. An added layer of intrigue comes when a close and trusted associate betrays the hero—or exploits the hero's fatal weakness. To better sell the consuming public on the surprise of the hero's death, and often the shock of his betrayal, this hero must be relatively uncomplicated. Thus, in Simpson's work, Forrestal's heroism more closely matches the rhetoric of the soldier-hero model deployed in contemporaneous newspaper accounts than the complex portrait of a psychically-convulsed tragic hero of scholarly biography. But Simpson's Forrestal is even more directly a martyr of the anticommunist crusade than credited by press coverage calling him a "war hero." Indeed, where scholarly biographers like Hoopes and Brinkley consider Forrestal's committed anticommunism as but one of his many facets, to Simpson this is key and causal—the reason for the hero's assassination.

After establishing his theory that the events of Forrestal's death were not suicide but politically-motivated murder—a theory supported by little more than the tautological reasoning that suicide makes little rational sense to a (presumably, in the case of Simpson) sane observer—Simpson exposes the sinister motives and agents behind the defenestration. When a section heading asks, "Who Could have Murdered Forrestal—and Why?," the supporting epigraph answers in classic domestic American anticommunist catechism: "The Communists and the international Communist conspiracy." The text raises Forrestal as the archetypal anticommunist American patriot, so steadfast that he posed a significant threat to Communists and their sympathizers who had by then infiltrated the highest echelons of the government. According to

¹⁴ Cornell Simpson, *The Death of James Forrestal* (Boston: Western Islands Publishers, 1966), viii.

Simpson's hagiography, Forrestal almost single-handedly saved France and Italy from communism in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and "inspired" arch-reactionary (and arch-opportunist) Joseph McCarthy's loosely-defined outing of communist influence in Truman's administration. Indeed, Simpson effusively eulogizes, no other single figure "battled and bested Communism on so many fronts as did James V. Forrestal. It was, therefore, absolutely imperative to the success of the world Communist conspiracy that he be liquidated."¹⁵

According to Simpson, Forrestal entered Bethesda involuntarily, essentially duped by his closest friends and held continually against his will. Simpson claims the medical staff routinely drugged Forrestal and denied him visitors or any other contact with the outside world. Then, early in the morning of May 22, 1949, "they" struck. Garroting him with the sash from his bathrobe, assassins dragged Forrestal out of his room, forced him onto the windowsill, and flung him down. Their murderous task complete, the conspirators hastily scribbled lines from the "Chorus of Ajax," conspicuously leaving it as a substitute suicide note before fading back into whatever shadows from which they had come. Yet, thanks to Simpson's keen detection, a number of facts betrayed their perfect crime. The newspapers, for instance, reported scuffmarks on the kitchen windowsill. While Walter Waggoner theorized Forrestal intended suicide by hanging, but tried unsuccessfully at the last minute to scramble back inside, Simpson instead saw this as evidence of a struggle—of one pushed unwillingly out the window. Upon discovery of the body, Forrestal's watch still ran; yet, the disfigurement of the corpse was so complete that only a bed-check positively identified the body. More sinister still, to Simpson, the White House seized and refused to release Forrestal's personal diaries. Simpson alleges these formed the basis of Forrestal's upcoming exposé of communist influence within the United States. Similarly, the

¹⁵ Simpson, *The Death of James Forrestal*, 49-79.

Navy steadfastly refused to publicize the record and findings of the Willcutts Commission—headed by Admiral M.D. Willcutts, and which investigated Forrestal’s hospitalization, care, and suicide for any signs of professional culpability—despite such unanswered questions as the obvious: why was a “suicidal” patient housed on the sixteenth floor, across the hall from an unprotected window? and, Why did a patient whose doctors said publicly he was “improving” commit suicide? Because official sources neglected to answer these questions by the time of Simpson’s work, the public freely interpret them. Perhaps, Simpson prodded his readers, Forrestal was neither suicidal nor improving, nor sick at all, but held against his will until such time as his enemies could fabricate sufficient circumstances to kill him with impunity.¹⁶

Most central to this conspiratorial view of Forrestal’s demise is his own repeated assertion that “they” stalked him; while the standard accounts (contemporaneous press reports and subsequent scholarship alike) attribute this to his psychological break, the conspiracist confirms Forrestal’s paranoia. Various sources record Forrestal’s increasing belief that he was the subject of illicit wiretapping, secret electronic and physical surveillance, and a purposeful public smear campaign. On the very day Louis A. Johnson took his oath as the incoming Secretary of Defense, Forrestal told close friend Ferdinand Eberstadt that “they” had finally succeeded in ousting him from public service. Furthermore, “they” bugged his home, and, gallingly, sent an agent to his door while Eberstadt ignorantly observed. A few days later, at Hobe Sound, FL, for a physical and mental “rest,” he confided similar worries to another close friend—Robert Lovett. Even as they walked along the beach, Forrestal identified such innocuous items as beach umbrella-stands as cleverly disguised surveillance devices. There he intimated to Lovett his fear that the communists had targeted him for purging from office because of his

¹⁶ Simpson, *The Death of James Forrestal*, 1-44.

strident and public anticommunism. At his friends' urging, he accepted a convalescent stay at Bethesda Naval Medical Center and there received treatment for symptoms ranging from "occupational fatigue" to depression. Forrestal's brother, Henry, grew dissatisfied with his care—and the limited access the hospital afforded family members—and planned to withdraw the former Secretary of Defense from the hospital on the very day Forrestal was found dead. Taken together, these events convinced Henry, as they later convinced Cornell Simpson, that James Forrestal "positively did not kill himself," but rather "they" had murdered him.¹⁷

Eulogizing the fallen: The shared social construction of an anticommunist "hero"

The lasting irony of this conspiratorial bent is that conventional interpretations of Forrestal's death rely just as heavily on this purported evidence of Forrestal's paranoia. Arnold Rogow's psychohistory categorizes Forrestal's statements as paranoid delusions symptomatic of the very type of mental fatigue or illness that precipitated his suicidal ideation. Thus, for the more conventional view of Forrestal as a hero undone by the mind that once made him great, as well as for the conspiratorial view that Forrestal was undone by a sinister "them" of the flesh-and-blood variety, there exists an element of stab-in-the-back mythos. The scholarly world confines this to a sort of Greek or Shakespearian tragedy, with Forrestal's own psyche betraying him. For conspiracists, even these accounts only obscure the true conspiracy behind Forrestal's murder. As the mythology expands and envelops other genres of Forrestal literature within the web of conspiracy, these accounts nevertheless maintain the authentic American hero metaphor in describing Forrestal's death.

¹⁷ Simpson, *The Death of James Forrestal*, 1-44; Hoopes and Brinkley, *Driven Patriot*, 449-51; Arnold A. Rogow, *James Forrestal, A Study of Personality, Politics, and Policy* (New York: MacMillan, 1963), 5-18.

Unwittingly, the tone of the *Times*' coverage of Forrestal's resignation, hospitalization, and prognosis provides the rhetorical basis for these enduring suppositions. As seen, the *Times* first reported rumors of Forrestal's ouster—willing or otherwise—from Truman's cabinet from election night through January 1949, but also carried official denials just as consistently. From the White House Press Secretary, to Truman, to Forrestal himself, the *Times* repeatedly printed categorical denials of any impending resignation. Thus, when on March 3, 1949, the paper confirmed Forrestal's resignation, the implication was that of a political stab-in-the-back. The following day, Arthur Krock opined precisely that, and even Anthony Leviero felt compelled to defend his newspaper's coverage of the rumors, essentially blaming Truman for misleading them.¹⁸

Two additional elements in the *Times* coverage of Forrestal's final months inadvertently contributed the context for the social construction of an elaborate stab-in-the-back mythology. First, the *Times* employed seemingly changing terminology in publicizing Forrestal's condition; secondly, they reported his violent end despite continually reporting a seemingly positive prognosis. While the record indicates that the *Times* deserves blame for neither of these factors, they nevertheless played a critical role in shaping the public's perception of Forrestal's demise, and, as already discussed, in the public eulogy of him as a legitimate American hero of one genre or another.

On April 6, 1949, the *Times* reported that Forrestal unexpectedly entered Bethesda Naval Medical Center, but characterized it as a "routine medical check-up." Just two days later, the terminology changed: "Forrestal Is Treated in Naval Hospital For Nervous and Physical Exhaustion." Still, Forrestal's rapid improvement left doctors "very much encouraged,"

¹⁸ "Denies Forrestal Quits"; "Forrestal Says He Expects to Stay..."; "Forrestal Stand 'Plain'"; "Forrestal to Quit"; Krock, "In the Nation: The Last..."; Leviero, "President Appoints Johnson..."

according to *Times* reports. Even as the “very tired” Forrestal’s hospitalization extended over the next several days, the outlook remained “quite satisfactory” as he rested “comfortably.” By April 12-13, the *Times* clarified Forrestal’s condition with the official diagnosis of “occupational-” or “operational fatigue.” Aware that the connection of this condition to that of shell shock experienced by soldiers in combat zones, the *Times* reassured its readers that, “fortunately...the outlook for recovery from operational fatigue is excellent.”¹⁹

On April 17, the *Times* updated Forrestal’s condition and again expressed confidence that the former Secretary of Defense enjoyed nearly restored health. Quoting Captain B.W. Hogan, the executive officer at Bethesda, the *Times* assured the public that Forrestal “would not suffer any ‘turns for the worse.’” Four days later, the Associated Press wire also reported him “Improving.” On April 24, this prognosis received yet more backing, as President Truman visited Forrestal at the medical center. Following the visit, Truman offered his unprofessional—but socially important, because it was presidential—opinion that Forrestal was “recovering.” Four days later, Forrestal’s successor—and, some pundits believed, the politico most directly responsible for Forrestal’s ouster—Louis A. Johnson visited and later voiced the most positive outlook yet. Johnson confidently predicted that Forrestal’s full recovery and release from doctors’ care by mid-May. It was not until mid-May, the 18th, that the *Times* next updated the public on Forrestal’s status, relaying the positive news of Forrestal’s regaining 12 of the 25 pounds he had lost at the onset of his illness. Four days later, he was dead.²⁰

¹⁹ “Medical Check-Up for Forrestal,” *New York Times*, 6 April 1949, p. 31; “Forrestal Is Treated...”; “Forrestal Tests Go On,” *New York Times*, 9 April 1949, p. 19; “Forrestal Rests...”; “Forrestal Reported In State of Fatigue,” *New York Times*, 12 April 1949, p. 31; “The Patient At Bethesda,” *New York Times*, 13 April 1949, p. 28.

²⁰ “Forrestal Still Gaining”; “Forrestal Improving”; “Truman Visits...”; “Forrestal ‘Looks Fine’”; “Forrestal Gains 12 Pounds”; “Forrestal a Suicide...”.

Certainly this shocked reporters as thoroughly as it did the American public. Indeed, virtually every article detailing Forrestal's death employed rhetoric of "surprise" in its descriptions and explanations of the event. For the *Times* and as a purely journalistic device, this helped make the story shocking, poignant, or even titillating to the public. Unintentionally, this rhetoric also served the stab-in-the-back mythology that soon developed in the wake of Forrestal's death. Even the *Times*' initial report of Forrestal's suicide reminded readers that Forrestal "had shown improvement," and that Secretary of Defense Johnson—ostensibly a trusted government official—had just recently "announced that he was recovering rapidly and would be a completely restored man." Further demonstrating the sudden and unexpected nature of Forrestal's death, the *Times* reported that his wife had only a few days prior traveled to France in search of a suitable location for her husband's continued rest and relaxation following his imminent release from Bethesda Naval Medical Center. Walter Waggoner's more detailed account bore the provocative headline: "Had Seemed to Be Improving in the Naval Hospital—Admiral Orders Inquiry." As to the first of these elements, Waggoner quoted hospital officials regarding Forrestal's positive prognosis in the weeks leading up to the suicide. Regarding the second component of the headline, Waggoner reported that due to the unexpected turn of events Rear Admiral Morton D. Willcutts, director of the National Naval Medical Center, convened an official inquiry into Forrestal's care at Bethesda.²¹

According to the May 24 *Times*, Forrestal's chief psychiatrist, George M. Raines, diagnosed the secretary with depression. Raines confirmed that his patient showed considerable improvement in the weeks preceding his death—so much so that Raines determined he could relax some of the restrictions on Forrestal's daily routine and that Raines himself might travel outside

²¹ "Forrestal a Suicide..."; "Mrs. Forrestal and Son Are Flying From Paris," *New York Times*, 23 May 1949, p. 2; Waggoner, "Forrestal Killed...".

the city for a few days. In the doctor's absence, Forrestal committed suicide "during a fit of despondency 'extremely common' to the severe type of mental depression he suffered," but which the *Times* had never before reported to the public. Even so, Raines reiterated that neither he nor anyone else at the hospital expected this dramatic turn of events; they had all seen encouraging signs of Forrestal's recovery.²²

For those who see Forrestal as a hero betrayed by an external foe, as one stabbed-in-the-back by someone or something, the apparent inconsistencies in these public accounts raise serious questions about the validity of the "official story" of Forrestal's suicide. Conspiracists, like Simpson, point to the jarring nature of the suicide as lacking logical sense. They base this claim almost entirely on the low levels of public awareness of Forrestal's condition, treatment, and prognosis (although, taken at their word, Forrestal's doctors themselves believed his condition warranted a positive prognosis even if, in the end, it proved inaccurate). In the use of Forrestal as sort of spy novel hero, conspiracists "debunk" ambiguities or seeming inconsistencies in the "official" story behind his treatment and death. They seize upon the public statements of Forrestal's chief caregiver, George M. Raines, and wonder why the hospital housed an allegedly suicidal patient in a sixteen-story tower, and why Raines left Forrestal increasingly unattended during a period that Raines admitted offered both the best chance for Forrestal's recovery and the biggest risk of relapse. They argue that traditional accounts, especially scholarly literature, unsatisfactorily answers of these questions, especially since neither Rogow nor Hoopes or Brinkley enjoyed access to two key evidentiary sources in constructing their narratives: Forrestal's unadulterated diaries, and the Navy's Willcutts Report. Conspiracists have

²² "Forrestal's Leap Laid to Depression," *New York Times*, 24 May 1949, p. 10.

long used the absence of these documents as proof of some manner of un-American cover-up, with Forrestal the immediate casualty—but with the American public as the lasting victim.

This is not to say that all Forrestal conspiracies share a single perspective. Interestingly, these particular conspiracy theories arise from precisely the same latent causes—ambiguity in press coverage and public awareness, incubated in a particular Cold War, anticommunist environment, and steeped in the rhetoric of authentic American heroism—but spiral outward toward vastly different conclusions. A brief examination of contemporary Forrestal conspiracies perpetuated by the Internet demonstrates the malleability of this archetype. The public-source Wikipedia article on James V. Forrestal acts as a clearinghouse for Forrestal conspiracies, with an entire subsection of the article devoted to these myths. As much text in the article details his death and its legacy as covers Forrestal’s career in public service, itself an indication of the degree to which these suppositions endure. Wikipedia’s entry considers the so-called Zionist conspiracy as the most plausible alternative explanation for Forrestal’s death. This stems from interpretations of Forrestal’s anti-recognition stance toward Israel—which some critics label anti-Semitism, although this seems by all reputable accounts a drastic overstatement. Thus, either Zionists within the United States, or more insidious still, assassins from the Irgun, targeted Forrestal for liquidation. The latter part of this theory gained traction in 2006 with the publication of an article in the *London Times* (Online) by Peter Day, purportedly exposing an Irgun assassination attempt on an anti-Zionist official in Great Britain in 1946.²³

Perhaps the World Wide Web’s most dogged proponent of an alternative Forrestal narrative is “DC Dave” David Martin (www.dcdave.com). Self-styled as a poet, economist, and

²³ “James Forrestal,” *Wikipedia*, Accessed 29 June 2008 at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Forrestal; “DC Dave” Martin, “Who Killed James Forrestal?” and related links, 10 November 2002 – 29 April 2008, Accessed on 29 June 2008 at <http://www.dcdave.com/article4/021110.html>.

political commentator, Martin self-publishes various articles on the illegitimacy of the “official” story. His website exemplifies the complexity of conspiracy mythmaking, as all new evidence is collaborated into existing webs of information which point to a more sensational explanation for Forrestal’s death. Martin successfully petitioned the U.S. Navy, via the Freedom of Information Act, to release the Willcutts Report in 2004. Instead of using its findings as the Navy did, to exonerate those in command of Forrestal’s care of significant wrongdoing leading to his death, Martin pulls a variety of quotes to suggest that Forrestal’s doctors did not consider him “insane.” Even so, rather than using them to perpetuate the “surprise” element of Forrestal’s suicide, Martin deploys these statements in a contradictory way. While the doctors were presumably wrong in detaining Forrestal for hospitalization in the first place, here their judgment appears as infallible—if the doctors did not think Forrestal would commit suicide, surely he did not and was instead murdered. Similarly, Martin points to contemporary press accounts of “scuffs” or “scuff marks” on either the building’s exterior or the sill of the kitchen window as signs of a struggle, like the “broken glass” that was reported in Forrestal’s room but removed by the time a picture— included in the Willcutts Report—of the scene was taken a few hours later. Yet, nothing in the room or in the kitchen bore signs of a failed hanging, leaving unexplained the knotted sash around Forrestal’s neck, so tightly tied that it had to be cut to be removed from the corpse. Here, the conspiracist’s question is, if so tightly tied around the neck, how could it slip from its mooring in the kitchen without disturbing something? While Occam’s Razor suggests attributing these seeming inconsistencies to innocent mistakes in the rush to publish the first facts of Forrestal’s death, or of the tragic misdiagnosis of Forrestal by fallible medical professionals,

Martin coalesces them to prove there is, as the old conspiracist's bromide maintains, "more to the story."²⁴

For some conspiracy myths, the "more" is a Zionist assassination attempt; for others it is the suggestion that the U.S. government murdered Forrestal to prevent his publicizing of evidence evidence that President Roosevelt withheld knowledge of the Japanese plan to attack Pearl Harbor prior to World War II. Still other conspiracists argue that Forrestal's intimate knowledge—as Secretary of Defense—of alien landings and UFO technology led to his assassination by the government he faithfully served. Yet another theory asserts that the CIA executed Forrestal during experiments in mind-control, along the lines of the MK-ULTRA program. After all, CIA biochemist Frank Olson died in 1953 following a fall from the window of his New York City hotel room—located, like Forrestal's hospital room, sixteen stories up.²⁵ And, in perhaps the ultimate pop acculturation of this conspiracy mythology, contemporary composer Evan Hause links Olson and Forrestal (along with Philo Farnsworth) in the macabre operatic "defenestration trilogy."²⁶

Ironically, even Hause's opera on Forrestal's defenestration would raise the ire of conspiracist Dave Martin. Titled "Nightingale," Hause's opera recalls the long-standing belief that Forrestal copied lines from Sophocles' "Chorus from Ajax" in a sort of substitute suicide

²⁴ Martin, <http://www.dcdave.com>.

²⁵ Some sources say it was merely ten stories, and it is unclear if the sixteenth-story element is a critical component in linking the deaths of Olson and Forrestal or merely a titillating coincidence happily perpetuated by some conspiracists.

²⁶ Joan d'Arc, "The Skeleton in Uncle Sam's Closet," *Paranoia Magazine*, Accessed on 24 March 2006 at <http://www.paranoiamagazine.com/skeleton.html>; Richard M. Dolan, "The Death of James Forrestal," 2001, Accessed on 24 March 2006 at <http://www.keyholepublishing.com/Death%20of%20James%20Forrestal%20.htm>; H.P. Albarelli, Jr. and John F. Kelly, "Mid-century deaths all linked to CIA?" *World Net Daily*, 2 September 2001, Accessed on 24 March 2006 at http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=24305; Evan Hause, "The Defenestration Trilogy," Accessed on 28 June 2008 at <http://www.hausemusic.com/Conservatory/PressReleases/Defenestration.html>.

note. Hoopes and Brinkley suggest that Forrestal stopped after writing the word “nightingale,” which perhaps sparked recognition of a similarly named secret military program dealing with amnesty for the WWII Ukrainian death squads and for which Forrestal bore responsibility as Secretary of Defense. While Martin’s conspiracy theory long centered around apparent inconsistencies between the copied text of the poem and other, confirmed samples of Forrestal’s handwriting, columnist Hugh Turley added in December 2007 that the stanza stopped well short of the lines referencing a nightingale. Here again one sees the social construction of conspiracy mythology that replaces confirmed knowledge in an environment of anticommunist hysteria and ambiguous public awareness—even the *Washington Post*, as Martin and Turley both chide, continued reporting the “nightingale” connection as recently as on the fiftieth anniversary of Forrestal’s death.²⁷

Like Simpson’s original conspiracy theory—which also criticizes the “official” attribution of the poem as a suicide note, instead of as the first piece of an elaborate cover-up—these more current examples also cite the seizure and redaction of Forrestal’s private diaries as evidence of government betrayal of the legitimate American hero Forrestal. According to some, including Simpson, the diaries documented Forrestal’s staunch and unwavering anticommunism, while for others they may have held the “truth” about his anti-Zionism, his knowledge of UFOs, or other grand secrets. Viking Press published Forrestal’s diaries in a single volume in 1951, but its editor, Walter Millis, admitted to his own redactions atop those made by the government for reasons of national security. Naturally, Simpson and his more contemporary kin attack Millis for a heavy editorial hand; Simpson, not ironically, uses the same red-baiting rhetoric employed by Joseph McCarthy during the hey-day of anticommunist politics, pondering what exactly Millis

²⁷ Martin, <http://www.dcdave.com>; Hugh Turley, “Hugh’s News: Handwriting tells dark tale?,” *Hyattsville Life and Times* 4, no. 12 (December 2007): 3, 15.

whitewashed in Forrestal's private writings. Although, as Hoopes and Brinkley point out, even the unpublished sections of this collection are available for public consumption at Princeton's Seeley Mudd Library, conspiracists continue unabated the attacks on the legitimacy of Millis's edition of the Forrestal diary as an authentic, scholarly source. Similarly, the release of the Willcutts Report in 2004 would seem to undermine its absence from the historical record as de facto proof of a government cover-up. Instead, its publication offers even more fodder for committed conspiracists.²⁸

While this exploration demonstrates the social construction of an archetypal anticommunist hero through the various eulogies of James V. Forrestal, responsible scholarship must emphasize that the scholarly interpretation of Forrestal's death faces no substantive threat to its credibility. The simplest, best evidenced, and most rational explanation remains that Forrestal suffered a mental break-down and committed suicide on May 22, 1949. His doctors explain the inconsistencies in his prognosis as relatively common in dealing with diseases of the mind, and Raines himself testified to both the inquiry and the general public that Forrestal had entered a crucial cross-roads period in his recovery. Apparent contradictions in the reporting of the events and immediate aftermath of Forrestal's death are easily dismissed by noting the general inaccuracy of eye-witness accounts, and the relatively common misreporting of specific details in the press's rush to "scoop" a story. These elements are neither uncommon nor insidious. More vexing is the government's handling of the Willcutts Report, withheld until 2004 and only released pursuant to a FOIA request. Nevertheless, the government's seizure and redaction of Forrestal's diary during an era of such heightened national security seems perfectly

²⁸ Simpson, *The Death of James Forrestal*, 80-92; James Forrestal, *The Forrestal Diaries*, ed. Walter Millis (New York: Viking Press, 1951), ix-xiii; Hoopes and Brinkley, *Driven Patriot*, 483; Dave Martin, <http://www.dcdave.com>.

reasonable. Ultimately, the divergence of the hero mythology from standard to alternative interpretations of Forrestal's death reflects a process of social construction of an anticommunist hero during, and even after, a unique public debate over the legitimacy and authenticity of certain American ideals. It should be unsurprising that the nation's anticommunist era touched even the public's understanding of what constituted a proper American hero.

Two conclusions emerge from this discussion. First, the role of the press should not be underestimated. In her examination of James Forrestal's role in cultivating an "anticommunist consensus" within the U.S. press establishment, scholar Karen M. Russell finds rather damning evidence that the press—to include the *Times*—withheld first-hand knowledge that Forrestal's performance during his final weeks in office bordered on the incompetent. Hoopes and Brinkley recorded what Forrestal's doctors discussed privately—an inability to make decisions or focus on tasks at hand, and increasingly paranoid delusions. Instead of serving their watchdog function to the public, Russell argues, the press kept quiet in order to preserve the positive public image of one of the nation's chief anticommunists. Rogow presupposes this view in explaining the press's failure to report adequately the seriousness of Forrestal's condition, adding also that the press and public alike shared a great deal of ignorance about mental illness during this era. A negative stigmatization of psychological trauma, in an era of dogmatic anticommunism, meant the press felt an intuitive need to protect Forrestal from the consequences of public knowledge of his true condition.²⁹

Secondly, if the previous pages explain the how, this explains why the press and the public needed a heroic eulogy to legitimize James Forrestal's death. To avoid tarnishing his legacy of committed public service—especially in the dangerous Cold War world in which

²⁹ Russell, "Building an Anticommunist Consensus"; Rogow, *James Forrestal*, ix-xv, 1-48, 344-51.

Forrestal died—the press offered and the public consumed more cautious terminology and more positive prognoses than were accurate. The propagation of “fatigue” was, to Rogow, “misleading [and] dangerous.” He provocatively asserts that Forrestal’s public status delayed his diagnosis and treatment and necessitated his isolation in a sixteenth-floor ward rather than one specifically designed for care of the mentally ill or those with suicidal ideations. Rather than any conspiracy of assassins, Rogow writes that Forrestal fell victim to “the peculiar mythology of official Washington, a mythology which...reaches not only into the Pentagon but into all the departments and agencies of the government. The essence of this mythology...is the denial that any Very Important Person can become mentally ill while in office.” Writing in 1963, Rogow predicted Brinkley and Hoopes’ recognition of “enduring suppositions” by concluding: “Certainly it can be argued that there would have been fewer rumors, fewer distortions, fewer half-truths and outright falsehoods, had the official mythology yielded for once to reality.”³⁰

This battle exists even within standard, scholarly interpretations of Forrestal’s death. Mary Akashah and Donald Tennant thoroughly critique Rogow in their 1980 article, “Madness and Politics,” offering “alternative” explanations for many of Rogow’s psychohistorical assertions. Where Rogow attributes Forrestal’s severe weight loss (25 pounds) to a physical manifestation of a psychological disorder, Akashah and Tennant note this could simply indicate an undiagnosed stomach ailment of which Forrestal had complained and was otherwise unrelated to any psychological cause. Rogow’s noting of Forrestal’s increasingly common head-scratching is, to Akashah and Tennant, merely a “long-standing habit”—not a “nervous habit” as identified by Rogow. Although this may appear as a mere parsing of words, it is clearly the attempt of

³⁰ Rogow, *James Forrestal*, xii-xiii, 351.

Akashah and Tennant to redeem Forrestal's historical legacy from the stigmatized realm of psychohistory, if not to redeem Forrestal from the stigma of psychological illness itself.³¹

As Paul Roazen notes in his exploration of the theory of "as if" (borderline symptomology) in politics—and Roazen subscribes to Rogow's conclusion that Forrestal committed suicide attributable to severe depression—Forrestal's role as an anticommunist likely contributed to his mental stress. While Roazen argues that all politicians maintain a gap between the "inner" self and the public, political "outer" persona, this separation was in Forrestal much wider than normal. Such severe separation might alleviate the tensions of a public life fraught with significance—such as being a chief anticommunist during the onset of the Cold War—but it ultimately rendered Forrestal unable to cope with the loss of his public persona. Roazen theorizes that "to some extent success in politics requires...the acceptance of one's identity as defined by one's political position." For Forrestal, this involved a role as public servant and, more critically, as one of the nation's foremost anticommunists; it was a role he could not replace.³²

Moreover, this theory holds utility for explaining why they public needed a heroic eulogy for Forrestal, despite the seeming ignominy of death by suicide. Indeed, Forrestal's role as a public anticommunist likely affected how the press and public each interpreted and accepted—or reconciled to their expectations—the circumstances of his death. K. A. Cuordileone explores the Cold War political culture as a "crisis in American masculinity," and, perhaps not ironically, begins the study in 1949. Noting that the "polarization of images" in the anticommunist culture produced "a premium on hard masculine toughness and rendered anything less than that soft and

³¹ Mary Akashah and Donald Tennant, "Madness and Politics: The Case of James Forrestal," *Proceedings of the Oklahoma Academy of Science* 60 (1980): 89-92, Accessed on 24 June 2008 at <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/oas>.

³² Paul Roazen, "As If and Politics," *Political Psychology* 4, no. 4 (December 1983): 685-92.

feminine, and, as such, a real or potential threat to the security of the nation,” one may see the dilemma Forrestal’s death presented to the press and the public. On the one hand, society may have stigmatized Forrestal’s mental condition as weakness—not illness—and thus dismissed it as a legitimate or authentic downfall for a true American hero. On the other, attributing the condition instead to a form of battle fatigue rooted the mortal wound in the rhetoric of anticommunism—or, the Cold *War*—and allowed for the reconciliation of Forrestal’s anticommunism with his suicide, seen here as a soldier’s death in battle.³³

Many in the press and the public likely feared that, if they publicized it, the Soviet Union would propagandize Forrestal’s illness into anti-Americanism. As the *Times* and other accounts record, however, not even the public eulogy of Forrestal as a soldier with battle fatigue prevented the “indispensable enemy”³⁴ from using the story for their own purposes. In one cartoon cited by the *Times*, Forrestal appeared in a straight-jacket while formulating anticommunist policy at his Washington desk. Another sardonically memorialized Forrestal as an “active organizer and first victim of war psychosis, on [this] the day of the fifth anniversary of his atomic, hysterical leap.”³⁵

Finally, one must consider why there remain so many enduring suppositions referenced by Hoopes and Brinkley, and why, as Rogow recognized, rumors, distortions, half-truths and outright falsehoods so quickly proliferated after Forrestal’s death. Two elements seem critical

³³ K. A. Cuordileone, “‘Politics in an Age of Anxiety’: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960,” *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (September 2000): 516 (quote), 515-22.

³⁴ This terminology (see: Howard F. Stein, “The Indispensable Enemy and American-Soviet Relations,” *Ethos* 17, no 4 (December 1989)) furthers the conception of domestic American anticommunism as a fundamentally Manichean exercise; Stein describes the relationship as a cultural pair, even arguing that the “image of the enemy” is “one of every group’s most treasured possessions.” (Quotes, 480, 483.)

³⁵ Quoted from *Krokidil* in “Forrestal Cartoon is Protested by U.S.,” *New York Times*, 18 June 1954, p. 6; “Contempt for U.S. Stressed in Soviet [Press],” *New York Times*, 1 January 1951, p. 7; Rogow, *James Forrestal*, 344-51.

here. First, these originated in an environment of espionage and investigation, of fifth columns and fellow travelers and boring-from-within, and of—in Senator Joseph McCarthy’s case—the most hysterical of red scare hysteria. Secondly, the public reconciles ambiguous levels of knowledge with elements of its socio-cultural surroundings. Here it may be instructive to consider the description by Mulford Q. Sibley in 1966 of a so-called “professional” patriot: “More often than not, he has a conspiratorial view of history, associates patriotism with the waging of war, and concentrates his ideological attack on a central enemy. In modern American life, that foe is communism, the crusade against which is often used to condemn any basic social change.” Such a person is a “talker” of patriotism, with an “outlook...of negatives,” who “sees devils everywhere.” One might be excused for seeing in these descriptions the images of several of the conspiracists mentioned in this study.³⁶

Certainly, there are unanswered questions, as there are with virtually any episode in history. Equally certain, the government’s actions in withholding first the diary and then the Willcutts Report unwittingly contributed to the creation and expansion of enduring suppositions regarding Forrestal’s death. These suppositions coexist, with more standard interpretations of his death, each representing hero archetypes influenced by the broader narrative of domestic American anticommunist culture. The debate will likely continue unabated, thanks in no small part to the ease with which anyone with an opinion and access may publish information to a blog, a webpage, or a Wikipedia article. Perhaps this is ultimately a manifestation of reaction against an anticommunist-era’s insistence on uniform standards of legitimacy and authenticity. That is a question lying outside the parameters of historical inquiry. Nevertheless, both standard and alternative explanations perpetuate—and Forrestal’s legacy even today exists as an artifact

³⁶ Mulford Q. Sibley, “Ethics and the Professional Patriots,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 363, Ethics in America: Norms and Deviations (January 1966): 126, 129.

of—an anticommunist era debate about the nature and legitimacy of an anticommunist, Cold War hero.