

# Advertising, the Red Scare, and the Blacklist: BBDO, US Steel, and *Theatre Guild on the Air*, 1945–1952

by CYNTHIA B. MEYERS

**Abstract:** Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn, the top “institutional” (or corporate image) advertising agency of the 1940s, oversaw the drama-anthology radio program *Theatre Guild on the Air* (1945–1953) for US Steel to improve its client’s public image at a time of labor strikes and antitrust actions. Drawing on archival sources, I integrate analysis of institutional advertising strategies, particularly the need for tight associations between sponsors and programs, into a reconsideration of the struggle over casting control—or blacklisting—on *Theatre Guild on the Air* during the postwar Red Scare.

In 1945, *Theatre Guild on the Air* (ABC, 1945–1949; NBC, 1949–1953), a radio drama anthology sponsored by the US Steel Corporation and produced by the Theatre Guild, began regular broadcasts on ABC. In 1952, an executive at the advertising agency Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn (BBDO) demanded that its client, US Steel, allow the agency to approve the program’s cast.<sup>1</sup> Although at first US Steel resisted, having granted nearly complete production control to the Theatre Guild, BBDO soon prevailed, exercising a type of blacklisting that persisted as the program moved to television. BBDO also managed to change the program title, from *Theatre Guild on the Air* to *The United States Steel Hour* (ABC, 1953–1955; CBS, 1955–1963), to ensure that the sponsor, not the Theatre Guild, would benefit from the audience’s favor.

The blacklisting era in the entertainment industry during the post–World War II Red Scare has been well documented, especially from the standpoint of its victims.<sup>2</sup> Although blacklisting affected thousands of workers in government agencies,

1 Ben Duffy to J. Carlisle MacDonald, July 3, 1952, box 81, US Steel folder, Bruce Barton Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter WHS), Madison (hereafter papers from this box are cited as 81/USS/BB).

2 An earlier Red Scare (1918–1920) followed World War I. Memoirs by victims include John Henry Faulk, *Fear on Trial* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964); and Lillian Hellman, *Scoundrel Time* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976).

---

*Cynthia B. Meyers is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at the College of Mount Saint Vincent, Bronx, New York. She holds a PhD in radio, TV, and film from the University of Texas at Austin and is author of A Word from Our Sponsor: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).*

unions, educational institutions, and other nonentertainment fields, the sufferings of blacklisted actors and writers, as Thomas Doherty has pointed out, dominate popular memory of the era.<sup>3</sup> The rationales of their persecutors are less well remembered. Among the chief of these were the advertising agencies that at the time produced or oversaw most broadcast programs, writing the scripts and selecting the casts. From the late 1920s until the late 1950s, most commercial broadcasting was financed by sponsors, who bought an hour, half hour, or quarter hour of airtime from a network and filled that airtime with a program that the sponsor or its advertising agencies selected or created. Sponsor program control, exercised through their advertising agencies, was the industry norm.

Despite their importance as program producers, the advertising agencies' role in blacklisting, when it is noticed at all, is often assumed to have been shaped by directives from clients, the sponsors.<sup>4</sup> In the example I explore here, the blacklisting impulse came from the ad agency. BBDO insisted that US Steel institute blacklisting on its program, not the other way around; in fact, US Steel resisted at first. Why might the agency have cared so much?<sup>5</sup> To answer this question, we must consider the beliefs about advertising strategies that shaped agency-produced programming.<sup>6</sup> Radio advertising practices were based on creating a tight association between advertiser and program, and, by extension, between advertiser and entertainer. Ad agencies designed programs to promote a single product with the goal of creating a strong "sponsor identification" in the minds of audiences. Since radio's inception, "institutional advertising" (or corporate image advertising), which associated a company with values such as progress, innovation, and Americanism, had been considered a more appropriate use of the public airwaves than hectoring hard-sell commercial messages.<sup>7</sup> The belief in such advertising strategies made broadcast blacklisting seem urgently necessary to agencies like BBDO, which, just as they exploited good associations, sought to avoid bad ones for their clients. And this belief had important consequences for broadcast history.

By the mid-1960s, sponsor-controlled programming, with its integrated sponsor identification, had been largely replaced by network-controlled programming interrupted by textually distinct commercials from various advertisers. Economic pressures, especially the higher costs of television production, were primarily responsible for this shift; other factors, such as the 1958 "quiz show scandal," which

3 Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 20.

4 For example, see Christopher Sterling and John Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A Concise History of American Broadcasting* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1978), 307. Erik Barnouw argues that networks had relinquished program control to advertising agencies, who took orders from sponsors, who claimed responsibility to stockholders. *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, 1933–53* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 2:282.

5 In considering this event, I use a different analytical frame from that of William L. Bird, *"Better Living": Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935–55* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 188–195.

6 For an in-depth analysis, see Cynthia B. Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsor: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

7 Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 192.

undermined audience trust, and the shift to telefilm production, which removed many of the risks of live programming, also helped solidify network program control.<sup>8</sup> However, my example here points to another factor: I suggest that, in highlighting the dangers of tight associations between advertisers and entertainment, the postwar Red Scare and controversy over blacklisting also contributed to the long-term decline of sponsorship. Sponsors and their agencies, having labored to create positive identifications between programs and their corporate image, faced accusations from anticommunists that instead of promoting American values, they were undermining those values by employing certain actors and writers. This negative outcome, coupled with the headaches of adjudicating the political acceptability of talent, undermined the governing assumptions in regard to the value of sponsor identification.

What follows, then, is a case study that integrates institutional advertising into the history of the blacklisting era in broadcasting. I begin with overviews of BBDO, an advertising agency specializing in corporate image advertising; US Steel, a massive industrial combine facing government regulatory action and labor strife; and the Theatre Guild, a prestigious New York theater group. I explain how they came together to collaborate on *Theatre Guild on the Air* as a vehicle to improve US Steel's public image. Then I briefly sketch key elements of the post-World War II Red Scare and blacklisting in the broadcasting industry. Against this background, I examine archival material from BBDO founder Bruce Barton's papers deposited at the Wisconsin Historical Society: letters and memos by BBDO and US Steel executives that document the tensions among BBDO, US Steel, and the Theatre Guild between 1945 and 1952 as they responded to political pressures from anticommunist activists. I cross-reference these fragmentary sources with contemporaneous materials, including anticommunist newsletters, trade magazines, and program scripts and recordings, with the goal of integrating the advertising industry and its strategies into our understanding of the blacklisting era and, in the longer term, the evolution of the broadcasting industry.

**Institutional Advertising, BBDO, and Radio.** Institutional (or corporate image) advertising aimed to burnish a company's image rather than sell products. From the 1920s through the 1950s, institutional advertising strategies included both "hard sell" and "soft sell" advertising strategies. Hard-sell advertising can be identified by its didactic, product-centered, rational appeals; the use of repetitive "reasons why" to buy were designed to convince dull-witted consumers. Soft-sell advertising is identified instead by the employment of user-centered emotional appeals, the making of positive associations, and the use of humor to attract and disarm discerning

8 The "quiz show scandal," memorialized in the 1994 Robert Redford film *Quiz Show*, refers to the 1958 revelations that television quiz shows were rigged, the contestants having been coached by producers, which resulted in congressional hearings in 1959 and much debate over sponsors' program control. For more on the scandal, see William Boddy, "The Seven Dwarves and the Money Grubbers," in *The Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 98–116. For more on the overall shifts in the television industry, see William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); and Michael Mashon, "NBC, J. Walter Thompson, and the Evolution of Prime-Time Television Programming and Sponsorship, 1946–58" (PhD diss., University of Maryland–College Park, 1996).

consumers.<sup>9</sup> Institutional advertising instructed consumers, like hard-sell advertising, yet relied heavily on the emotional appeals and positive associations found in soft-sell advertising. In the 1920s, as Roland Marchand explains, many large firms first turned to institutional advertising to “humanize” themselves, hoping to create a “corporate soul” and build a form of “social legitimacy.”<sup>10</sup> As Anna McCarthy notes, the “institutional” in institutional advertising reflected “the modern firm’s increasing interest in defining itself as an establishment on a par with church, state, and family.”<sup>11</sup> Such advertising was especially favored by large publicly owned corporations such as General Electric, General Motors, Ford, DuPont, US Steel, and Standard Oil, which were threatened by antitrust actions, government regulation, labor conflict, and populist resentment of “big business.” Their institutional advertising campaigns overlapped with various other public relations efforts: worker education and corporate welfare, industrial films, world’s fairs, and arts sponsorship.<sup>12</sup> The overall goal of such advertising was fundamentally political. William L. Bird argues that the use of institutional advertising in the 1930s was part of a battle strategy to attack the New Deal through a “new vocabulary of business leadership.”<sup>13</sup> McCarthy similarly argues that much Cold War-era institutional advertising was part of an effort to build a postwar liberal consensus.<sup>14</sup> Institutional advertising often represented advertisers’ notions of citizenship norms, the relations among markets and governments, and the roles of elites in society. As McCarthy puts it, institutional advertising was “a kind of indirect political speech that sought to locate corporate interests on a moral plane that transcended the market, rendering them equivalent to a public good.”<sup>15</sup>

Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn was the top institutional advertising specialist from the 1920s through the 1940s. Marchand suggests that its leader, Bruce Barton, was the “forger of institutional souls.”<sup>16</sup> Barton is remembered as the author of the 1925 best seller *The Man Nobody Knows*, a controversial book that depicts Jesus as in many ways a modern businessman.<sup>17</sup> Barton attempted to elevate everyday business practice into a high vocation, a form of “service” to “human progress.”<sup>18</sup>

9 For example, a hard-sell soap ad may list the soap’s product attributes (“easy on the hands”), whereas a soft-sell soap ad may refer to a user’s emotional needs (“skin you love to touch”). Stephen Fox argues that hard sell and soft sell alternated dominance decade by decade in *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and Its Creators* (New York: William Morrow, 1984).

10 *Ibid.*, 167, 170, 9.

11 Anna McCarthy, *The Citizen Machine: Governing by Television in 1950s America* (New York: New Press, 2010), 32.

12 For more on industrial films, see Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Useful Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and Gregory Waller, “Free Talking Picture,” in *Going to the Movies*, ed. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 248–272.

13 Bird, “*Better Living*.”

14 McCarthy, *Citizen Machine*, 1–30.

15 *Ibid.*, 32.

16 Marchand, *Corporate Soul*, 134.

17 Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925). See Leo Ribuffo, “Jesus Christ as Business Statesman,” *American Quarterly* 33 (1981): 206–231; Warren Susman, *Culture as History* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 122–149.

18 Bruce Barton, “Advertising as an Incentive to Human Progress,” *Advertising & Selling Fortnightly*, November 4, 1925, 25, 74–75.

Barton believed that a company's economic power needed to be aligned with its "social obligations" in order to build its "moral legitimacy."<sup>19</sup> Barton's award-winning copywriting skill is evident in a 1926 institutional advertisement for General Electric promoting not a GE product but electricity in general. Above an illustration of an aproned woman bending over a hand-cranked washer, laboring to do her family's laundry, a headline claims, "Any woman who does anything which a little electric motor can do is working for 3 cents an hour!"<sup>20</sup> Appealing to consumers concerned about the costs of using electrical appliances, the ad argues not only that electricity could free housewives from the burdens of manual labor but also that *not* using electrical appliances is a form of exploitation. Electricity consumption, then, is not a selfish act but a socially progressive one.

Institutional advertisers embraced radio in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Broadcasters and advertisers, and agencies like BBDO, feared that direct product advertising on radio would alienate audiences, whereas they regarded institutional advertising as perfectly adapted to the medium.<sup>21</sup> Network radio provided institutional advertisers with national reach and access to private domestic sites of reception. On radio, institutional advertisers could engage in friendly, personalized modes of address to its invisible audiences, thus building positive associations in ways the impersonal medium of print could not. And advertisers could employ national stars of stage, music, and screen to associate with their firms the culture they thus made available to mass audiences. The prestige and cultural legitimacy of classical music attracted many sponsors, and networks encouraged such sponsorship to elevate radio into a medium of cultural uplift. Sponsors limited their advertising to the program title and, oftentimes, opening and closing statements delivered by dignified announcers, as in *Cadillac Symphony Orchestra* (NBC, 1933–1935), *Cities Service Concerts* (NBC, 1927–1956), and *The Voice of Firestone* (NBC, 1928–1954; ABC, 1954–1963).<sup>22</sup>

BBDO was one of the first advertising agencies to produce programs for radio; an early program was an institutional advertising campaign for a radio manufacturer, *The Atwater Kent Hour* (NBC, 1926–1931; CBS, 1931–1934), featuring stars of the Metropolitan Opera. Although BBDO went on to produce programs designed to sell products, such as *The Lucky Strike Program* with Jack Benny (CBS, 1949–1955), it specialized in institutional radio programming.<sup>23</sup> For the General Motors radio program *The Parade of the States* (NBC, 1931–1932), instead of selling cars, Barton wrote a "testimonial" with the purpose "to sell America to Americans by a weekly radio tour of each state."<sup>24</sup> For DuPont, the chemical and munitions company, BBDO produced the radio program *Cavalcade of America* (CBS, 1935–1939; NBC 1940–1953),

19 Marchand, *Corporate Soul*, 114, 136, 142.

20 Reproduced in BBDO *Newsletter*, February 1966, 34. BBDO *Newsletter* is courtesy of Information Resource Center, BBDO-NY.

21 Committee No. 2 Advertising and Publicity, *Proceedings of the Fourth National Radio Conference, and Recommendations for the Regulation of Radio* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1925), 10.

22 David Goodman, *Radio's Civic Ambition: American Broadcasting and Democracy in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 116–180.

23 BBDO *Newsletter*, 16–17.

24 Bird, "Better Living," 25–46.

which evolved into a television program (under various titles) until 1961. An anthology drama based on historical events, vetted by historians, written by well-known authors, and performed by stars, *Cavalcade*, claimed DuPont, “offers a new and absorbing approach to history, the incidents being re-enacted so as to emphasize the qualities of American character which have been responsible for the building of this country.”<sup>25</sup> The motivation for the radio program came from the political pressures DuPont faced in 1934, when it was called before the Nye Committee in the US Senate and investigated for inciting wars to sell munitions. As DuPont president Walter Carpenter later recalled, DuPont “undertook to find ways and means of dissipating the evil effects of this slander operation and in that connection instituted the ‘Cavalcade of America’ program on the radio.”<sup>26</sup>

**US Steel’s Need for Public Relations.** US Steel was similarly in need of healing public relations. The company was created in 1901 from a group of steel producers and suppliers in a deal overseen by financier J. P. Morgan, and it had image problems from its beginnings.<sup>27</sup> A descendant of Carnegie Steel, it continued Carnegie’s antiunion and strikebreaking tactics, helping destroy a steel union in part by red-baiting during a 1919 strike.<sup>28</sup> As the dominant American steel company, US Steel was repeatedly subject to governmental regulatory review. In 1911, the Department of Justice indicted US Steel for violating the Sherman Antitrust Act and moved to break it up; in 1920, the Supreme Court resolved the case in US Steel’s favor, finding that its market share had dropped. Still, US Steel faced future governmental actions and public hostility toward “big business.” According to one of its defenders in 1921, it had to convince the public that “the big company was not illegal, either technically or morally, and that, in fact, its influence on industry was beneficent.”<sup>29</sup>

US Steel approached the problem with a variety of strategies, drawing on progressive and corporate liberal ideals to position itself as a business concerned not just with profits but also with its role in society. To counter its well-known resistance to unionization, in its first decade US Steel instituted a number of corporate welfare programs, such as nurseries and employee housing.<sup>30</sup> It described its stockholder ownership structure as “an experiment in popular ownership, the ownership of industry by the worker.”<sup>31</sup> To address suspicions that it operated unfairly, US Steel pioneered the practice of revealing more than basic financial information in its annual reports. According to its chairman, Elbert Gary, it provided this “accurate account” in the belief that “the

25 DuPont press release, September 27, 1935, box 36, *Cavalcade* folder, Public Affairs Department, Accession 1410, DuPont Records, Hagley Museum and Library.

26 W. S. Carpenter Jr. to Crawford H. Greenewalt, November 10, 1960, box 4, accession 1814, Greenewalt Papers, DuPont Records, Hagley Museum and Library.

27 Kenneth Warren, *Big Steel: The First Century of the United States Steel Corporation, 1901–2001* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001).

28 David Brody, *Steelworkers in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

29 Arundel Cotter, *United States Steel: A Corporation with a Soul* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1921), v.

30 Marchand, *Corporate Soul*, 22.

31 Cotter, *United States Steel*, 7.

surest and wisest of all regulation is public opinion.”<sup>32</sup> Under Gary’s leadership, US Steel also established a “publicity bureau.” But during the 1920s, perhaps as a result of its victories in court and against unions, US Steel’s publicity efforts subsided.<sup>33</sup>

The challenges of the Great Depression and the New Deal, and of increased union activity, revived US Steel’s public relations efforts in the 1930s. Having solicited its business since 1930, in late 1935 Barton finally convinced its leaders to hire BBDO for print institutional advertising.<sup>34</sup> In 1936, US Steel hired J. Carlisle MacDonald to oversee its reorganized public relations department; chairman of the board Irving Olds defined the department’s purpose as the “creation and carrying out of broad policies which will be reflected in favorable public opinion.”<sup>35</sup> Those efforts included expanded corporate welfare programs, such as employee garden plots, a company magazine and industrial films that prominently featured US Steel workers, steel-mill open houses for local communities, and an institutional advertising campaign.<sup>36</sup>

Barton devised a “sympathetic consumer campaign to show how the corporation had contributed to the progress of the country.”<sup>37</sup> In a 1935 advertisement, a picture of a bearded Andrew Carnegie carries the headline “He came to a land of wooden towns and left a nation of steel” (Figure 1).<sup>38</sup> The “seven weeks of danger” of Carnegie’s own immigration trip from Scotland across the Atlantic in a wooden ship had become “a hundred hours of comfort in a floating steel hotel.” “Steel rails” now “joined New York and Pittsburgh,” and “automobiles of steel” traveled between cities. The “economic pains” of the Depression are dismissed as the “pains of adolescence.” “Will America ever be finished?” asks the ad. And it replies, “Never as long as American ingenuity begets ideas and American ambitions remain unsatisfied.” US Steel is thus associated with “American ingenuity” and its role in satisfying “American ambitions” confirmed.

The steel industry was at the forefront of the World War II effort. A few years before the war, in 1937, US Steel recognized the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), and by 1942 SWOC had been reorganized into the United Steel Workers of America. In the war economy, an unprecedented collaboration among industry, government, and labor evolved as industries shifted production to war matériel, the federal government imposed wage and price caps but guaranteed cost-plus returns, and unions agreed not to strike for the duration.<sup>39</sup> US Steel’s MacDonald urged other corporations to join not only in doing their best to win the war but also in letting the American people *know* they were doing so.<sup>40</sup> US Steel’s wartime advertising campaign

32 Douglas Fisher, *Steel Serves the Nation, 1901–1951* (New York: US Steel, 1951), 93.

33 Marchand, *Corporate Soul*, 43, 223.

34 *Ibid.*, 223.

35 Fisher, *Steel Serves the Nation*, 94.

36 Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 208, 216, 226, 227; Fisher, *Steel Serves the Nation*, 95–96.

37 BBDO *Newsletter*, 31.

38 Emphasis in original, reproduced in Julian Watkins, *The 100 Greatest Advertisements* (New York: Dover, 1949), 192.

39 John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976).

40 J. Carlisle MacDonald, *The Public Relations Job Ahead*, pamphlet, January 7, 1948, 5, quoted in Marchand, *Corporate Soul*, 357.



ANDREW CARNEGIE ..... Here are hundred years old

He came to a land of wooden towns  
and left a nation of steel

IN AN ATTEMPT to DuRocheville, Scotland, he was born on November 25th a hundred years ago—the son of a man and woman who later dared the great adventure of crossing the Atlantic to find opportunity.

They sailed across waters in a wooden ship and landed in a country of wooden towns.

From New York to Pittsburgh was another three weeks' journey, by the Erie Canal and the Lake to Cleveland, thence down a canal to Beaver, and up the Ohio River. Andrew was thirteen years old. Before he had reached middle age, steel mills had joined New York and Pittsburgh, and steel Pullmans rolled over them in ten hours. He lived to see automation of steel moved from city to city in a day.

Now airplanes, powered by gasoline explosive inside cylinders of steel, span the distance in a hundred minutes and the Atlantic crossing has changed from seven weeks of danger to a hundred hours of comfort in a floating steel band.

Great areas are the work of great steel. And great steel means health only when they are needed. When a country ceases to need them, it is no longer great. Andrew Carnegie became a master builder because America needed him and welcomed him.

Does our country no longer need great builders? Have we no frontiers left, as some would assert?

Andrew Carnegie, if he were alive, wants to the first to deny it, United States Steel, which carries forward the industry he helped to create, presses against any such amount of despair.

The economic pains we have had are the pains of adjustment—not the pains of old age. America is built, but men are changing of building a better.

These vital services of national life, the railroads, are to be rebuilt. New auto-routings, stronger, lighter—will lift the burden of dead weight from rolling stock and make transportation more economical and efficient.

Twenty-five million homes are to be rebuilt, and steel will be there to build chimneys and health within the walls—to lift the threat of fire that has wiped out whole communities, from country villages to cities as large as Chicago.

Twenty-five million automobiles are to be replaced with lighter, stronger, safer cars. Already thousands of miles of steel and concrete highways have been laid, and thousands more miles must be added.

Will America ever be finished? Never as long as American ingenuity fights itself and American will: times remain unattained.

The nation that Andrew Carnegie helped to build will be rebuilt and rebuilt again. Always with more and more steel.

AMERICAN ALUMINUM COMPANY • AMERICAN BRASS & COPPER COMPANY • AMERICAN IRON & STEEL COMPANY • AMERICAN STEEL & WIRE COMPANY  
AMERICAN STEEL CORP. • AMERICAN STEEL & WIRE COMPANY • AMERICAN STEEL & WIRE COMPANY • AMERICAN STEEL & WIRE COMPANY  
AMERICAN STEEL CORP. • AMERICAN STEEL & WIRE COMPANY • AMERICAN STEEL & WIRE COMPANY • AMERICAN STEEL & WIRE COMPANY  
AMERICAN STEEL CORP. • AMERICAN STEEL & WIRE COMPANY • AMERICAN STEEL & WIRE COMPANY • AMERICAN STEEL & WIRE COMPANY



Figure 1. BBDO advertisement for US Steel (*Saturday Evening Post*, November 30, 1935, 40–41).

included an ad with the headline “Feeding the War’s Hungriest Mouth.”<sup>41</sup> Explaining that building weapons to fight the Axis powers requires coal mines and limestone quarries to supply the steel mills, the ad asserts: “Steel is team play. Men, mines, mills, ships, trains are working day and night to keep our tonnage of war steel bigger than that of any Axis country. With the fighting help of this team, we can again meet requirements in 1945.”<sup>42</sup> US Steel’s representation of itself as part of a team would be a recurring motif: US Steel claimed to be not just building its own profits but also contributing to the welfare of the nation as a whole.

At the end of the war, the American steel industry, credited with helping win the war, dominated world steel production and appeared poised to expand; however, the wartime consensus among industry, labor, and government began to erode as old problems, such as overproduction and unemployment, reasserted themselves.<sup>43</sup> Seizing the immediate postwar moment of national solidarity, US Steel decided to increase its institutional advertising by becoming a radio sponsor, because it was “warmer and more penetrating than magazine advertising,” according to *Sponsor* magazine.<sup>44</sup> Chairman Olds explained that US Steel’s objective was to “bring to the public mind a better understanding of the affairs and policies of US Steel, and to increase the appreciation of the part played by US Steel and its subsidiary members in the nation’s economy.”<sup>45</sup>

41 Advertisement in *Syracuse (NY) Herald Journal*, March 9, 1945, 26.  
 42 Ibid.  
 43 Warren, *Big Steel*, 214; Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 13.  
 44 “Steel Melts the Public,” *Sponsor*, March 13, 1950, 51.  
 45 Quoted in Fisher, *Steel Serves the Nation*, 96.

A primary target of its institutional advertising was its employees. Radio, according to *Sponsor* magazine, serves as “an employee relations medium,” and a sponsored radio program could “build good morale” in ways that “law, unions, and management together” could not.<sup>46</sup> The first US Steel-sponsored episode of *Theatre Guild on the Air*, a radio adaptation of Robert Nichols and Maurice Browne’s 1928 play *Wings over Europe* featuring the actor Burgess Meredith, was broadcast in September 1945.

**The Theatre Guild and *Theatre Guild on the Air*.** The reason US Steel selected the Theatre Guild to produce its program was straightforward: US Steel sought to associate itself with the “foremost producer” of American drama and to earn the gratitude of audiences for providing them a theatrical education. This commitment to education perfectly aligned with the mission of the Theatre Guild itself. Founded in 1918 by a group frustrated by the formulaic quality of commercial theater, the Guild began in 1919 “to produce plays of artistic merit not ordinarily produced by the commercial managers.”<sup>47</sup> One Guild founder explained that the “function of our theatre is not only to entertain but to stimulate, not only to make you feel but also to make you think.”<sup>48</sup> To sidestep the pressures of selling tickets, the Guild established a subscriber base, which reached six thousand by 1921 and twenty-five thousand in 1934.<sup>49</sup> Believing that most Americans had not been exposed to “fine drama,” the Theatre Guild produced many foreign playwrights, such as George Bernard Shaw, August Strindberg, and Stefan Zweig. Though, according to critic Brooks Atkinson, initially “many people suspected that [the Guild] was subversive because it imported so much immorality and brooding from abroad,” it managed to make a commercial success of such productions.<sup>50</sup> By the early 1930s, the Guild had become a top theater producer featuring major stars, such as Claudette Colbert, Helen Hayes, Katharine Hepburn, Fredric March, Ruth Gordon, Alfred Lunt, and Lynn Fontanne. The Guild also produced major American writers, such as Eugene O’Neill, Thornton Wilder, Elmer Rice, Maxwell Anderson, and Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, whose *Carousel* and *Oklahoma!* became huge hits.<sup>51</sup>

In keeping with its educational mission, the Theatre Guild sought a wider audience. Having licensed some plays to Hollywood filmmakers and been dissatisfied with the results, the Guild turned to radio, according to its directors, “as a means of bringing such drama to the whole of the American public.”<sup>52</sup> Just before World War II, the Guild approached NBC but was rebuffed. According to Armina Marshall, a Guild producer, NBC’s lack of interest reflected an assumption that “programming with

46 “Employees Must Be Sold Too,” *Sponsor*, August 1947, 31.

47 Norman Nadel, *A Pictorial History of the Theatre Guild* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1969), 5.

48 *Ibid.*, 277.

49 *The History of the Theatre Guild: 1919 to 1934* (n.p.: Theatre Guild, 1934), 5, 19.

50 Brooks Atkinson, introduction to Nadel, *Pictorial History*, vii.

51 I rely on the appendices of Nadel, *Pictorial History*, 278–303, for information as to actors, playwrights, plays, and dates of productions.

52 Lawrence Langner and Theresa Helbrun, introduction to *Theatre Guild on the Air*, ed. H. William Fitelson (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1947), vii.

anything ‘cultural’ about it would not be accepted by the radio audience.<sup>53</sup> The Guild’s highbrow cultural credentials were, however, exactly what interested US Steel when it agreed in 1945 to sponsor its program to be called *Theatre Guild on the Air* (hereafter *TGOTA*) (Figure 2). The Guild sought to prove that radio audiences would



Figure 2. A 1947 trade advertisement for *Theatre Guild on the Air* that features stars Fredric March and Burgess Meredith (*Sponsor*, September 1947, 38).

accept programs with “high artistic broadcast standards” and that radio, as a medium, “was never meant to be used exclusively as a sales agency.”<sup>54</sup> US Steel would serve as a benevolent institutional sponsor; as Guild producer H. William Fitelson explained, US Steel’s messages would only “tell the story of a growing American industry rather than attempt to sell steel.”<sup>55</sup>

Radio presented challenges. *TGOTA* radio plays were performed live on the air in an actual theater in front of an audience. However, despite the Guild’s goal of producing only plays it had produced on stage (and with the original cast), the plays had to be rewritten so as to fit the allotted airtime and to make up for the lack of visual cues—radio audiences could not see sets, costumes, or blocking, not to mention actors’ facial expressions and physical gestures.<sup>56</sup>

Despite these limitations, the Guild promoted radio as an ideal medium for drama because “the focal point becomes the imagination of the listener” and because radio allows for “a kind of dramatic creativity which simply does not exist in the production of a play . . . which can be seen as well as heard.”<sup>57</sup> Radio allowed for instantaneous scene changes and for elaborate sound effects. The Guild experimented with narrators to provide exposition and transitions. Sometimes the “fourth wall” was removed and characters described themselves directly to the audience or a character spoke to the audience as a first-person narrator.<sup>58</sup> Music, provided by a full orchestra, was used “to

53 Armina Marshall, “The Theatre Guild on Radio and Television,” in Nadel, *Pictorial History*, 211.  
 54 *The Story of the Theatre Guild, 1919–1947* (n.p.: Theatre Guild, ca. 1947), 21; H. William Fitelson, preface to *Theatre Guild on the Air*, ed. H. William Fitelson (New York: Rinehart, 1947), xii.  
 55 Fitelson, preface to *Theatre Guild on the Air*, xii.  
 56 Erik Barnouw, *Media Marathon: A Twentieth-Century Memoir* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 81–84.  
 57 Marshall, “Theatre Guild on Radio and Television,” 212.  
 58 Eugene O’Neill’s *Ah, Wilderness*, *TGOTA*, broadcast October 7, 1945; *State Fair*, *TGOTA*, broadcast December 31, 1950; *The Third Man*, *TGOTA*, broadcast January 7, 1951. Recordings of these broadcasts are available at the Internet Archive (<https://archive.org/details/TheaterGuildontheAir>).

intensify emotions, underline dramatic or comedic situations, or point to the locale,” according to Guild directors.<sup>59</sup>

The relationship between the Theatre Guild and US Steel, in the person of the public relations director J. Carlisle MacDonald, seemed near ideal for each of their purposes.<sup>60</sup> In a later recollection, Guild producer Marshall claimed that with US Steel, the Guild faced “none of the uncertainties concerning contracts, negotiations, and business dealings which were commonplace in the harassing dealings of the Broadway theatre.”<sup>61</sup> Guild producer Fitelson claimed in 1947, after two years of productions, that “as to censorship, we have learned that most of it is self-imposed” because “work which has quality need encounter no serious difficulty” if producers “exercise discretion.”<sup>62</sup> Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude*, which the Guild produced on stage in 1928 and for radio in 1946, included a scene in which a character is advised to abort a child, concerning which Marshall describes “a great deal of apprehension” on the part of the network, ABC.<sup>63</sup> But “the Theatre Guild had a contract with United States Steel which gave us full autonomy in the selection of plays.”<sup>64</sup> US Steel “lived up to its contract,” and the play was aired as written.<sup>65</sup> Although BBDO “had expected an avalanche of indignant mail,” there were “only a few letters of protest.”<sup>66</sup>

At times, however, the Guild accepted US Steel’s directives. For introductory remarks, the sponsor replaced Guild director Lawrence Langner with radio announcer Norman Brokenshire. Complaining that Brokenshire’s “colloquial diction” and mispronunciations created a “bad image” for the Theatre Guild, and by extension, US Steel, Langner and Marshall appealed to Chairman Olds. Olds listened “politely,” and then explained US Steel’s reasoning: Brokenshire “is much more representative of the large part of our audience than you are[,] Lawrence. His speech is commonplace but the audience identifies with it. He makes mistakes, but so do they. They don’t feel they are being talked down to.”<sup>67</sup> Langner and Marshall accepted Olds’s explanation: both shared the aim of not alienating an uneducated public.

BBDO account executive Carroll Newton, who oversaw *TGOTA* for client US Steel, regularly reported to the BBDO managing committee some of the tensions among the agency, the Guild, and US Steel. BBDO had much less control over *TGOTA* than other programs it produced. In 1948 and 1949, Newton complained that the Guild did not employ enough major stars, that it insisted on saving money by using old plays rather than new ones, and that it refused to look outside the legitimate stage for

59 Langner and Helbrun, introduction to *Theatre Guild on the Air*, viii.

60 MacDonald, a former press agent, reported directly to the chairman of the board, Irving Olds. “Mr. Sponsor: J. Carlisle MacDonald,” *Sponsor*, December 1946, 37.

61 Marshall, “Theatre Guild on Radio and Television,” 213.

62 Fitelson, preface to *Theatre Guild on the Air*, xii.

63 Marshall, “Theatre Guild on Radio and Television,” 213.

64 *Ibid.*

65 *Ibid.*

66 *Ibid.*

67 *Ibid.*

new material.<sup>68</sup> Newton wanted to attract audiences with new plays and big stars; the Guild wanted to educate audiences about established plays using its stock actors.

BBDO was also concerned about avoiding controversy. A 1949 broadcast of Tennessee Williams's *Summer and Smoke* prompted listener complaints aimed at US Steel.<sup>69</sup> Newton defended the program in a letter to a US Steel executive. Arguing that the play treated "a serious subject with honesty and from the point of view of modern psychology," he pointed out that films like *The Lost Weekend* (Billy Wilder, 1945) and *Crossfire* (Edward Dmytryk, 1947) indicated increasing public acceptance of material with a "realistic approach to serious problems."<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, he acknowledged the play would "not be well received by a certain group of people," and he concluded that "the extent of feeling shown in some of the letters indicates to us that we must all exercise the greatest possible caution to avoid giving offense to anybody in the future."<sup>71</sup>

In 1949 and 1950, Newton relayed US Steel's complaints that the program had never achieved high ratings even though it was, in MacDonald's opinion, "unmatched in appeal for the more intelligent people, and those of good taste."<sup>72</sup> Why, MacDonald wondered, weren't audiences more grateful for high-quality programming? At a cost of about \$1 million per year, was *TGOTA* actually benefiting US Steel, or was it simply a vehicle for the Guild? Was US Steel merely subsidizing the Guild? Would the direct methods of a hard-sell advertising campaign bring better results to US Steel than its association with a New York theater company in a radio program?

The typical *TGOTA* episode began with a short announcement of US Steel's presentation of the Theatre Guild, "one of the foremost theater producers," followed by an educational introduction to the play of the week. About twenty-five minutes into the play, George Hicks, a former radio journalist, would read a two- to five-minute "talk," written by BBDO, designed to educate listeners about US Steel. For a few seasons, Hicks also gave a second talk after another twenty minutes of the play. Occasionally, a US Steel executive, such as chief executive officer Benjamin Fairless, would also speak for several minutes. Chairman Olds described these talks as "brief, interesting commentaries" presented in a "sincere, straightforward manner."<sup>73</sup> Emphasizing *TGOTA*'s didactic purpose, Olds also noted that the program was "required listening for many college and high school groups."<sup>74</sup> By current standards these commentaries would not be considered "brief"; the sponsors, however, regarded five minutes as a small percentage of the sixty minutes of airtime for which they were paying.

The commentaries ranged among topics such as US Steel's research efforts, workplace safety, and production processes. Hicks introduced them with personalized appeals. For example, in one he wonders what the audience might "remember from

68 Carroll Newton to Bruce Barton, July 21, 1948; Newton to Duffy, July 15, 1949, box 80, US Steel folder, Bruce Barton Papers, WHS (hereafter papers from box 80 are cited as 80/USS/BB).

69 Newton to Barton, April 27, 1949, 80/USS/BB.

70 Newton to John Rust, April 26, 1949, 80/USS/BB.

71 Ibid.

72 Newton to Duffy, July 15, 1949; Newton to Duffy, February 8, 1950, 80/USS/BB.

73 "Steel Melts the Public," 50.

74 Fisher, *Steel Serves the Nation*, 97.

your school days” about steel production: “So, let’s see what does go into those huge furnaces. There’s iron . . . limestone and coke, then there’s scrap steel.”<sup>75</sup> In another he remarks that “I learned a few things about US Steel’s tremendous and continuous research program, which I think will interest you.”<sup>76</sup> The conclusions emphasized the benefits conferred on everyone by the company’s doings: “The result of this carefully integrated program of research . . . will be reflected in the automobiles you drive, the tin cans on your grocer’s shelves, the bolts and screws you tighten, your garden tools, and the thousands of other products vital to modern civilization.”<sup>77</sup> US Steel was not a faceless, incomprehensible corporation but a bighearted philanthropist, improving everyone’s lives in specific, individualized ways.

One of the themes of these “talks” was that US Steel was “the industrial family that serves the nation.”<sup>78</sup> By characterizing US Steel as a “family,” BBDO attempted to personalize its relations to employees but also implied a natural hierarchy of parents (management) and children (employees).<sup>79</sup> In a 1946 talk, Hicks explained that this industrial family included its 225,000 stockholders, among whom

may be your next-door neighbor, your grocer, your doctor or your insurance company. It’s quite possible that your local hospital or the college which your children attend have invested some part of their funds in US Steel. That’s why I think you will now agree that introducing you to the owners of US Steel is a good deal like introducing you to America itself. . . . Millions of Americans have a direct or important indirect interest in the affairs and the progress of US Steel.<sup>80</sup>

US Steel, then, was not controlled by elites but owned by regular Americans whose interests were shared with other Americans. Hicks went on to suggest, “And I think you’ll now be better able to understand why the management of US Steel faces a three-fold responsibility.”<sup>81</sup> It must conduct its affairs “so as to satisfy the best interests—of the nation, of the stockholding owners and of its employees.”<sup>82</sup> US Steel balanced these to “serve our nation.”<sup>83</sup>

US Steel pursued its goal of selling its employees on the company, of making “everyone want to do his job” (Figure 3).<sup>84</sup> In a 1947 talk, Hicks lauded the women workers whose “capacity for observation” qualified them to inspect ten thousand sheets of steel plate a day.<sup>85</sup> These workers feel their job is important, and US Steel “shares

75 Fitelson, *Theatre Guild on the Air*, 336.

76 *Ah, Wilderness*, TGOTA, broadcast October 7, 1945.

77 *Ibid.*

78 *The Great Adventure*, TGOTA, broadcast January 5, 1947.

79 Marchand, *Corporate Soul*, 103, 104, 107.

80 Fitelson, *Theatre Guild on the Air*, 346.

81 *Ibid.*

82 *Ibid.*

83 *Ibid.*

84 “Employees Must Be Sold Too,” 31.

85 *The Great Adventure*, TGOTA, broadcast January 5, 1947.

that feeling with every girl in its tin plating sorting departments. For the corporation trusts her with far more than her daily allotment of plate. It trusts her with the precious reputation of US Steel.”<sup>86</sup> In conclusion, Hicks explained that whatever the job, whether small or large, “making carpet tacks or bridge girders, US Steel today, as always, puts the same kind of trust in every one of its 275,000 workers. US Steel workers respect and justify this trust. That’s one of the most important reasons why, when you buy anything tagged with the famous round USS label, you can be mighty sure the steel is quality steel.”<sup>87</sup> Quality, like reputation, is an ephemeral value, difficult to measure or define.



Figure 3. “Steel Melts the Public” (*Sponsor*, March 13, 1950, 24).

also in the Theatre Guild. According to *Sponsor* magazine, MacDonald had “given the agency, BBDO, and the Theatre Guild more freedom than an agency and a producing group usually receive on a big program.”<sup>88</sup> Erik Barnouw, a *TGOTA* scriptwriter, observed that MacDonald “seldom disputed the Theatre Guild partners on any matter relating to drama.”<sup>89</sup> In demonstrating its support for the Guild’s artistic integrity, US Steel also intended to build collaborative if paternalistic relations with its employees, customers, and the public, to gain social and moral legitimacy and, by extension, increased political protection from regulatory threats and legal dismemberment. This bargain was threatened by the postwar Red Scare.

**The Post-World War II Red Scare and the Rise of Blacklisting.** Although anticommunist movements in the United States may be rooted in conflicts dating from the mid-nineteenth century over industrialization, immigration, and urbanization, the Red Scare of 1946–1956 was particularly significant, possibly the “longest lasting wave of political repression in American history,” according to Ellen Schrecker.<sup>90</sup> The Soviet absorption of Eastern Europe, the communist victory in China in 1949, and the Korean War’s beginning in 1950 made some feel that World War III was imminent. Historians continue to debate whether the Red Scare was an “unfortunate

US Steel’s institutional advertising on *TGOTA* claimed that these values were produced in its trusting, cooperative, industrial family, a gendered family that embodied American values.

US Steel presented itself as trusting not only in its employees but

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 “Mr. Sponsor: J. Carlisle MacDonald,” 37.

89 Barnouw, *Media Marathon*, 84.

90 M. J. Heale, *American Anticommunism: Combating the Enemy Within, 1830–1970* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), x, xvi.

overreaction to a genuine threat or the product of a conscious campaign to wipe out dissent.<sup>91</sup> Many believe that the purging of communists from unions, government offices, universities, and entertainment industries was simply cover for an attack on liberalism in general and labor unionism in particular, an attack personified by the demagogue senator Joseph McCarthy.<sup>92</sup> Others, such as Jennifer Delton, argue, in contrast, that the most effective anticommunists of that era were not McCarthyites but liberals seeking to protect the New Deal, and that the ensuing “liberal consensus” was “born out of liberals’ anticommunist efforts” during the Red Scare.<sup>93</sup> Cooperation between communists and liberals, as in the 1930s Popular Front and in the anti-Axis alliance, had ended after the war. Liberals resented the communist shift from anti- to pro-Nazi in the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact and then back again in 1941; and they were appalled by communist tactics such as lying about membership and infiltrating and undermining liberal organizations supporting labor unions and civil rights.<sup>94</sup> Many liberals agreed with the Right’s accusations that they were harboring communists and were eager to purge them.<sup>95</sup> For many liberals, communism was violent treason rather than a political movement and therefore deserving of suppression by any means.<sup>96</sup> The year 1947 was a turning point: President Truman implemented loyalty oaths for federal employees, the House Un-American Activities Committee held hearings investigating communists in the film industry, and the subsequent film studios’ “Waldorf Statement” announcing the purging of any identified communists launched what became the blacklists.

At a time when it was possible to worry, as did actor Adolphe Menjou, that a communist actor’s line readings in a film might affect audience politics, broadcasting—a much more pervasive medium that entered the privacy of the home only under the stricture that it serve the public interest—became vulnerable to fearmongering.<sup>97</sup> Anticommunist activists such as the American Business Consultants, the publisher of the newsletter *Counterattack* (1947–1973), beginning in 1947 first identified radio news commentators, then entertainment programs, as sources of communist subversion. Their “third violinist” theory posited that only one person in a group, like a violinist in an orchestra, was necessary to spread communism effectively.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, given broadcasting’s one-to-many communication pattern, a communist takeover of a broadcasting station could be effected, they believed, merely with one engineer, one

91 Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, x.

92 Gerald Horne, *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930–50: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds, and Trade Unionists* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Susan Jacoby, *Alger Hiss and the Battle for History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

93 Jennifer Delton, “Rethinking Post–World War II Anticommunism,” *Journal of the Historical Society* 10, no. 1 (2010): 4.

94 Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 131, 139; Delton, “Rethinking Post–World War II Anticommunism,” 2, 13, 21.

95 Delton, “Rethinking Post–World War II Anticommunism.”

96 Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 120.

97 Barnouw, *Golden Web*, 250; Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 23.

98 David Everitt, *A Shadow of Red: Communism and the Blacklist in Radio and Television* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007), 29.

director, and one announcer, who could instantly reach “ninety million American people with a message!”<sup>99</sup>

In June 1950, *Counterattack* published a booklet, *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*, which listed performers, writers, and directors and

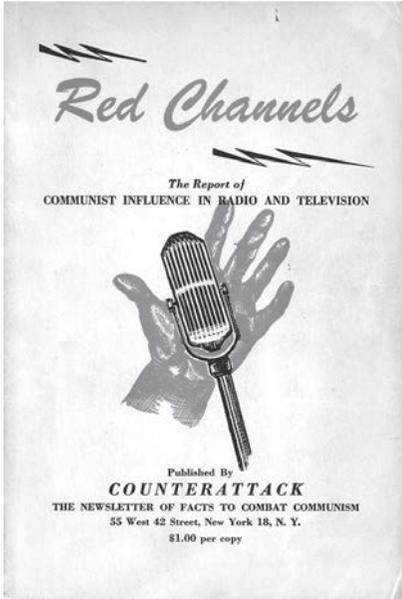


Figure 4. *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* (New York: Counterattack, 1950).

their affiliations with suspect organizations (Figure 4).<sup>100</sup> Industry insiders unknown to the public were listed along with major stars such as Orson Welles, Edward G. Robinson, and John Garfield. One of its chief compilers, Vincent Hartnett, claimed that *Red Channels* could “show how the Communists have been able to carry out their plan of infiltration” of broadcasting.<sup>101</sup> Hartnett implicated every segment of the broadcasting industry: “Networks, individual stations, advertising agencies, ‘package producers,’ radio-TV unions, and even the trade press have been more and more ‘colonized’ by the Party.”<sup>102</sup> Since it might have been difficult to imagine an advertising executive as a Communist Party member, Hartnett clarified: “The ‘colonists’ need not be party members or even deliberate co-operators. It is sufficient if they advance Communist objectives with complete unconsciousness.”<sup>103</sup> Hartnett’s

Freudian claim of unconscious subversion may not have been credible to most, but he distracted his readers with long lists of apparently factual data such as dates, events, groups, and petitions. Hartnett and his partners at *Counterattack* insisted that *Red Channels* was not a “blacklist” but simply a compendium of facts for readers to decode.<sup>104</sup>

*Counterattack* claimed to be concerned not about writers slipping communist propaganda into scripts or performers giving communist line readings, but about the financial impact of hiring Communist Party (CP) members. However, in its treatment of the sponsors of broadcasts, *Counterattack* took up the advertising theory of association and applied it to its own purposes:

All sponsors gladly accept full responsibility for the favorable publicity and good will that derives from their programs. They revel in it and congratulate

99 *Counterattack*, June 23, 1950, 1.

100 *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* (New York: Counterattack, 1950).

101 *Ibid.*, 9.

102 *Ibid.*, 5.

103 *Ibid.*, 6.

104 *Counterattack*, September 13, 1950, 3.

themselves for their business acumen in finding effective selling media for their product. And as long as they do that they must also accept full responsibility for the bad publicity that comes of their helping finance [the] CP by using Fifth Columnists and their abettors on their programs.<sup>105</sup>

Association between a program and a corporate sponsor might be somehow perverted into an association between the program and communism. In the face of a “dodging of responsibilities” by networks who pointed to sponsors, sponsors who pointed to producers or advertising agencies, and producers and ad agencies who pointed back to sponsors, *Counterattack* argued that a sponsor should take “responsibility to see that his (or his stockholders’) money is not used, directly or indirectly, to finance Stalin’s US agents.”<sup>106</sup>

In enforcing blacklists, advertising agencies are often assumed to have been following orders from their clients, the advertisers.<sup>107</sup> Young & Rubicam, for example, has been understood as following General Foods’ orders when actress Jean Muir, listed in *Red Channels*, was fired from the television program *The Aldrich Family* (NBC, 1949–1953) in late 1950 merely for having become a “controversial personality.”<sup>108</sup> Many agencies were not, in fact, so passive. Some wrote letters demanding that CBS and NBC desist from hiring communists.<sup>109</sup> According to the advertising trade magazine *Tide*, most admen agreed that “agencies have the right and duty to consider the political ideologies of the people who write and act in the sponsor’s show.”<sup>110</sup> Rosser Reeves, who headed the Ted Bates advertising agency, publicly supported the anticommunist movement and argued with his more liberal colleagues about McCarthy’s tactics.<sup>111</sup> And a 1950 column in the trade magazine *Advertising & Selling* published this dire warning: “Communists can be advertisers too. Think twice before you handle any campaign that smacks of parlor pinkness. It may be fire engine red, underneath.”<sup>112</sup>

Some advertisers, such as Hallmark, and some producers, such as Air Features, simply ignored *Red Channels* and the evolving blacklists.<sup>113</sup> But at times public professions hid a more complex reality: the claims by many advertisers and agencies that they were not consulting *Red Channels* were meant primarily to avoid lawsuits for libel or conspiracy.<sup>114</sup> Although Young & Rubicam (Y&R) publicly claimed to resist a letter campaign to drop a performer, it allegedly used *Red Channels* for clients such as

105 *Counterattack*, March 14, 1952, 2.

106 *Ibid.*

107 See, e.g., Barnouw, *Golden Web*, 282.

108 “The Truth about Red Channels, Part One,” *Sponsor*, October 8, 1951, 29, 76.

109 Winslow Case to Sylvester “Pat” Weaver, May 19, 1950, box 118, folder 46; Fred H. Walsh to Niles Trammell, September 20, 1951, box 115, folder 64, NBC Records, WHS.

110 Quoted in Merle Miller, *The Judges and the Judged* (New York: Doubleday, 1952), 198.

111 Correspondence between Rosser Reeves and David Ogilvy, April 12–15, 1954, box 2, folder 5, Rosser Reeves Papers, WHS.

112 W. H. Long, “Eight Ways to Help Defeat Native Communism,” *Advertising & Selling*, August 1950, 63.

113 James L. Baughman, *Same Time, Same Station: Creating American Television, 1948–1961* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 207; Mary Jane Higby, *Tune In Tomorrow* (New York: Cowles, 1968), 139.

114 “How to Keep the Reds off the Air—Sanely,” *Sponsor*, November 5, 1951, 86.

Goodyear; producer David Susskind claimed that Y&R refused to allow him to cast a child whose parent was suspect.<sup>115</sup> Y&R had pioneered soft-sell advertising strategies designed to appeal to audiences rather than alienate them.<sup>116</sup> Its belief in the advertising effectiveness of positive associations may have contributed to the agency's efforts to ensure that the associations it was creating for its clients were not damaging ones.

Throughout the industry, reactions to blacklisting were conflicted. As Doherty points out, even during the worst of the broadcasting blacklists, noncommunists objected: for every newspaper columnist enthusiastic for blacklisting, such as Walter Winchell or Jack O'Brian, there was an anti-blacklist columnist, such as John Crosby or Jack Gould.<sup>117</sup> Even *Sponsor* magazine, a trade journal for broadcast advertisers, in 1951 published a three-part analysis and exposé that summarized the industry's complaints about the anticommunist activists: the lists in *Red Channels* implied guilt by association; American Business Consultants, a private and unaccountable organization, wielded an outsized influence on agencies and sponsors; and its offers to research potential hires for a fee was basically a shakedown.<sup>118</sup> Asking "Are American advertisers being blackmailed?," *Sponsor* blamed *Red Channels* for creating "pressure-group hysteria" and a "kangaroo court."<sup>119</sup> *Sponsor* quoted a "veteran radio man" who complained, "This industry has fought to stay free of government control for twenty-five years. To allow private blacklisters into the picture now is to risk our freedom."<sup>120</sup> Most in the industry, however, seem to have assumed that purging was necessary: revulsion at blacklisting was focused not on the communists, who were felt to deserve it, but on the collateral damage to noncommunists.

Hence, many of the concerns over the blacklists were not about its necessity but its procedures: if *Red Channels'* data were flawed, some argued, there ought to be a more official, perhaps governmental, process for identifying and purging communists.<sup>121</sup> Having instituted their own internal communist purges, industry guilds and trade organizations attempted to establish procedures for "clearing" accused innocents. However, these procedures were rarely followed; their effect was to make the blacklisting process more secretive, not less.<sup>122</sup> While publicly insisting blacklists were wrong, many companies instead maintained "whitelists" of preapproved performers, directors, and

115 "How to Keep Reds off the Air—Sanely," 86; Jon Krampner, *The Man in the Shadows: Fred Coe and the Golden Age of Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 58; Louis Nizer, *The Jury Returns* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 288–290.

116 Fox, *Mirror Makers*, 132–140.

117 Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 33.

118 "Truth about Red Channels, Part One," 27–29, 75–81; "The Truth about Red Channels, Part Two," *Sponsor*, October 22, 1951, 30–31, 76–86; "How to Keep Reds off the Air—Sanely," 32–34, 84–88.

119 "Truth about Red Channels, Part One," 27.

120 "How to Keep Reds off the Air—Sanely," 85.

121 For example, GE executives testified to a Senate subcommittee that a government agency should be created to "apprehend and remove communists" because "we do not believe employers are qualified to safely and fairly exercise the judicial function of appraising evidence concerning communist affiliations." L. R. Boulware, G. H. Pfeif, and W. J. Barron, *Statement before a Senate Subcommittee: What to Do about Communism in Unions* (n.p.: General Electric, July 8, 1952), 3, 10.

122 Rita Morley Harvey, *Those Wonderful, Terrible Years: George Heller and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 78–79, 96, 144.

writers.<sup>123</sup> That way, they could avoid the outrage produced by publicly firing actors after having hired them, as happened to Jean Muir and to Philip Loeb (who was fired from the television version of *The Goldbergs* [CBS, 1949–1951; NBC, 1952–1953; DuMont, 1954]). Furthermore, they could claim that, by merely identifying those who were employable, they were not conspiring to deny employment to specific persons. For advertisers, performers were hired to produce positive associations, not negative ones. As a General Foods executive explained the problem, employing an actor who was “controversial” would be “akin to sending out a poor salesman in an area where the salesman was disliked.”<sup>124</sup>

John Cogley, in his 1956 *Report on Blacklisting*, singled out BBDO, one of the four top advertising agencies in broadcasting, as the most significant practitioner of blacklisting.<sup>125</sup> While other agencies repeatedly denied they were blacklisting even as they were, BBDO was open about its efforts. Everyone in the industry understood that the BBDO executive Jack Wren oversaw a blacklist. Wren’s ties with the anticommunist activists at *Plain Talk* magazine probably gave him outsized influence in the industry, and many believed (incorrectly) that he was a former FBI agent.<sup>126</sup> BBDO’s openness had some advantages even for the accused: while other agencies, networks, and producers often refused to speak to suspected talent, leaving them without recourse to a defense, Wren met with and investigated the cases of those seeking to be “cleared.”<sup>127</sup> Wren advised suspected talent to take action to clear themselves, such as make a speech to an anticommunist organization.<sup>128</sup> As Cogley put it, BBDO “has taken the blacklisting problem for what it is, i.e., a problem in public relations, and has treated it accordingly.”<sup>129</sup>

Wren’s investigations served not only BBDO clients but also BBDO itself. Erik Barnouw reports having heard rumors during the Red Scare that BBDO was riddled with communists.<sup>130</sup> BBDO’s history of hiring leftist actors and writers in the 1930s for DuPont’s *Cavalcade of America* radio docudrama made it vulnerable to such accusations. BBDO had to demonstrate it was actively shunning suspect talent. Wren later claimed his work was a direct result of the anticommunist activists’ accusations against BBDO: his job was “to protect our clients against the false charges made that we loaded our shows with Communists, by Vincent Hartnett, who . . . wrote to our officers accusing us of loading our shows with Communists.”<sup>131</sup>

123 Fairfax Cone, *With All Its Faults: A Candid Account of Forty Years in Advertising* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), 265.

124 Quoted in “Truth about Red Channels, Part One,” 76.

125 John Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting II: Radio-Television* (n.p.: Fund for the Republic, 1956), 115.

126 Everitt, *Shadow of Red*, 105.

127 Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, 118.

128 *Ibid.*, 116.

129 *Ibid.*

130 Barnouw, *Media Marathon*, 78.

131 From Wren’s testimony in John Henry Faulk’s libel lawsuit against anticommunist activists, quoted in Everitt, *Shadow of Red*, 306.

BBDO, its institutional advertising clients, and the talent they hired all believed one thing in common: that broadcasting exercised strong media effects and had the power to create powerful associations in listeners' minds. The Red Scare demonstrated that these associations could create negative as well as positive effects. Although Barnouw later complained that BBDO, the agency that produced programs that "stressed peace and social values," was also the most "zealous in institutionalizing blacklisting," BBDO executives would not have seen a contradiction.<sup>132</sup> They believed that their policies, which openly asserted they were in control of their clients' image management, were necessary to counter the false fearmongering claims that communists had infiltrated key American institutions such as broadcasting.

**US Steel, Theatre Guild on the Air, BBDO, and the Red Scare.** US Steel, one of the largest US corporations, a keystone in the economy, a company that had used red-baiting after World War I to successfully suppress strikes and unionization, would seem an unlikely target for anticommunist activists. Yet in December 1947, *Counterattack* asked: "Why does US Steel Corp., for example, repeatedly use Fredric March, a Communist, on its programs?"<sup>133</sup> A few weeks later, on January 9, 1948, *Counterattack* was more specific, listing March, his wife Florence Eldridge, Gene Kelly, Lillian Hellman, and Millard Lampell as participants in *TGOTA*, and asserting that US Steel "doesn't care whether its money goes to Communist Party members and fellow-travelers."<sup>134</sup> Subsequently, *Counterattack* published the response of US Steel's chairman Olds on January 30, 1948 (Figure 5). Pointing out that the Theatre Guild "cast[s] the plays," and that *TGOTA* is not being "used as a medium for spreading Communistic propaganda," Olds affirmed that people were hired for the program "on the basis of their ability" and not "on account of ideological, social, or religious beliefs." *Counterattack* then denied accusing *TGOTA* of spreading propaganda; the problem, its writers claimed, was that US Steel was paying communists, and "such persons give part of their income to the Communist Party and its fronts."<sup>135</sup>

At first, *Counterattack's* accusations seemed to have little effect; US Steel's public resistance was admirable.<sup>136</sup> In April 1948, US Steel CEO Benjamin Fairless told BBDO that *TGOTA* was "not only the finest and most important channel we have to the public, but it is difficult to imagine a finer one. To keep this program on the air is of vital importance to the Corporation, and we should not question it for a moment."<sup>137</sup> BBDO unsurprisingly considered some kind of advertising crucial to the company's health. When in September 1948 a US Steel executive suggested canceling the company's national advertising, Bruce Barton warned that US Steel would be canceling only

132 Barnouw, *Golden Web*, 279.

133 *Counterattack*, December 5, 1947, 1. Fredric March was also mentioned in *Counterattack* on October 24 and October 31, 1947. Up to that point, March had performed on *TGOTA* in December 1945, September 1946, March 1947, and October 1947.

134 *Counterattack*, January 9, 1948, 2.

135 *Counterattack*, January 30, 1948, 1.

136 Miller, *Judges and the Judged*, 72; Bird, "Better Living," 188.

137 Duffy to Newton, April 28, 1948, 80/USS/BB.

the “advertising which you pay for and control. The part which you do not and cannot control is the advertising given you by politicians, columnists, demagogues, and other operators in the field of public opinion,” such as the writers of *Counterattack*.<sup>138</sup>

*Counterattack* did not limit its criticism to US Steel’s radio program. The next year, on February 4, 1949, it attacked CEO Fairless for agreeing to attend a dinner fund-raiser for Emery Sipler, a religious leader who, *Counterattack* claimed, was an “ardent supporter of a long, long list of Communist fronts.”<sup>139</sup> Almost immediately, a BBDO executive explained in a meeting with Olds that BBDO “is in a position through a special department in our research set-up to give our clients an immediate check on the activities of any person or persons connected with ‘subversive organizations.’”<sup>140</sup> Possibly Jack Wren advised Fairless; anyway, by February 11 Fairless had withdrawn from the dinner. *Counterattack* published Fairless’s explanation: “Innocently I accepted, thinking it was a church movement, and therefore having no connection with non-Americanism.”<sup>141</sup> In November 1949, *TGOTA* produced Herman Wouk’s play *The Traitor*, about an American scientist who passes secrets to the Soviets. Pointing out that “until now they’ve avoided anti-Communist plays,” *Counterattack* praised US Steel and the Guild for this “good beginning,” indicating a rapprochement of a sort.<sup>142</sup> Meanwhile, Fredric March and his wife sued *Counterattack* for libel, and in December 1949, *Counterattack* published the Marches’ statement that they were not communists. Acknowledging that the Marches “condemn Communist despotism in Stalinist Russia,” *Counterattack* “withdraws and retracts its previously published statements that Fredric March and Florence Eldridge

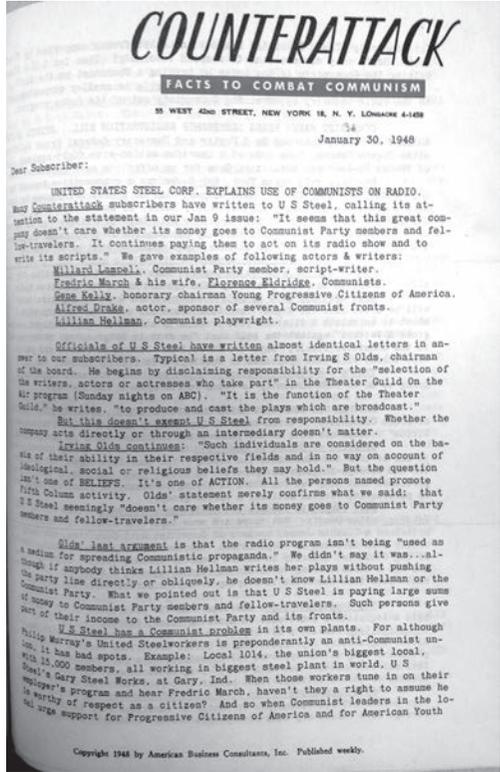


Figure 5. “United States Steel Corp. Explains Use of Communists on Radio” (*Counterattack*, January 30, 1948).

138 Barton to Duffy, September 15, 1948, 80/USS/BB.  
 139 *Counterattack*, February 4, 1949, 1.  
 140 Newton to Barton, February 9, 1949, 80/USS/BB.  
 141 *Counterattack*, February 18, 1949, 2.  
 142 *Counterattack*, November 11, 1949, 4.

March are Communists.”<sup>143</sup> March subsequently starred in *TGOTA* broadcasts in November 1950 and February 1953.

Thus, by the time *Counterattack* published *Red Channels* in June 1950, both US Steel executives and Guild performers had already tangled with the *Counterattack* activists. But the publication of *Red Channels* marked a turning point in the anticommunist attack on broadcasting; suddenly accusations that had been scattered among *Counterattack* newsletters were conveniently packaged in one source. The booklet sold briskly; about 17,500 copies were sold by October 1951.<sup>144</sup> *Red Channels* listed at least ten people who had recently been involved in *TGOTA*: Luther Adler, Mady Christians, John Garfield, Lillian Hellman, Judy Holliday, Marsha Hunt, Burl Ives, Millard Lampell, Aline MacMahon, and Burgess Meredith (who had been in six productions from September 1945 to June 1950); *Red Channels* listed another eighteen or so who had been involved in Guild stage productions, including Ruth Gordon, Lee J. Cobb, and Edward G. Robinson.<sup>145</sup> Barnouw claims that “the list-bearing harpies carried little weight at the Theatre Guild” and that the theater industry resisted the pressure and employed many black-listees.<sup>146</sup> However, nine of those ten who had been involved with *TGOTA* before *Red Channels* did not work again on *TGOTA*.<sup>147</sup> The exception, Burgess Meredith, published a statement in the May 1951 *Counterattack*, claiming, “I am not now and never have been a member of the Communist Party”; he subsequently appeared on *TGOTA* broadcasts in June 1951, April 1952, and October 1952.<sup>148</sup> It may be coincidence, of course, that nine out of ten *TGOTA* performers named in *Red Channels* did not return to the program and that Meredith’s statement appeared a month before he returned to the program.

Although the Theatre Guild may have resisted in word more than in deed, US Steel and BBDO felt growing pressure, as memos of their private discussions show. In July 1949, US Steel considered dropping the Theatre Guild and radio programming altogether. BBDO convinced US Steel to change the program’s title to *United States Steel Hour: Theatre Guild on the Air*, despite the tensions this would cause with the Guild, and urged US Steel to give BBDO increased control.<sup>149</sup> Meanwhile, the steelworkers union, having undergone its own internal purges of communists, led a strike in the fall of 1949 and won increased employer-funded pensions. Facing hearings about its monopoly power and increasing pressures from Congress and the Truman administration for labor peace, US Steel believed that *TGOTA* remained an important means of countering its image as “the embodiment of all that is considered reprehensible in business.”<sup>150</sup> Barton warned US Steel: “The unions are talking about

143 *Counterattack*, December 23, 1949, 1.

144 “Truth about Red Channels, Part Two,” 78.

145 I compared the names in *Red Channels* with Theatre Guild cast lists in the appendices in Nadel, *Pictorial History*, 278–303; however, this is only an estimate because the appendices list only the star players in Guild productions, not supporting casts.

146 Barnouw, *Media Marathon*, 81.

147 I differ here from Bird, who seems to discount the blacklisting effect because he found only two actors in *Red Channels* with “any ongoing public association with the program.” “*Better Living*,” 26, 241.

148 *Counterattack*, May 4, 1951, 4; Nadel, *Pictorial History*.

149 Newton to Duffy, July 15, 1949, 80/USS/BB.

150 *Investment Dealers Digest*, quoted in “Steel Melts the Public,” 24.

people, and the Steel Corporation has been talking about statistics and profits.”<sup>151</sup> In February 1950, US Steel again considered dropping the Guild and asked BBDO to develop alternative program ideas for television.<sup>152</sup> But in March 1950, *Sponsor* ran a laudatory article about how effective US Steel’s sponsorship had been, documenting that the *TGOTA* audience had grown from three million in 1946 to ten million in 1949, and that more than 50 percent of those surveyed identified the program’s sponsor as US Steel (Figure 6).<sup>153</sup>

In April 1950, in discussions with the Theatre Guild, US Steel asked for the “right

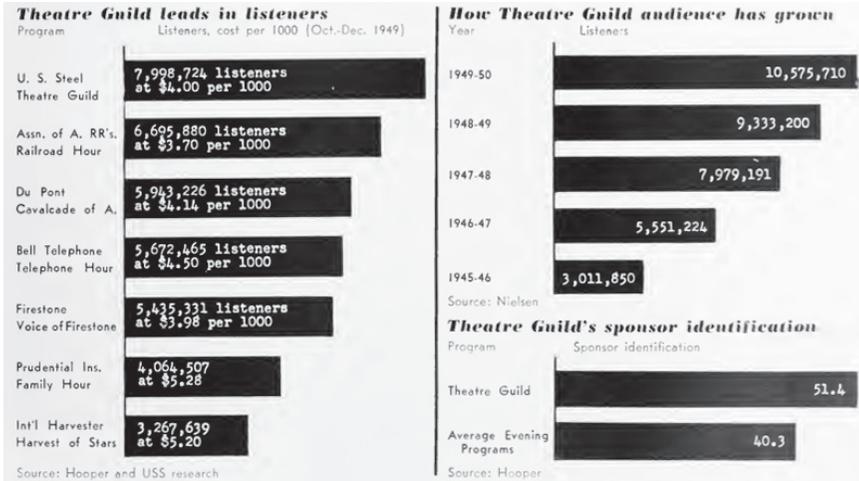


Figure 6. Detail, “Steel Melts the Public” (*Sponsor*, March 13, 1950, 25).

to order certain material used on the program” and “complete control over casting,” not expecting it to agree.<sup>154</sup> Newton, the BBDO executive, pointed out, “As a practical matter, this would take *all* control from the Theatre Guild. It is obviously an impossible arrangement.”<sup>155</sup> By July 1950, a month after publication of *Red Channels*, BBDO’s George Kondolf, a theater director turned radio director, took on new directing responsibilities for *TGOTA*, probably as a compromise to preserve the Guild’s sense of autonomy and yet provide BBDO more direct oversight.<sup>156</sup> By September 1951, an organizational chart of BBDO staff working on the US Steel account lists Jack Wren as providing “Personnel Research,” along with a Gwen Owen (Figure 7).<sup>157</sup> How actively Wren and Owen provided “clearance” of *TGOTA* casts is not clear, but BBDO had officially assigned Wren to work on the program.

151 Barton, memo, August 22, 1949, 80/USS/BB.

152 Newton to Duffy, February 8, 1950, 80/USS/BB.

153 “Steel Melts the Public,” 25.

154 Newton to Duffy, April 3, 1950, 80/USS/BB.

155 Ibid.

156 Newton to Duffy, July 14, 1950, 80/USS/BB.

157 “BBDO Organizational Chart for US Steel,” September 27, 1951, 80/USS/BB.

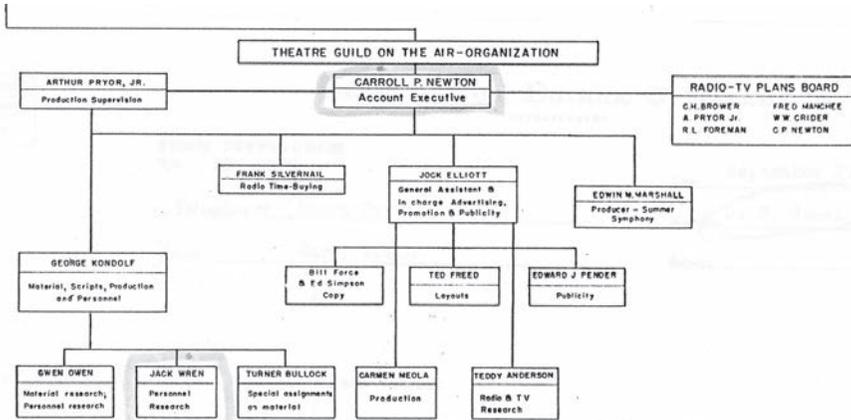


Figure 7. Detail, BBDO organizational chart for US Steel, September 27, 1951.

*TGOTA* was using up more than half of US Steel’s advertising expenditures, and US Steel’s lack of control over the program was beginning to chafe.<sup>158</sup> The Guild did not disclose its production budgets to BBDO or US Steel; it was paid a contracted sum.<sup>159</sup> In the 1949 contract negotiations, the Guild waived receiving its annual increase and in return was not required to provide its cost figures to BBDO.<sup>160</sup> In December 1950, Newton reported to the BBDO executive committee that US Steel’s MacDonald told him that “other producers and agencies had told [MacDonald] he was a sucker to pay those amounts of money to the Theatre Guild and let them make the profit they do make.”<sup>161</sup> MacDonald went so far as to suggest that BBDO pay the Guild out of its compensation from US Steel—an arrangement common when the agency directly controlled the program. In making this suggestion, MacDonald, according to Newton, “assumed BBDO, the Theatre Guild, and the network were all interested in keeping the program on the air. (I pointed out that our interest was not in this program, but in doing the best possible thing for US Steel, but this was passed right by.)”<sup>162</sup> Newton was making a key point: BBDO was a defender not of *TGOTA* but of the interests of US Steel. Although MacDonald repeatedly assured Newton that he was “satisfied with the relationship with the agency,” BBDO was on notice that it could lose US Steel as a client because of its dissatisfaction with *TGOTA*.<sup>163</sup> This probably galled Newton: BBDO did not control the program only because US Steel had chosen to give the Guild so much autonomy over BBDO’s objections.

158 “Steel Melts the Public,” 24.

159 In a proposed budget for 1950–1951, US Steel would pay \$14,000 per episode to the Theatre Guild and a talent commission of \$2,190 to BBDO. Memo, April 3, 1950, 80/USS/BB. Airtime was a separate expense for US Steel. For a January 1949 episode, Katharine Hepburn was paid \$2,500. Contract, December 16, 1948, box 25, folder 3, Katharine Hepburn Papers, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

160 Newton to Duffy, March 28, 1949, 80/USS/BB.

161 Newton to Duffy, December 14, 1950, 80/USS/BB.

162 Newton to Duffy, April 3, 1950, 80/USS/BB.

163 Newton to Duffy, December 14, 1950, 80/USS/BB.

Meanwhile, in mid-1950 US Steel anticipated that the Antitrust Division of the Justice Department would soon file a dissolution suit to break up the company. BBDO advised US Steel repeatedly to anticipate the suit by mounting an advertising campaign “in praise of bigness,” and by humanizing itself as a “good neighbor” in its communities.<sup>164</sup> US Steel canceled the campaign, in part because it believed that with the advent of the Korean War in June 1950, as Newton explained, “large corporations will again become something to be thankful for, rather than the many-headed dragons they have been for the past few years.”<sup>165</sup> In fact, regulators did back off on trying to break up US Steel and instead provided “carrots” such as wage caps and new tax policies to encourage it to expand steel production for the war effort.<sup>166</sup> In December 1950, CEO Fairless, in his message on *TGOTA*, referred to the Korean conflict obliquely as “the grave responsibilities of an uncertain future” and promised that “the growth and security of our country will never be endangered by any shortage of steel.”<sup>167</sup> Hicks finished the broadcast with an announcement that “Americans are engaged in a worldwide struggle of ideas, devotion to individual liberty versus adherence to the all powerful state. . . . Let’s resolve to lead daily lives that prove that freedom works.”<sup>168</sup> Nonetheless, at the end of 1950, US Steel continued to debate whether to retain the Guild or to move into television with a new program, which BBDO favored. Newton reported to Ben Duffy, the president of BBDO, that “Mr. Olds and the Board are very proud of their radio show, and they all feel that the Theatre Guild should be able to do relatively a much better job on TV”; BBDO was to start negotiations with the Guild accordingly.<sup>169</sup> Newton also reported that MacDonald acknowledged that he “personally does not like change and neither do others of their top officials.”<sup>170</sup>

During 1951, US Steel dithered about moving *TGOTA* to television; it also considered using agencies other than BBDO for a new television program.<sup>171</sup> This probably frustrated BBDO executives, who believed that they should have more control over US Steel’s program. MacDonald fretted that a one-hour program would be too expensive on television and proposed a half hour, which was unacceptable to the Guild.<sup>172</sup> Certain US Steel board members believed *TGOTA* cost too much (roughly \$1 million a year) and presented “violent opposition” to continuing it.<sup>173</sup> BBDO countered US Steel’s concerns over expense with a chart showing that US Steel spent less than a penny per “dollar of sales” on its public relations expenditures.<sup>174</sup>

164 Newton to Barton, July 31, 1950; presentation, January 9, 1950, 10, 80/USS/BB.

165 Newton to Barton, July 31, 1950, 80/USS/BB.

166 Stein, *Running Steel, Running America*, 14.

167 *State Fair, TGOTA*, broadcast December 31, 1950.

168 *Ibid.*

169 Newton to Duffy, October 24, 1950, 80/USS/BB.

170 *Ibid.*

171 Newton to Duffy, May 17, 1951, 80/USS/BB.

172 *Ibid.*; Newton to Duffy, September 13, 1951, 80/USS/BB.

173 Newton to Duffy, September 13, 1951, 80/USS/BB.

174 Newton to Barton, June 22, 1951, 80/USS/BB.

By 1952, the political climate had changed, and BBDO was taking a more aggressive approach to US Steel. The pressure on sponsors to blacklist had increased; the shift to television raised the stakes because television was considered an even more powerful medium than radio. BBDO president Duffy wrote MacDonald in the spring of 1952 explaining the agency's view of its role and that of its advertising. Pointing out that occasionally "advertising designed to create good will for a client has the opposite effect when exposed to the public," Duffy continued: "we are anxious to have our advertising do good rather than harm."<sup>175</sup> Explaining that "our personal thoughts or beliefs have nothing to do with what follows" and that some accused performers may be innocent, Duffy argued:

[T]his has nothing to do with whether or not they should be used on one of our clients' programs. If there is a finger of guilt pointed to them by the average American—or a segment of the American public—which could react unfavorably to the overall success of our advertising, we should be careful.

It is our feeling that if one is running his own business and has complete say over the use of actors and actresses, the decision would be relatively easy because any penalty involved would be suffered by the individual. In the case of a corporation like the United States Steel Corporation however, where the stock interests are widespread and ownership covers various segments of the American people, we should be extra careful not to offend. The loss is not an individual loss, but a corporate loss spread over all the stockholders.<sup>176</sup>

Having described US Steel stockholders in its institutional advertising as regular, middle-class Americans, including its own hundreds of thousands of workers, Duffy turned the corporate liberalism of US Steel's advertising toward the illiberal goal of discrimination based on political beliefs. Knowing that US Steel sought social legitimacy, Duffy warned that it could harm those it claimed to be helping, its stockholders and employees, if it did not engage in blacklisting. Because the Guild had cast performers who might have an "opposite effect" on its public relations, "and at least one other is scheduled to appear" (probably Ruth Gordon in May 1952), Duffy went on to explain, "we want to go on record that your agency did and does recommend against the use of such talent."<sup>177</sup> Duffy pointed out that the question was not these performers' guilt or innocence, but that "it is simply a question of the public reaction to the corporation which sponsors them" and that "we believe in protecting the advertiser's interest."<sup>178</sup> Duffy concluded, "Contractually, neither you nor we as your agents have the right of approval of casts. We want to recommend as strongly as we can that no future contract with the Theatre Guild . . . be approved without this right spelled out unequivocally."<sup>179</sup>

175 Duffy to MacDonald, December 11, 1952, 81/USS/BB. This is the letter's "copy date," but I believe this is a copy of the letter sent in the spring of 1952 that Newton mentions in his letter of November 3, 1952, 81/USS/BB.

176 *Ibid.*

177 *Ibid.*

178 *Ibid.*

179 *Ibid.*

Duffy wrote MacDonald again in July 1952 that US Steel should either insist on a contract clause providing it with casting control or cancel *TGOTA*. Duffy pointed out that the Guild had “flatly refused to accept any clause legally giving US Steel the right to disapprove personnel.”<sup>180</sup> Furthermore, “it is our firm belief that decisions which can do such great harm to the public relations of US Steel should be wholly in your hands, with full responsibility for advice and recommendation placed upon your agency, rather than entrusted to *any* third party.”<sup>181</sup> In Duffy’s view, the Theatre Guild was an irresponsible “third party” whose goals did not match US Steel’s.

BBDO at length managed to institute “whitelisting” at *TGOTA*, in which only performers who had already been preapproved would be cast. In November 1952, Newton wrote MacDonald explaining that a new procedure would be followed to prevent “any occurrence that would create bad public relations and thus tend to negate the good effects for which you spend very substantial sums of money”:<sup>182</sup>

Our experience has convinced us that we *cannot get proof* of the validity of charges that have been made against certain performers. . . . The best way we as an agency can serve our clients in this respect is to require submission of names in advance of engagement. . . . The Guild has refused to submit names in the past. They reiterated that refusal today. I cannot escape the conclusion that their primary concern in this stand is for their own relations in the theatre, and United States Steel is secondary in their thinking.<sup>183</sup>

What the Guild refused, however, was only to submit a list of names for each episode, which BBDO might allow or deny. The Theatre Guild’s Langner agreed instead to “furnish to us a list of names from which the Guild would agree to cast. We can study these names and make recommendations on them.”<sup>184</sup> Any future additions to this whitelist would likewise be submitted to BBDO in advance of casting decisions.

The combined pressures of the Red Scare and the expensive transition to television changed the relations among US Steel, the Theatre Guild, and BBDO. By the time *TGOTA* became the television program *The United States Steel Hour* in 1953, the system for vetting the talent was well in place (Figure 8). The title change allowed US Steel and BBDO the option to replace its producer without having to rename the program and lose sponsor identification. The Guild gave up its brand identity in the program and submitted lists for preapproval by BBDO from which it would cast. And some actors who had been blacklisted, such as Kim Hunter, eventually began to appear on *The United States Steel Hour*.<sup>185</sup> Until 1963 the television program continued the aims of *TGOTA*: the Theatre Guild presented edited plays, headlined by stars, to

180 Duffy to MacDonald, July 3, 1952, 81/USS/BB.

181 Emphasis in original. Ibid.

182 Newton to MacDonald, November 3, 1952, 81/USS/BB.

183 Emphasis in original. Ibid.

184 Ibid.

185 Kim Hunter appeared on *TGOTA* in March 1948, and then on *The United States Steel Hour* in June 1956 and October 1962. Nadel, *Pictorial History*.



Figure 8. “TV Premiere: The United States Steel Hour” (Sponsor, October 2, 1953, 113).

the US economy was precisely why anticommunist activists targeted it. BBDO, having convinced clients of its expertise in managing positive associations, offered to do the same for negative associations through its “personnel research” office headed by Jack Wren. After initially defending the Guild’s artistic integrity, US Steel executives, some of whom had complained about their lack of control over the program, accepted BBDO’s offer. The agency took control of casting, retitled the program to emphasize the sponsor’s role, and so helped US Steel continue its association with aesthetic prestige into the television era.

However, as that era progressed, there were fewer and fewer prestige programs—and not only, I think, for economic reasons. The Red Scare had made the disadvantages of sponsor identification alarmingly clear. As networks took control of most programming, advertisers were able to avoid not only the heavy burden of producing programs but also the risks of a too-close association with a program or entertainer. If a negative association arose, an advertiser could simply move its commercial elsewhere. As Charlie Brower, the president of BBDO after Duffy, explained, “One sacred cow that we all believed in was ground to hamburger. That was ‘sponsor identification.’”<sup>186</sup>

Decades later, in an era when media effects are assumed to be weak rather than strong, recognizing that the belief in the power of association underlay both the pressure to blacklist and the goal of sponsor identification may give us insight into the

expose the public to fine drama and to generate gratitude and goodwill toward US Steel.

**Conclusion.** The Theatre Guild, BBDO, and US Steel shared a belief in the value of educating the public and in the power of media messages to shape public attitudes. BBDO hoped to shape those attitudes by associating its client, a much vilified corporation, with the cultural uplift of the Theatre Guild’s prestigious dramas. But during the Red Scare, worry about negative associations supplanted confidence in positive ones. The anticommunist activists at *Counterattack* attacked sponsors by exploiting assumptions about the power of association. US Steel’s size and significance insulated it, its officers must have believed, from any serious charge of propagandizing for communism, but its centrality to

186 Charlie Brower, *Me, and Other Advertising Geniuses* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 213.

rationales of the persecutors. This story of how this particular sponsor, agency, and producer negotiated the conflict between their corporate liberal ideals and the political exigencies of the Red Scare not only illustrates their shared assumptions about the powers of broadcasting and advertising to influence the public but also provides new perspectives on why the system of sponsor-controlled programming eventually came to an end. \*

Copyright of Cinema Journal is the property of University of Texas Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.