

Blacklisting Schweitzer

By LAWRENCE S. WITTNER

Thanks to the recent declassification of key government documents, the dimensions of a bitter conflict between Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the famed humanitarian, and the U.S. government are evident for the first time.

Albert Schweitzer—distinguished musician, philosopher, theologian—returned in 1924 to the jungles of Lambaréné, in French-ruled Gabon, where he had previously developed a hospital. Here, under the most difficult conditions, he worked selflessly as a physician, preaching his own brand of reverence for life. Although Schweitzer was never quite the saint that legend implied, millions of people believed he was.

By the mid-1950s, Schweitzer stood at the height of his worldwide renown. In December 1955, a Gallup poll among Americans found that Schweitzer was the fifth most admired man in the world. By the following year, his status had risen to fourth.¹

Naturally, political leaders paid court to him. In January 1955, President Dwight Eisenhower sent greetings to Schweitzer on his 80th birthday. "Your spirit and work have been an example and inspiration to all of us," the president wrote in this message, which was also issued as a White House press release. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told Schweitzer that his "contributions to the peoples of the world . . . are indelibly written into the annals of our civilization."²

Yet, as previously classified government documents reveal, within just a few years

Schweitzer became *persona non grata* to U.S. officials, including Eisenhower and Dulles. Secretly convinced that he was an adherent of "the Communist line," they severed personal contacts with him, ordered his activities investigated by the FBI and the CIA, orchestrated rebuttals to his public statements, and discouraged his travel to the United States.

Visit to Lambaréné

This dramatic reversal began innocently enough in late 1956 when Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review*, made plans to visit Schweitzer at Lambaréné, carrying with him yet another birthday greeting from Eisenhower. Behind this journey lay Schweitzer's London publishers and Emory Ross, a former missionary who headed the Schweitzer Fellowship, which subsidized the hospital at Lambaréné. They had convinced Cousins to fly to Schweitzer's jungle headquarters to see if he could rescue the aging missionary's unfinished manuscripts—parts of which hung on nails in his room—from the hazards of moisture, fire, and wandering goats.

Cousins, though, had an additional motive for his journey. Appalled by the nuclear arms race, he had championed nuclear disarmament, as well as world government. A man like Albert Schweitzer, Cousins reasoned, might be able to convince people of the perils posed to human survival by nuclear weapons.³

Visiting Schweitzer at Lambaréné in January 1957, Cousins initially broached the question of preserving the manuscripts, then plunged into a discussion of "existing world tensions in the context of . . . total destructive power." Schweitzer, he explained, was one of the few individuals who could reach a worldwide audience.

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The Daily News said Schweitzer had repeated "stale Communist propaganda."

"All my life I have carefully stayed away from making pronouncements on public matters," Schweitzer responded. "I have tried to relate myself to the problems of all humankind rather than to become involved in disputes between this or that group." Even so, as Schweitzer pondered the unprecedented perils of the nuclear era, as well as the great popular renown he enjoyed, he began to waver.⁴

Pausing briefly to inspect some baby goats bleating outside his bungalow, the doctor returned to suggest that "maybe the place to take hold is with the matter of nuclear testing." The issues involved were not complicated, and "the matter transcends the military interests of the testing nations. It is clearly in the human interest that the tests be stopped."

Cousins had suggested that Schweitzer call for a meeting of government leaders, but Schweitzer thought this "much too complicated." Instead, he would reach them, he later told Cousins with impish glee, through "Radio Oslo . . . the city of the Nobel Peace Prize!" Schweitzer had received this coveted award in 1952, and thereafter he remained on good terms with the Nobel Prize Commission and with Norwegian radio. Eventually, Schweitzer convinced the president of the commission, Gunnar Jahn, to read a message in Norwegian over Radio Oslo and to have English, French, German, and Russian translations thereafter.⁵

In this fashion, Schweitzer had his "Declaration of Conscience" read over Radio Oslo on April 23, 1957, and eventually broadcast in nations around the world. Pointing to the dangerous effects of radiation produced by the testing of nuclear weapons, Schweitzer warned that every additional nuclear explosion was "a catastrophe for the human race, a catastrophe that must be prevented."

To fail to consider the consequences of nuclear testing "would be a folly for which humanity would have to pay a terrible price," Schweitzer's message entreated. "We must muster the insight, the seriousness, and the courage to leave folly and to face reality." World statesmen were "telling one another again and again that they want nothing more than to reach an agreement to end the testing of atomic weapons." But why did they not come to an agreement? "The real reason is that in their own countries there is no public opinion asking for it." Conversely, "when public opinion has been created in the countries concerned and among all nations," then statesmen would "reach an agreement to stop the experiments." And this, in turn, "would be like the sunrays of hope which suffering humanity is longing for."⁶

Schweitzer's message, broadcast in 50 nations and covered by countless newspapers,

helped catalyze the growing public uneasiness about the nuclear arms race into broad-scale popular resistance.

In Norway, some 225,000 people added their names to Schweitzer's declaration. In West Germany, the Bundestag asked the nuclear powers to suspend nuclear testing; soon thereafter, both the opposition Social Democrats and Free Democrats initiated a tumultuous campaign against the deployment of nuclear arms in that nation. In Holland, critics of nuclear testing formed an Albert Schweitzer Committee Against Nuclear Weapons.⁷ In Great Britain, Bertrand Russell and other prominent intellectuals established the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. In Sweden, a protest campaign against nuclear weapons erupted and prominently featured Schweitzer's warnings.⁸

And so it went throughout much of the world—including the Soviet Union where, although dissident movements could not organize openly, prominent scientists like Andrei Sakharov, inspired by Schweitzer, secretly pressed the Soviet government to end nuclear testing.⁹

American unease

The reaction to Schweitzer's "Declaration of Conscience" was rather subdued in the United States. For reasons that remain obscure, no American radio station broadcast Schweitzer's message. The *Saturday Review* printed the declaration in full, but few other publications gave it much attention.¹⁰

Even among media that deigned to notice Schweitzer's statement, the response was not always favorable. The *New York Times* criticized his stand, while the *New York Daily News* attacked him frontally. In an editorial titled "Pull in Your Horns, Doc," the paper proclaimed itself "not impressed" by his "long-winded epistle." Schweitzer's message "repeated the stale Communist propaganda about how nuclear fall-out is a fearful danger" and "flouted the assurances of most nuclear scientists that fall-out from test explosions at the current rate is not dangerous at all." The newspaper suggested that readers "laugh off this Schweitzer manifesto."¹¹

U.S. government officials, however, found it less amusing. Nuclear weapons were the core of the Eisenhower administration's national security policy. When, in 1956, Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson called for a halt to nuclear testing, Eisenhower and other administration officials scornfully dismissed the idea. Stopping nuclear testing, said Vice President Richard Nixon, would be "catastrophic nonsense." To compound the administration's problem, secret government

opinion polls on nuclear testing indicated overwhelming opposition to nuclear testing in numerous nations, including key NATO allies.¹²

In this context, Schweitzer's declaration seriously exacerbated the administration's problems abroad and added to its difficulties at home. As Lewis Strauss, chair of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), complained to an AEC committee that spring, Schweitzer's appeal was "a body blow to the testing program."¹³

Naturally, then, from the standpoint of administration officials, everything possible had to be done to reduce the damaging effects of Schweitzer's message. Willard Libby, an AEC commissioner on whom Strauss leaned heavily when dealing with nuclear critics, prepared a rebuttal to Schweitzer that attracted far more attention in the United States than did the Declaration of Conscience. Carefully crafted and tactfully deferential to Schweitzer, it contrasted the "extremely small" risks from atmospheric nuclear testing with "the terrible risk of abandoning the defense effort which is so essential under present conditions to the survival of the Free World."¹⁴

Behind the scenes, the government response was less measured. In a memo to Libby dated April 26, 1957, Everett Holles, the AEC's public relations director, noted that Cousins had complained to CBS about the limited coverage given Schweitzer's declaration by the American mass media. "It is a curious coincidence," Holles observed acidly, "that the New York *Daily Worker* on Friday accused the radio-TV networks of 'suppressing' the Schweitzer story."

The memo makes it plain that the AEC must have played a role in CBS's decision to drop the issue. The network had asked if it could count on the AEC, including Libby, for cooperation if it decided to set aside time for a special program on the Schweitzer statement. Holles, however, declined to answer, stating only that "since Dr. Libby had made a respectful, scientific reply to Schweitzer I was not sure that he would want to carry on the matter over the air."¹⁵

Other U.S. government agencies also took up the Schweitzer case. That July, the CIA presented the State Department with copies of four letters Schweitzer had written to Gun-



Albert Schweitzer: Nuclear tests were a "folly for which humanity would have to pay a terrible price."

nar Jahn and to Kaare Fostervoll, director of Radio Oslo, regarding the release of his appeal. The State Department later shared these letters with Strauss and other AEC officials.

Given the CIA's subsequent refusal to declassify these letters or the accompanying memo, it remains unclear how the CIA obtained copies of Schweitzer's private correspondence. But Schweitzer believed that people—in his view, journalists—were tampering with his personal mail at the Lambaréné post office. Consequently, Schweitzer advised both Jahn and Fostervoll to address all correspondence pertaining to his antinuclear activities to a member of the hospital staff.¹⁶

More broadcasts

Despite the U.S. reaction, Schweitzer renewed efforts to arouse the conscience of the

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world against the arms race. Dismayed by the heightened nuclear testing of the great powers—and by their soothing reassurances about radioactive fallout—Schweitzer arranged for three additional broadcasts on Radio Oslo in 1958. Aired on the evenings of April 28, 29, and 30 in Norwegian, and subsequently broadcast in other languages, these messages went further than his first. They called for an end to nuclear testing, nuclear weapons, and nuclear war.

“At this stage we have the choice of two risks,” Schweitzer said in the final broadcast. “The one lies in continuing the mad atomic arms race, with its danger of an unavoidable atomic war in the near future; the other in the renunciation of nuclear weapons, and in the hope that America and the Soviet Union, and the peoples associated with them, will manage to live in peace.”¹⁷

Broadcast around the world and published in an inexpensive format as *Peace or Atomic War?*, Schweitzer’s new radio addresses intensified popular pressures for nuclear disarmament. American pacifists conducted non-violent invasions of U.S. missile bases and the U.S. nuclear testing zone in the Pacific. Large antinuclear marches swept through Japan. A Swiss Movement Against Atomic Armaments organized a massive campaign against the deployment of nuclear arms in Switzerland.¹⁸ Modeling themselves on Britain’s increasingly popular and rambunctious Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, nuclear disarmament groups sprang up in New Zealand and Ireland. Gallup polls conducted in numerous cities outside the United States during May and June 1958 found their residents in favor of halting U.S. nuclear testing by 64 percent to 27 percent.¹⁹

Most embarrassing of all for U.S. officials was the fact that, on March 31, 1958—after completing a major series of nuclear tests—the Soviet government announced that it was suspending its nuclear testing program and urging the United States and Britain to do the same. Given the worldwide demand for an end to nuclear testing, as well as U.S. plans to conduct tests later that year, this was a brilliant move.²⁰

In this context, U.S. officials viewed Schweitzer’s radio broadcasts of late April 1958 as particularly villainous. Obtaining copies of Schweitzer’s address a few days in advance of the broadcast, the U.S. ambassador to Norway, Frances Willis, claimed that it “generally supports [the] Soviet propaganda line.”²¹

On May 2, Dulles reported that the Schweitzer talks had been “reviewed by interested agencies.” Although it would “be unwise for government officials [to] answer Schweitzer directly,” Dulles argued, private scientists should “challenge his remarks,” perhaps in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*.

Back in Norway, the U.S. ambassador tried to find out if Schweitzer’s broadcasts were ghost written. She reported May 12 that Schweitzer had sent Gunnar Jahn his talks “in manuscript form, hand-written in ‘old-fashioned’ German.” Apparently, then, there were no foreign agents at work, just the determined, 83-year-old Schweitzer.²²

Even so, U.S. officials searched zealously for evidence of Communist subversion or other malfeasance. On May 2, just two days after the broadcasts concluded, Strauss had the FBI launch an investigation of the Schweitzer Fellowship, the U.S.-based organization that had raised thousands of dollars over the years to maintain Schweitzer’s hospital at Lambaréné. In three separate reports that must have disappointed Strauss, J. Edgar Hoover concluded that the fellowship was just what it purported to be: a charitable organization that funded humanitarian work, nothing more.²³

Meanwhile, cognizant of Schweitzer’s latest appeal but unaware of Washington’s fierce disdain for him, the U.S. consul general in the Congo, James Green, reported in late May that he would be visiting Schweitzer in June. Would the State Department like him to “deliver greetings” from Eisenhower or Dulles or “summarize current thinking” on the suspension of nuclear testing? In response, Acting Secretary of State Christian Herter warned the diplomat that Schweitzer’s articles and speeches had been highly critical of U.S. nuclear testing and had been “closely adhering [to the] Communist line.”

“Your visit would probably not convince [the] aging Schweitzer [of] his error and might provide ammunition for [a] declaration [that a] United States official [was] trying [to] bring pressure [to] bear on him.” Herter therefore advised Green to “exercise extreme caution and under . . . no circumstances discuss nuclear policy or disarmament.” Furthermore, there would be “no message of greeting from [a] high United States official.”²⁴

Despite these admonitions, when Green visited Lambaréné in mid-June, he engaged in extensive discussions with Schweitzer about nuclear testing and nuclear weapons—discussions he justified by noting that Schweitzer introduced the subject. In these conversations, summarized in a five-page, single-spaced memo to the State Department, Green found Schweitzer “extraordinarily alert,” eloquent, and quite sincere. When discussing the terrible effects upon nature produced by years of nuclear weapons explosions, tears came to the doctor’s eyes, Green wrote. He concluded, unhappily, that “although the Department understandably resents the fact . . . that Dr. Schweitzer is giving support to the Communist line, it should not be concluded that Dr.

Schweitzer has any sympathy for Communism or any desire to support the Soviet Union against the Free World. On the contrary," Green argued, Schweitzer was "acting on the basis of deep humanitarian convictions. These convictions happen—unfortunately—to coincide with current Soviet policy."²⁵

The moratorium

Ironically, U.S. nuclear policy was on its way to coinciding with Soviet policy, too. Embarrassed by years of antinuclear protests, dismayed by polls showing widespread hostility to U.S. nuclear weapons testing, and humiliated by the Soviet moratorium, U.S. officials shifted gears in the spring and summer of 1958. On April 8, Eisenhower secretly suggested halting the U.S. test program, arguing that "continued rigidity on nuclear testing may well lead to [the] moral isolation of the United States." In July, Dulles told a British official that "in face of public pressure," the United States "would have to suspend tests."²⁶

Sensing the drift, hardliners within the administration met with Eisenhower on August 12 and pleaded with him to continue underground nuclear testing. But the president responded that world opinion could be even more powerful than nuclear weapons. On August 20, Dulles wrote British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan that "our standing in the world is at a point where there is real danger to us in being adjudged militaristic. That danger can have consequences as serious as the forgoing of some nuclear weapons knowledge." Finally, in late August, Eisenhower announced that the United States would suspend nuclear testing as of October 31, while the nuclear powers negotiated an effective inspection system.²⁷

Schweitzer was overjoyed at the news. "I read it with deep emotion," he told Cousins. At last their efforts seemed crowned with success. "Our pact in Lambaréné," Schweitzer observed with some justification, "has surely contributed to the fact that the powers possessing atomic weapons had to give in."²⁸

Remarkably, Schweitzer's emergence as a nuclear critic did not diminish his extraordinary public prestige. In late 1958, a Gallup poll found that, among Americans, his status had risen to the third most admired man in the world. He retained this standing in 1959 and 1960.²⁹

Nevertheless, within the Eisenhower administration Schweitzer's opposition to nuclear weapon tests was not easily forgiven. At the outset of 1959, when a proposal surfaced to have Eisenhower send birthday greetings to the 84-year-old physician, Gen. Andrew

Goodpaster of the White House staff vetoed the idea.

Soon after, Eisenhower had to deal with a request from Robert Goheen, president of Princeton University, that Eisenhower join him in inviting Schweitzer to the United States to accept an honorary doctorate at Princeton. Dulles admitted to the president that "humanitarian reasons" made such a visit

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Kennedy had not faced Schweitzer's opposition to nuclear testing in the 1950s.

desirable. "On the other hand," he remarked, Schweitzer was "rather undependable politically." Dulles promised Eisenhower that he would have this matter "staffed" and then report back.³⁰

The staff report, prepared by John A. Calhoun, a State Department official, could hardly have been more hostile. It informed General Goodpaster that "as you are aware, Dr. Schweitzer's articles and speeches have been highly critical of United States nuclear test policy and closely adhere to the Communist line." Calhoun concluded that, "in view of Dr. Schweitzer's dubious political attitudes, the Department does not believe that the President should join Dr. Goheen in inviting Dr. Schweitzer to visit this country."³¹

This recommendation prevailed. A letter to Goheen was drafted, rejecting Eisenhower's participation on the basis of "articles and speeches" by Schweitzer that "have been highly critical of certain aspects of U.S. policy." Ultimately, though, the final letter, dispatched by Eisenhower on March 10, avoided political issues entirely. Instead, it simply implied that a presidential invitation to "a foreign dignitary to accept an honorary degree in this country" would set a bad precedent. Although the Princeton president did send an invitation to Schweitzer, reinforced by appeals from Robert Oppenheimer and Adlai Stevenson, Schweitzer declined. In fact, he never again visited the United States.³²

Schweitzer and Kennedy

Schweitzer had a somewhat less conflictual relationship with the new administration of John F. Kennedy. Unlike Eisenhower, Kennedy had not borne the burden of Schweitzer's opposition to nuclear testing in the 1950s.

Furthermore, in the fall of 1961, when the Soviet Union unilaterally broke the moratorium it had begun, Schweitzer's warnings about the dangers of nuclear testing served administration policy very well. Assailing the Soviet resumption of nuclear testing, the new president, joined by British Prime Minister Macmillan, urged Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to follow their lead by agreeing "not to conduct nuclear tests which take place in the atmosphere and produce radioactive fallout." This would "protect mankind from the increasing hazards from atmospheric pollution and . . . contribute to the reduction of international tensions."

In a speech later that month to the U.N. General Assembly, Kennedy said that the U.S. and British governments had proposed a ban on atmospheric testing "to save the human race from the poison of radioactive fallout." The United States, he insisted, wanted "to

halt the spread of these terrible weapons, to halt the contaminations of the air, [and] to halt the spiraling nuclear arms race."³³ U.S. officials had ceased to describe radiation from nuclear tests as harmless.

Of course, the Kennedy-Schweitzer relationship deteriorated somewhat as the government announced plans to resume atmospheric nuclear testing. Writing to Kennedy on April 20, 1962, Schweitzer reminded him of the dangers of radioactive fallout that would accompany atmospheric testing. Even the purportedly reduced fallout of the latest U.S. weapons "will still cause men and women of our generation to receive radiation through radioactive milk, radioactive vegetables, radioactive water, or in any other way. The smallest doses of radiation on the so sensitive cells of the reproductive organs are sufficient to cause the future misery in the third and fourth generations."

Five weeks later, after the resumption of U.S. atmospheric nuclear testing, Kennedy responded respectfully, if a bit tartly, in defense of his actions. "I can see no choice, as the man responsible for the future of my country and my people, but to take necessary steps to protect the security position of the United States."³⁴

Eventually, however, Kennedy began new test ban negotiations that culminated in the summer of 1963 in the signing of the world's first nuclear arms control agreement—the Partial Test Ban Treaty. Here at last was the culmination of Schweitzer's efforts, and he reacted with exultation. On August 6, he wrote to Kennedy that the treaty was "one of the greatest events, perhaps the greatest, in the history of the world." This test ban treaty, he said, "gives me hope that war with atomic weapons between East and West can be avoided." Delighted with Schweitzer's message, the White House staff featured it in a press release issued at Hyannisport. Kennedy's secretary, Evelyn Lincoln, later observed that the arrival of Schweitzer's effusive letter created great excitement in the president's office and that Kennedy "was extremely grateful to him for his views."³⁵

By the summer of 1963, then, the situation had turned full circle. Only recently considered an unregenerate adherent of "the Communist line," Schweitzer was once again regarded as a saintly, politically useful figure by the U.S. government. This reversal, of course, was not a result of any change in Schweitzer's opinions. In fact, he had been remarkably consistent in his critique of nuclear testing and the nuclear arms race. Rather, the renewed respect for Schweitzer among U.S. officials attested to how far they had shifted their position on nuclear weapons under the prodding of others, including the gentle doctor from Lambaréné. ■

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