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Claude Pepper and the Seeds of His 1950 Defeat, 1944-1948

by JAMES C. CLARK

Claude Pepper's defeat in the 1950 Florida Democratic Senatorial primary has long been seen as the result of a vicious campaign in which his opponents used underhanded methods to win. But while the 1950 campaign between Pepper and George Smathers was one of the nastiest in Florida history, the roots of Pepper's loss can be traced to 1945, when he began to feud with President Harry Truman and began courting the political left. Those two activities so badly damaged his standing in Florida that he lost the large following which had sent him to the U.S. Senate in three previous elections.

The 1950 election was hard fought, but no more so than several others, including Richard Nixon's remarkably similar campaign in California and Senator Frank Graham's loss in North Carolina. In both of those races, the winners successfully tied their opponents to various groups linked with communism. Smathers used the same technique, but Pepper had actually flirted with such organizations and had repeatedly praised Soviet leader Joseph Stalin.

Pepper regarded himself as the political heir to President Franklin Roosevelt and near the end of World War II launched a campaign to position himself as a champion of world peace through closer relations with the Soviet Union. Had events turned out differently, his gamble might have propelled him into the presidency instead of to defeat in Florida.

Before the United States entered World War II, Pepper spent nearly two years talking about military preparedness and the coming American involvement in the war. Although he was heavily criticized at the time, he turned out to be correct and became a national figure. As the war progressed, Pepper thought he could advance his political career by advancing the issue of world peace. Unfortunately, for Pepper, world events shattered his dream for

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world peace. Instead of political advancement, Pepper endured five years of negative publicity that few politicians could have survived.

Just seven weeks after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Pepper began to think about the postwar period. He wrote to his friend Raymond Robins, ". . . I am doing what I can to foster an appreciation of the necessity of some kind of a world governmental structure to be built upon the Post War wreckage."¹ In April 1942, Pepper submitted a resolution calling for the United States to join a world organization after the war.²

He believed the issue of world peace would increase his standing in the Senate, where he had often been seen as a publicity seeker. He told former Senator Sherman Minton he had "a feeling that I have gained some influence in the Senate. . . . There is no need concealing the fact that all of them have never thought that I was the greatest person in the world."³

In the Senate, Pepper was one of Franklin Roosevelt's most loyal supporters, always the first to rally to a Roosevelt idea and willing to lend his considerable oratorical skills to defend the President on the Senate floor. Roosevelt's death in 1945 was a severe blow to Pepper. The senator had come to believe that he was the logical heir to the Roosevelt political legacy and his relations with the new President, Harry Truman, were at best cool. Years later, Pepper told an interviewer, "I liked Harry Truman, but he was not someone to take seriously."⁴ It was a major error on Pepper's part to underestimate Truman.

Within weeks of Roosevelt's death, Pepper began to have reservations about Truman. At first, he wrote that Truman, ". . . has shown good judgement, good sense and good manners. He will not be a great President but I believe he will be a good President."⁵ But soon he became disillusioned. According to Henry Wallace, Pepper "spoke at some little length about his disillusion about the way things were going. He seemed to think there was danger of the

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1. Pepper to Raymond Robins, January 28, 1942, Claude Pepper Papers, The Mildred and Claude Pepper Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee. (Hereinafter, Pepper Papers).
 2. United States Congress, Senate Resolution 135, 78 Cong., 1 Sess., 1943, 2.
 3. Pepper to Sherman Minton, March 10, 1945, Pepper Papers.
 4. David McCullough, *Truman* (New York, 1992), 220.
 5. Pepper to Robins, April 24, 1945, Pepper Papers.

present administration making many of the same mistakes that the Harding administration made."⁶

Pepper saw a chance to advance his own political fortunes. Within three months of Roosevelt's death, he began to make plans for higher office. He organized groups in Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin to "work in the next Democratic Convention for a liberal platform and a liberal candidate," and a friend began to work on a "plan for forming an organization in my behalf throughout the country"⁷ On July 30, 1945, Pepper received an unsigned memorandum entitled "Your Personal Future." The plan called for Pepper to join the Truman ticket as a vice presidential candidate in 1948 and become the presidential nominee in 1952. It urged Pepper to be "an independent party regular with a personal following." The memo advised him to become "the prophet of the future . . . the most active and best publicized liberal." The memorandum held an important warning for Pepper. "The path of Pepper's significance does not lie in international affairs. It only lies specifically in the applications of the world trend in internal politics."⁸ While Pepper accepted some of the advice, the part he rejected cost him dearly. Instead of working to get on a ticket with Truman, he did as much as he could to antagonize the President. Instead of concentrating on domestic issues, he devoted his attention to foreign affairs and became a champion of closer relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Even before the war ended, Pepper began to call for closer American-Soviet relations. In 1943 he wrote an article for *Soviet Russia Today*, an English language magazine published by the Soviets, and said the future of world peace depended on the ability of Russia and the United States to get along.⁹ In a nationwide radio address in June 1945, he recommended loaning money to Russia to rebuild when the war ended.¹⁰

In August 1945 Pepper left for a tour of Europe and the Soviet Union. Although he said he was going in an official capacity as a

6. Henry Wallace, *The Price of Vision: The Diary of Henry A. Wallace, 1942-1946*, ed. John Morton Blum (Boston, 1973), 464-465.

7. Pepper to Robins, May 21, 1945, Pepper Papers.

8. Unsigned memorandum to Pepper, July 30, 1945, Pepper Papers.

9. *Soviet Russia Today*, November 1943.

10. *The American Forum of the Air*, June 11, 1945, broadcast transcript, Pepper Papers.

member of the Small Business Committee to look for foreign trade opportunities, he went at his own expense.¹¹ To finance the trip, Pepper agreed to write a series of articles for the *New York Times* and the North American Newspaper Alliance. It was an odd arrangement; he would meet with world leaders as a member of the United States Senate, then write a story about the meeting as a journalist. For, his exclusive interview with Soviet Dictator Joseph Stalin, he arranged to be paid \$1,000.¹²

He visited London, Paris, Frankfurt and Berlin, where he inspected Adolf Hitler's office in the Reich Chancellery and the air raid shelter "in which he and Eva Braun are supposed to have committed suicide. I don't believe either of them is dead."¹³ Then he flew to Moscow on September 14 to meet with Stalin. The interview lasted one hour, but haunted Pepper for the remainder of his senate career. United States Ambassador Averill Harriman was out of the country when Pepper arrived, and it fell to diplomat George F. Kennan to arrange the interview. Kennan was clearly outraged that Pepper was traveling as both a senator and a journalist. Kennan wrote that he had thought Pepper was coming as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and was surprised to learn he also planned to write for newspapers. "I recall only a sense of hopelessness I experienced in trying to explain to the Russians why a distinguished statesman, discussing serious problems of international affairs with a foreign governmental leader, would be interested in exploiting for a very minor private gain whatever value the interview might have in the eyes of the commercial mass media . . . my sympathies, in this case, were on the Russian side."¹⁴

It was not simply a matter of Pepper exploiting the meeting with Stalin, the Russians were able to use it to obtain something they sorely needed--positive publicity. Pepper went on Soviet radio to praise Stalin.

"I have had the honor to meet and talk to Generalissimo Stalin, one of the great men of history and of the world. . . . Russia's greatest era lies not in her glorious past but in her

11. *New York Times*, August 15, 1945.

12. Claude Pepper, *Pepper: Eyewitness to a Century* (New York, 1987), 180.

13. "Russia In Transition," Pepper column to constituents, September 27, 1945, Pepper Papers.

14. George F. Kennan, *Memoirs, 1925-1950* (Boston, 1967), 278.

future. . . . The people of America and good men and women everywhere owe a great debt to Generalissimo Stalin, to the Red Army and to the people of the Soviet Union for their magnificent part in turning back and destroying the evil Nazis."¹⁵

In his regular column to Florida newspapers, he wrote that the Russians desperately wanted peace in order to rebuild their economy. "For that reason I do not believe the Russians have any aggressive intention."¹⁶ In his private notes, Pepper wrote, "As for foreign policy, the objective of the Soviet Union was to collaborate with other nations of the world in keeping peace."¹⁷

The trip took four months and when Pepper returned to the United States on December 13, 1945, he encountered strong criticism in Florida. The *Fort Lauderdale News* said in an editorial, "Your Junior Senator could do you very little good in fighting communism in this country after publicly admitting via the radio that his visit to the Soviet Union was a 'great privilege' and that Stalin is 'one of the greatest men in the history of the world.' Claude Pepper believes in Communism. **WE DO NOT.** That's why we suggest that the sooner you realize he is **NOT** a part of **OUR AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE** the better off we all will be."¹⁸

Even his friends were alarmed at the trip. One wrote to a Pepper aide, "The Florida crackers are not interested in statesmanship, and they are not interested in Europe and world affairs. They are principally selfish and they think the Senator should be devoting his time and talent to the narrow interests of the state of Florida only, and it is going to take some good work . . . to overcome the ground that has been lost by his prolonged trip to Europe."¹⁹ One constituent advised that Pepper would do better to "spend more time in Florida and devote more attention to local problems. . . ."²⁰ Pepper thought his trip could "make a greater contribution to fu-

15. Embassy of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Information Bulletin, October 2, 1945, Pepper Papers.

16. "Russia In Transition," Pepper column to constituents, September 27, 1945, Pepper Papers.

17. Claude Pepper notes, September 14, 1945, Pepper Papers.

18. *Fort Lauderdale News*, September 21, 1945.

19. Moorman M. Parish to James C. Clements, November 20, 1945, Pepper Papers.

20. R. K. Lewis to Robert W. Fokes, October 22, 1945, Pepper Papers.

ture peace . . . and even if defeat should be the price still I would have no complaint." He said he thought constituents "are going to complain always when I don't devote my whole time to their petty, personal matters." Pepper said he had five years to rebuild his base in Florida.²¹ His support of Russia and Stalin drew increasing attention from the *Daily Worker* which offered regular coverage of his activities.

By early 1946, the liberal movement in the United States was badly divided over the question of how to deal with the Soviet Union. Eventually, two wings emerged, one represented by such groups as the Americans for Democratic Action, supported Truman's hard line policy toward the Soviet Union. The other believed the key to peace was through the maintenance of good relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. That group was willing to overlook increasing Soviet aggression in Eastern Europe to maintain peace. The National Citizens' Political Action Committee (NC-PAC) supported Soviet-American unity, and was allied with the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Both Pepper and Henry Wallace became frequent speakers at NC-PAC events. Wallace was committed to NC-PAC, and although Pepper agreed with its goals he did not join.

Wallace had served as vice president during Roosevelt's third term before being replaced by Truman. Pepper led an effort to keep Wallace on the ticket and the two men became very close. In 1945, Pepper led the effort to get Wallace confirmed as secretary of commerce. Within the Senate there was strong opposition to Wallace because of his pro-Soviet views. Pepper engineered a compromise in which Wallace was confirmed but lost much of his power. Although Pepper believed it had enhanced his standing in the Senate, the battle also served to tie the two men closer together and link them in the mind of the public.²²

Pepper became more and more outspoken in urging closer relations with Russia. On February 27, 1946 he spoke at the Red Army Day dinner in Chicago to raise money for Russian relief. According to an account in the *Daily Worker*, Pepper "wished a long life to the Red Army as a warning to all tyrants who might attempt

21. Pepper to Parish, December 17, 1945, Pepper Papers.

22. Pepper to Minton, March 10, 1945, Pepper Papers.

conquest.” Pepper said that Soviet people wanted friendship but “our handling of the atom bomb does not ease their minds.”²³

A month later, Pepper urged the United States to “destroy every atomic bomb which we have, and smash every facility we possess which is capable of producing only destructive forms of atomic energy,”²⁴ The speech received little coverage from the mainstream press, some negative editorial reaction, but was embraced by the *Daily Worker*. The front page headline read “TREAT U.S.S.R. AS FRIEND PEPPER URGES,” and the story said that Pepper had “collided head on with the anti-Soviet hysteria now gripping the capital”²⁵

In April, Pepper sharply criticized the foreign policy of Great Britain, calling the United States “a guarantor of British imperialism.” His speech implied that it was Britain, not the Soviet Union, responsible for the problems of the world.²⁶ His speech brought him the greatest criticism of his career, unleashing a stream of negative publicity that would continue until his 1950 defeat. The only praise for his speech came from the *Daily Worker*. It editorialized that Pepper’s speech “can well be studied by every patriotic American.”²⁷ In Russia, Pepper’s remarks received far more attention than a major speech by President Truman in Chicago.²⁸

The day after Pepper’s speech, Florida’s senior senator, Charles O. Andrews, demanded an apology. Andrews said the speech, “does not represent the feeling and sentiment of the great mass of people of Florida.” Andrews singled out Pepper’s charge that the United States and Britain were “ganging up” against Russia, but said he did not agree with “any part of his statement.”²⁹ *The Washington Post* carried an editorial entitled “Red Herring.” It was the first time the word “Red” had been used in print in connection with Pepper. “If he keeps it up he will be making a strong bid for the distinction of being America’s number one whitewasher of aggression. . . . We don’t see how the Senator’s constituents can avoid asking him where his loyalties lie.”³⁰

23. *Daily Worker*; February 27, 1946.

24. *Congressional Record*, 79th Congress, 2nd Session, 2463.

25. *Daily Worker*, March 21, 1946.

26. *Congressional Record*, 79th Congress, 2nd Session, 3087.

27. *Daily Worker*, April 6, 1946.

28. *New York Times*, April 10, 1946.

29. *New York Times*, April 6, 1946.

30. *The Washington Post*, April 18, 1946.

Before the controversy over his April 4 speech had settled, Pepper created another controversy with an article in *The New Republic*: "The United States is nursing exclusive possession of the atomic bomb, seeking globe-girdling military bases and considering military conscription."³¹ Pepper's remarks brought increased scrutiny from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the State Department. The bureau prepared a memorandum about Pepper's association with groups the Justice Department said were linked to communists. A memorandum from FBI Assistant Director D. M. Ladd to Director J. Edgar Hoover included a note, "I thought you would be interested in the following information further pointing out Senator Pepper's pro-Russian attitude." Hoover sent the report to Truman aide Harry Vaughn and noted, "I thought the President and you would be interested in the following information which has come to the attention of this Bureau concerning the continued pro-Russian attitude of Senator Claude Pepper about whom previous information has been furnished to you by me."³² Pepper's *New Republic* article received widespread notice in *Pravda*, prompting the American Embassy in Moscow to send a telegram to Secretary of State James F. Byrnes stating that Pepper, "accuses [British Foreign Minister Ernest] Bevin and British of 'desiring to force US to shed American blood so that British may rule Palestine as a colony,' and asserts that US too often supports British in British Soviet conflicts on interest in Europe and Middle East."³³

Pepper's activities did not deal exclusively with foreign affairs, but even in domestic areas he clashed with Truman. A nationwide strike of railroad workers had disrupted the nation's transportation system, and on May 17, Truman used wartime powers to seize the railroads. The workers refused to run the trains and walked off the job on May 23. When Truman asked Congress for the authority to draft the workers, the House of Representatives went along, but the Senate balked, largely because of the opposition of the Senate's Republican leader, Robert A. Taft, and Pepper. Pepper said he saw nothing which "justified the effort which was made to rush, in an unseemly and hasty manner, this measure into law."³⁴

31. *The New Republic*, April 8, 1946, 470-473.

32. Hoover to Harry Vaughn, May 9, 1946, File 94-4-684-47, FBI Files.

33. Department of State, telegram to Secretary of State, June 28, 1945, File 94-4-684-47, FBI Files.

34. *Congressional Record*, 79th Congress, 2nd Session, 5819-5822.

Although Truman expected Taft's opposition, he was angry about Pepper's position. At a cabinet luncheon in late May, the discussion centered on the railroad legislation. According to Wallace, "All remarks were quite restrained except the President's comments on Claude Pepper. He has a very deep animus against Pepper. He says Pepper's only motive is to get publicity. . . . He said all that was necessary to get 90 percent of the senators against anything was to have Claude Pepper come out on the floor for it. He says Pepper is purely opportunistic."³⁵ As a result of the opposition of Taft and Pepper, the bill failed.

Although Pepper thought he had done the right thing, his support of the striking workers did little to help him in Florida, and his opposition served to separate him even more from Truman and the mainstream of the Democratic party.

But Pepper's main concern remained international affairs. He believed Truman was pursuing a disastrous course. He wrote to his friend Robins complaining, "This that we are doing now is essentially American imperialism as the imperialists of McKinley's day. . . . They want the United States to dominate the world's economy and with our own force give shape and direction to the whole trend of things on earth."³⁶

He kept up his criticism of American foreign policy in a newspaper column aimed at Florida newspapers. "Russia is not altogether at fault in this matter, as the propagandists would have you believe. Russia is at fault. But the British are at fault too because the British are not willing to give up a lot of their colonial empire and to take the yoke of oppression off of people they have held down a long time . . . the United States is not without fault either."³⁷

Pepper had hoped that his stands would take him to a leadership position in the Democratic Party and make him a candidate for president or vice president. Instead, he became more isolated from his party and soon was mentioned not as a leader of the Democratic party, but as a catalyst for a third-party effort. On June 6, a *Daily Worker* story headlined "More Third Party Talk", said, "Senator Claude Pepper, rather than Henry Wallace, is the figure most

35. Henry Wallace, *The Price of Vision*, 575.

36. Pepper to Robins, June 5, 1946, Pepper Papers.

37. Very truly yours column, August 22, 1946, Pepper Papers.

often mentioned as a possible standard bearer. This is particularly due to the fact that Wallace, who doubts the wisdom of a third party, has hesitated to differ publicly with Truman on many different issues, but is even more due to the courageous battle which Pepper has led against tremendous odds for labor's rights. The Floridian has caught the public imagination."³⁸

The *Daily Worker* was not the only publication carrying articles about Pepper. In the wake of his speech about Britain and his stand in the railroad case, it was difficult to pick up a magazine or newspaper and not read an article about Pepper. The day after the *Daily Worker* article appeared, *United States News* carried a story with the headline, "Senator Pepper's Emergence as Champion of Left-Wing Groups." The story was unflattering both in its tone and selection of facts.

"Senator Claude Pepper has bobbed up suddenly as an outstanding hero of the labor unions and leader of the country's liberal to leftward groups. Senator Pepper has reached this position, principally, by clinging aggressively to views he long has held . . . the Senator is an outspoken critic of the current policy of playing tough with Russia. . . . In such circles and among labor leaders, Senator Pepper's name now is being bracketed with that of Henry A. Wallace when 1948 presidential campaigning is discussed."³⁹

A small publication, *Readers Scope*, carried a series of articles about possible presidential candidates and included Pepper as one of the potential candidates. He received encouragement from Dr. Francis E. Townsend, the father of the radical pension proposal which bore his name. Townsend wrote, "I think you are the logical choice for the Democrats as candidate for the presidency."⁴⁰ Pepper began to get questions from reporters about his political ambitions. On August 13, 1946, he had a conversation with reporters in which he held out numerous possibilities for 1948. Pepper said he would "not run away" from the Democratic presidential nomina-

38. *Daily Worker*, June 6, 1946.

39. *United States News*, June 7, 1946, 56.

40. Francis E. Townsend to Pepper, August 15, 1946, Pepper Papers.

tion in 1948, but predicted that Truman would be renominated. He said he would be pleased to run for the vice presidency on a Democratic ticket with Wallace and said he would rather have Wallace as the Democratic nominee. The wire service story caught the eye of the President's staff and was placed in the files of Truman's secretary."⁴¹

Pepper's positions attracted more and more national publicity, most of it unfavorable. At the end of August, the *Saturday Evening Post* published an article entitled "Red Pepper" saying "The Communist press whoops it up for Pepper because he has been taking Russia's side in international disputes. . . . When he first came to the Senate he followed the straight Roosevelt line. People said he was a stooge, a mere loud mouth from the South." The article asked, "But that still leaves Pepper himself unexplained. What is he up to?"⁴²

It was a good question. With the election still two years away, he had tried to cast himself as a running mate for both Truman and Wallace, or as a presidential candidate himself. And before the election he would find yet another candidate. He wrote to Robins that he was working "As a Democrat to retain my party status and to discharge my duty by doing what I can to elect a Democratic Congress . . . to do all I can to pull together the liberal forces in the Democratic party and the country."⁴³

Not only had Pepper become a target for conservative newspapers and magazines, but they began to make fun of him and see how many ways they could work the word "Red" into stories about Pepper.

A column in the *Washington Times Herald* is typical.

"Here's one that is good enough to tell without any buildup. On July 7, 1946, Claude Pepper, the Red hot Senator from Florida went out to Pilsen Park in Chicago to make a speech before the American Slav Congress. On August 2, Claude rose up and shoved that speech text into the

41. Wire service story, August 13, 1946, Box 56, President's Secretary's Files, Papers of Harry S. Truman, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri. (Hereinafter, Truman Papers).

42. *Saturday Evening Post*, August 31, 1946, 19-118.

43. Pepper to Robins, October 3, 1946, Pepper Papers.

Congressional Record, where it can be found today on Page A5067. He could easily wish now that he hadn't done that. Out of charity for your sensibilities we will spare you the opening clauses of that oratorical masterpiece and get right down to the Red meat: 'And I heard from the lips of that great soldier, that dynamic leader, the man that drove the Nazis out of Yugoslavia, Marshal Tito, the story of the partisan struggle in Yugoslavia. I will add that Marshal Tito, with characteristic humanity, and human interest, took me out into the stables and showed me there the horse that he rode in all that great period of warfare, his little mare, Molly, and I saw how he put his arms in affectionate embrace around Molly's neck for she, too, was a gallant comrade in the victory. I suggested to Marshal Tito that I hoped he would do with Molly what had been done with General Lee's great horse, Traveler, whose skeleton is preserved in Washington and Lee University at Lexington, Va., and that she, too, may be memorialized for all the time as a great soldier. I saw Marshal Tito's great dog, Tiga, which lingered lovingly at his feet, and I saw a republic being born in Yugoslavia."⁴⁴

Three months after carrying a critical profile of Pepper, *United States News* again reported on his activities. "Senator Claude Pepper, a foremost advocate of go-easy with Russia policy, is emerging as the forthright leader of America's more extreme or radical liberals. . . . Mr. Pepper more recently has been building a record that led some to accuse him of following the Communist line, especially in foreign affairs. . . . The Senator, of course, has his eye on the Presidency."⁴⁵

The same week, *Newsweek* also contained an unflattering article. ". . . Months ago talk on the left fringe of American politics had begun to evolve about Pepper as the best for Democratic Vice President or third-party leader in 1948. At 46, Pepper appears to regard himself as a man of considerable destiny. His colleagues believe he has become convinced that he is heir to FDR's big mantle, especially in matters concerned with foreign policy. . . ."⁴⁶ *Newsweek* re-

44. *Washington Times Herald*, September 12, 1946.

45. *United States News*, September 27, 1946, 64-65.

46. *Newsweek*, September 30, 1946, 29.

peated the line Pepper used in his Chicago speech praising Marshal Tito.

In October, there were two critical articles in national publications. *The American Mercury* criticized him for both his left-wing politics and his views on race, calling him the "current darling of the ultra-left wing press . . . who made a pilgrimage to the Kremlin for a cozy, confidential chat with Comrade Stalin barely a year after he had campaigned for the Senate re-election on a platform that included white supremacy for the South--the missionary on the make who has always tempered his liberal evangelism to the exigencies of the mundane political moment; and who nevertheless hopes, perhaps by 1948, to supplant Henry Wallace as the leader of the American left. . . ."47

The second article appeared in a magazine with a small circulation, but a major impact. *Medical Economics* was read primarily by doctors, who were already suspicious of Pepper's views of government funded medical care. "He represents, not Florida, but that vague area known as the left-of-the CIO-PAC, the American Labor Party, and the 'friends of the Soviet Union.' . . . The big red faced gentleman from Florida has an uncanny talent for making the opposition look bad. And he has no compunction about selecting facts to gain an end. . . ."48

Despite the criticism, Pepper continued his attacks on American foreign policy. Speaking at a Labor Day Rally in Los Angeles, Pepper said, "These foolish people who tell us we can never get along with Russia and encourage us to widen instead of bridge the gap between the two nations, who want us to go back to the Hoover and Coolidge and Harding enmity for Russia instead of the Roosevelt friendship, will divide the race of Man into two mutually destructive forces."<49

On September 12, 1946, Pepper made his sharpest criticisms of Truman at a major political rally sponsored by left wing National Citizens Political Action Committee at Madison Square Garden. Pepper and Commerce Secretary Henry Wallace were the main speakers. Pepper went first, criticizing the Truman administration's

47. *The American Mercury*, October 1946, 389-396.

48. *Medical Economics*, October 1946, 73-81.

49. *Daily People's World*, September 2, 1946.

foreign policy. "With conservative Democrats and reactionary Republicans making our foreign policy as they are today, it is all we can do to keep foolish people from having us pull a Hitler blitzkrieg and drop our atomic bombs on the Russian people," Pepper said. He was cheered wildly as he talked of what he called "our blundering foreign policy." By contrast, Wallace was heckled and booed several times for a speech that seemed generally to support the Truman administration. Although Pepper had been brutally critical of the Truman administration, it was Wallace who drew the most criticism. Initially, Truman said he had read the Wallace speech in advance and approved his remarks.⁵⁰ But as criticism mounted, primarily from Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, Truman backed away from Wallace and finally fired him.

Nearly all of the attention in the United States went to Wallace, but in the Soviet Union, it was Pepper who attracted most of the publicity.⁵¹ Pepper's remarks drew criticism in Florida where the *Lakeland Ledger* noted, "The Russians like Senator Pepper's Madison Square Garden speech a great deal more than they liked the one by Secretary Wallace, although the Florida Senator and the former vice president have been running neck and neck for leftist honors."⁵² As if his words were not enough to draw criticism, Pepper would also be hurt by a picture taken at the rally of Pepper, Wallace, and the African-American singer Paul Robeson. The picture would be used against Pepper in the 1950 campaign. The departure of Wallace from the cabinet left Pepper as the highest ranking supporter of the Soviet Union. Pepper remained a staunch supporter of Wallace, calling him a "great American statesman."⁵³ While nearly everyone considered Wallace to represent the Democratic Party's left wing, Pepper disagreed. "I don't know exactly what a left-winger is, but I regard Wallace as just a good Democrat who believes in democracy and wants to see it become effective."⁵⁴

Pepper said that Democrats should be prepared to vote for Republicans if the Democratic foreign policy did not change. The *Palatka Daily News* editorialized, "His statement releases any Florida

50. *New York Times*, September 13, 1946.

51. *New York Times*, September 17, 1946.

52. *Lakeland Ledger*, September 16, 1946.

53. *New York Times*, September 18, 1946.

54. *Miami Herald*, September 18, 1946.

Democrat from any obligation to support him henceforth or to even consider him as a party member."⁵⁵ Representative John J. Sparkman, the head of the Democratic National Committee's Speaker's Bureau, announced that Pepper would not represent the national party during the fall campaign. Sparkman, who was also running for the United States Senate in Alabama, said, "Certainly we don't want to send out anyone who is advocating the election of Republicans to Congress, as it appears from the press dispatches that Mr. Pepper has done. Certainly we don't want to send out anyone who is going to stab the President; we don't want those stabs, whether from the right or the left. And certainly Mr. Pepper has been attacking the President."⁵⁶ Sparkman also said Wallace would not be allowed to appear as an official representative of the party.

Pepper was in Tallahassee when the announcement was made, and he quickly responded. He said his removal from the speakers' list showed "a determination to have a purge of all those who believe in progressive leadership." He said Sparkman's announcement "is not very likely to have any practical effect on what I do." Pepper said he had more speaking invitations than he could fill.⁵⁷

The sacking of Wallace had brought Truman more criticism, and imperiled the Democratic campaigns for the House and Senate just seven weeks before the November election. Party leaders could not tell whether removing Pepper as a speaker would help or hurt. They decided it might hurt, especially in the North. The day after Sparkman read Pepper out of the party, Robert E. Hannegan, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee read him back in. Hannegan denied that Pepper had been removed from the speakers' list.⁵⁸ In fact, Hannegan and Pepper held a series of what were described as "peace talks" to work out Pepper's role in the fall campaign. Under the plan, Pepper would concentrate on liberal groups in the North.⁵⁹

Pepper saw the 1946 congressional elections as a referendum on his views with liberal victories showing that there was support for his position. Ten days before the November election, he wrote,

55. *Palatka Daily News*, September 18, 1946.

56. *New York Times*, September 22, 1946.

57. *New York Times*, September 23, 1946.

58. *New York Times*, September 23, 1946.

59. *United States News*, October 18, 1946.

"I am convinced by everything I have seen that we can and will win again a Democratic Congress by a good margin. . . . I have found an overwhelming sentiment among the people to retain and extend the gains of the Democratic administration both at home and abroad."⁶⁰

Pepper's fall tour on behalf of Democratic candidates was a disaster. Although he had bragged about how many invitations he had received to speak, most were from left-wing groups. He spoke in Boston on October 9, but his speech was boycotted by the Democratic candidates for whom he was supposed to be speaking.⁶¹ He was heckled when he spoke in Michigan on behalf of a candidate opposing Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg.⁶² He ended his tour in New York, where he addressed a street rally organized by the communist-influenced fur workers union. In New York he was criticized by the local newspapers. The *New York News* said his appearance meant "the radical part of the Democratic mixture is grooming Wallace and Pepper for President and Vice President in 48."⁶³ But the most stinging criticism came from the right-wing *New York Mirror* which for the first time used the phrase that would come to haunt Pepper, "Red Pepper." The paper said, "Red Pepper . . . From Florida, where he stands for Bilboism--for inequality in America--for 'white supremacy'."⁶⁴

The 1946 election was a disaster for the Democrats in general, and for the candidates Pepper backed in particular. In New York, Mead and Lehman both lost and Vandenberg was easily re-elected in Michigan. But the losses and the string of critical articles had no apparent effect on Pepper. Privately Pepper blamed Truman for many of the party's problems. He wrote to Robins, "The presidency is just over his head and he not only is not big enough for the job, but not good enough for the job."⁶⁵

In December, Pepper met with William D. Pawley, a leading Democrat and ambassador to Brazil. Pawley told Sam J. Papich, the legal attache in Rio de Janeiro, that he had asked Pepper about his

60. Pepper to Mike Monroney, October 23, 1946, Pepper Papers.

61. *Boston Herald*, October 10, 1946.

62. *Detroit Free Press*, October 26, 1946.

63. *New York News*, November 5, 1946.

64. *New York Mirror*, November 5, 1946.

65. Pepper to Robins, October 14, 1946, Pepper Papers.

pro-Russian views. Pepper said that he would not change his stand and did not want to talk about the matter any more. Pawley also said that Pepper had later met with a publisher of a Miami newspaper who had previously supported Pepper. Pepper told the publisher-probably John Knight of the *Miami Herald*-- that Franklin Roosevelt was a man who could look ahead five years and that he, Pepper, believed that "in the not too distant future the entire world, including the United States, would be supporting Russia wholeheartedly." The publisher quoted Pepper as saying, "when that day arrived, he wanted it to be known that it was Senator Pepper who championed close, friendly, and cooperative relations with Russia." The publisher said Pepper declared he "naturally wanted to take advantage of the prestige he would reap," and that he would have hopes of being considered as a presidential candidate.⁶⁶

Although most of the attention was negative, he was receiving encouragement. Charles E. Marsh, a newspaper publisher and backer of Lyndon Johnson, wrote a memo entitled, "Thoughts on Pepper." He presented a five-year plan he thought would put Pepper in the White House. Marsh said he considered Pepper "A Noble man, the best we've got in this country." But Marsh added that Pepper was "Really a dawdler when he is not kicked in the butt. He loves the good things of this life, but above all loves to bask in his achievements and the compliments of little people."⁶⁷ The *New York Times Magazine* said that "the rumor circulated in the Capitol Hill cloakrooms by the anti-Pepperites is that the Senator from Florida is after something bigger. They say he would like to be a "labor President--at least a Vice President--of the United States."⁶⁸

As 1947 began, Pepper thought his relations with Truman were improving. The two chatted at a reception and Pepper said, "It may be that the little frictions of the past have been largely eliminated and that in the future our personal relations, since circumstances have brought us closer together, will be more friendly."⁶⁹ But any hope that 1947 would be a better year than 1946 was short lived. Pepper had helped draft the Legislative Reorganization Act of

66. File 64-4480-467, December 19, 1946, FBI Files.

67. Charles E. Marsh to Pepper, undated, Pepper Papers.

68. *New York Times Magazine*, November 3, 1946.

69. Pepper to Robins, January 29, 1947, Pepper Papers.

1946, but he had no idea his fellow Democrats would use it to deny him his major forum, a seat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Pepper lost his seat to Senator Carl A. Hatch of New Mexico, who was placed on the committee as part of an effort to force Pepper off. One newspaper said he had been “squeezed off the Committee by a neat little bit of technical legerdemain.”⁷⁰ Pepper wrote to Robins that “by a skillful intrigue I was removed from the Foreign Relations Committee by a Senator who had some seniority in the service of the Senate over me.”⁷¹ His own party was further isolating him. Pepper took a seat on the Agriculture Committee, but clearly missed the Foreign Relations Committee. The *Tampa Tribune* editorialized that “while Russia loses a friend in Foreign Relations, Florida gains a friend in Agriculture.”⁷² Although Pepper was no longer on the Foreign Relations Committee, that was still the area he gave the most time. He continued his campaign for better relations with Russia, and gathered more publicity linking him to the communists.

In March the *Chicago Star*; a Communist Party newspaper announced that Pepper had agreed to write a regular column. Sen. Claude Pepper, Florida’s fighting liberal, is a hard hitter. His courageous and often brilliant speeches confound his reactionary enemies in Congress. . . . Look for “Pepper Pot,” a new *Star* column!”⁷³ The National Catholic Welfare Conference criticized the column, calling Pepper “Next to Wallace the Communists’ main front man.”⁷⁴ Pepper claimed that the column was one he sent to a regular mailing list of newspapers and radio stations, but he ordered the *Star* taken off his mailing list.⁷⁵

Newsweek commented that Pepper’s “colleagues now call him “Red” Pepper. But the pro-Communist left returns his affection. Only Henry A. Wallace outranks Pepper on their popularity scorecard.”⁷⁶

70. *PM*, January 7, 1947.

71. Pepper to Robins, January 9, 1947, Pepper Papers.

72. *Tampa Tribune*, January 9, 1947.

73. *Chicago Star*, March 1, 1947.

74. National Catholic Welfare Conference newsletter, March 21, 1947, File 94-1-32011-14, FBI Files.

75. *New York World Telegram*, April 22, 1947.

76. *Newsweek*, January 1947.

On March 12, 1947, Truman announced that Britain could no longer provide military and economic assistance for Turkey and Greece. He proposed an aid package to Greece and Turkey to fight the threat of communism, which became known as the Truman Doctrine. When the Senate held hearings on the Greek-Turkish aid bill, Pepper arranged to rejoin the Foreign Relations Committee as a guest, which allowed him to ask questions. When Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson testified before the committee, most of the questions were friendly, except for Pepper's. Pepper said he thought the Truman Doctrine would "destroy any hope of reconciliation with Russia."⁷⁷ To make it clear he was opposed to the spread of communism, Pepper said he wanted to "stop Russian aggression wherever it exists . . . but that does not mean that we are going to intervene in every country where there is communism."⁷⁸

Pepper came up with his own version of the Truman Doctrine, calling for aid to Greece, but not Turkey, the exclusion of military supplies and the administration of the program not through the United States government, but through the United Nations. For the first time in several years, he was not alone. John Knight, publisher of the *Miami Herald* wrote, "for once, I agree with Senator Claude Pepper in his suggestion that the Greek question be referred to the United Nations. . . ."⁷⁹ In the 1950 election, Knight would forget that he had once backed Pepper's view.

After speaking against the bill, Pepper said he would still vote for it. He realized that to vote against the measure would eliminate any standing he still held on foreign affairs within his own party. He wrote to his friend Robins that he was voting for the measure as "a personal sacrifice of my convictions on the measure as a part of the price of attaining greater future usefulness in international affairs."⁸⁰

As the vote drew closer, Pepper continued to speak against the measure, but promised to vote for it. Gradually, he became the leading opponent of a measure he planned to support. Pepper's speeches against the Truman Doctrine brought him increasing criticism. He responded by saying that given the political climate, even

77. *Congressional Record*, 80th Cong., 1 Sess., 3281-3289.

78. *Ibid.*, 3592.

79. *Miami Herald*, March 9, 1947.

80. Pepper to Robins, May 5, 1947, Pepper Papers.

Thomas Jefferson, "would be afraid to speak his own mind."⁸¹ In the left-wing journal *In Fact*, Pepper wrote that "We must constantly be reminded that Hitler and the Nazis built up their vicious system on the pretense of fighting Communism. Lots of people in this country are actually fighting democracy under that guise."⁸²

His criticism of the Truman Doctrine and defense of Russia's action became more pronounced as the vote drew closer. On April 17, 1947, Pepper spoke for four hours to the Senate to urge passage of his version of the aid package. One of the major issues for the Soviets was the desire to control the Dardanelles, the strategic Turkish straights. The Truman Doctrine, in part, was designed to keep the Russians out of the Dardanelles. But Pepper, in the midst of an increasingly angry debate said, "The Russians have as much right in there as we have to be in Panama, to be perfectly frank." Pepper complained that "the Russian viewpoint has been ignored."⁸³ At one point, Pepper referred to the Communist infiltration of Greece as "alleged."⁸⁴

In late April, just before the final vote, Pepper attended a World Federation luncheon where the main speaker, Cord Meyer, Jr., talked about the importance of the United Nations. Pepper decided that "beyond any question that I would not and could not vote for the Truman Doctrine because I hated it and I knew it betrayed America and America's stand in the United Nations which was the hope of the world's peace."⁸⁵ On the eve of the vote, Pepper changed his mind and announced he would vote against the measure.

The decision heartened Pepper, who wrote, "I never felt better in my conscience than when I finally resolved against the most intense persuasion of some of my dearest and best friends." But even Pepper realized that it would hurt him politically in Florida. He found that the change made him "subject to constant harassment at home, and generally in the nation. . . . Whatever the consequences may have been or may be to me in Florida I would not change that vote."⁸⁶

81. *Newsweek*, April 7, 1947, 25.

82. *Ibid.*

83. *New York Times*, April 18, 1947.

84. *Washington Times-Herald*, March 31, 1947.

85. Pepper to Robins, May 5, 1947, Pepper Papers.

86. *Ibid.*

Pepper's stand in the Truman Doctrine brought consistent praise from just two quarters, *The Daily Worker* and the Russian newspaper, *Pravda*. Whenever one of the communist publications praised Pepper, an American newspaper or magazine reported the information, usually adding critical comments. When *Pravda* gave Pepper high marks, *Newsweek* reported: "There was so much the Russians could be thankful for, the Moscow daily exulted, particularly their American friends . . . Wallace, Pepper, and Elliott Roosevelt earned *Pravda's* accolade by their attacks on American foreign policy, and especially on the Truman Doctrine."⁸⁷

The criticism of the Truman Doctrine vote brought Pepper back--if only temporarily and only publicly--closer to Truman and the mainstream of the Democratic Party. On August 15, 1947, Pepper met with Truman at the White House and told reporters that "the President should be and will be nominated and should be and will be elected." He said he had given up the idea of supporting a third-party movement being considered by Henry Wallace. "I think Mr. Wallace can render his best service by continuing to be a private citizen who speaks his mind freely." When reporters asked about whom Truman should pick as his vice presidential running mate he did not name any names, but clearly described himself. "Somebody who subscribes as completely as possible to the views of Franklin D. Roosevelt. He ought to be someone who can command not only the strong but enthusiastic support of organized labor and the working people in general." *Time* magazine said, "No one doubted that Claude Pepper friend of Russia and darling of the left wing was looking in the mirror as he was speaking."⁸⁸

A few hours later Pepper appeared on "Meet the Press" and again voiced his support for Truman. After the broadcast Truman called Pepper to thank him.⁸⁹ Pepper wrote to former Senator Sherman Minton, "You know there never was any question but that I was going to support the President."⁹⁰

But his public statements were different from what he was thinking privately. He asked a close friend, University of Florida Professor William G. Carleton, if the time was right for a third

87. *Newsweek*, May 12, 1947, 29.

88. *Time*, August 15, 1947, 16.

89. *Ibid.*

90. *New York Times*, September 14, 1947.

party, or if the Democratic Party's liberal wing should be built up?⁹¹ To his friend Robins he wrote that he wanted to be able to have the support of the Florida delegation to the convention in case an opportunity for him should develop.⁹² Carleton wrote him, "If the situation shapes up in such a way in 1948 for you to make a contest for the Democratic presidential nomination, I hope to God you will seize the opportunity."⁹³

Pepper continued his flirtations with the presidency and vice presidency. At the 1948 Democratic convention he briefly became a candidate for the presidential nomination, which brought him more laughs and criticism than delegates. He was forced to withdraw after one day. Pepper never recovered from his involvements with the Soviet Union and his related political activities. By 1950, opposition to Pepper in Florida was both extensive and well organized. Pepper could not overcome six years of negative publicity and controversy and was easily defeated by Smathers.

91. Pepper to William G. Carleton, June 30, 1947, Pepper Papers.

92. Pepper to Robins, March 6, 1948, Pepper Papers.

93. Carleton to Pepper, March 22, 1946, Pepper Papers.