August 14, 1951

Dear President Truman:

I have just listened to the rebroadcast of your talk today before the American Legion in Washington. I agreed with a great many of the things you had to say about how our country is being turned into a spineless, hysterical land by people who prey upon fears and use slander, guilt by association and character assassination to build suspicion and close-mindedness. And I agree with you that unless people of strength and character get up the nerve to put a stop to this we'll have no democracy left to defend against possible aggressors.

As I listened, however, there were several things that disturbed me. There seemed to be inconsistencies. Because I've always considered that you are an honest man (perhaps this is in itself an indication of how much all of us -- even supporters -- are infected with the disease of suspicion of the people we would ordinarily never think of doubting), I've decided to take them up with you directly.

In all sincerity, this is what bothered me. (I am impatient with myself for having to apologize for daring to differ with my President -- how effective is the fear of being called a Red because I exercise my right, even my duty, to express honestly the things I wonder about.) As I listened, I asked myself, "Where did all these things start? How did we get sucked into this whirlpool of fear and doubt and slander?"

And I realized, of course, that it started right in Washington. Not in the halls of Congress, where it has been nursed into such a prosperous, vicious, handyman, but in the executive branch. What set the pattern for the test of guilt or innocence by association but the loyalty programs? Where did the conclusive evidence of a man's Americanism originate but in the Attorney General's list of subversive organizations?

This is a touchy situation, I know. I do not question the necessity of a government's setting up standards to weed out people who work their way into sensitive positions to do spying or sabotage for a foreign power. But how can I reconcile this reasonable necessity with the sweeping, all-pervading snooping into the lives and thoughts of decent people who are as remote from sensitive jobs as a truckdriver? And how can I reconcile a valid security check with the wild-eyed
Hysteria whipped up by vicious reactionaries and hiators who justify their campaigns of fear and hate by the fact that the government itself is doing almost the same thing. Once the snowball of suspicion and deducing a loathsome guilt from anonymous tips and possibly-malicious denunciations gets started, say, the State Department, it is inevitable that it will roll into something huge and flatten everybody in its path — be he postal clerk, typist or elevator operator. The psychology of suspicion and intolerance quickly reaches the point where it invades all walks of life, because we're all afraid of the same thing — losing the democracy we all cherish so. "Reasonable doubt" turns into "reasonable grounds" for dismissal. What is the difference between "reasonable doubt" of a man's loyalty and "reasonable grounds" for assuming his disloyalty? When you begin to think that way, where do you stop? Is it any wonder that our own Secretary of State and Defense Secretary can be called Communists when intelligent, respectable men can fire a person because of evidence that can never stand up in a court of law?

Yes, I'm really upset about all this. I heard of something today that got me mad. It was of a man I know who is desperate, his family in a terrible way. He was a postoffice clerk, he's 34 years old. He's worked hard and struggled all his life for the security he thought he had in the postoffice. But then he lost his job in a loyalty investigation because it turned out that somebody said that he had been a member of a subversive organization when he was 18 years old. He didn't deny it, it was true. I don't even know what organization it was, but it probably was some Communist-led group that said it wanted to do away with discrimination and prejudice. He's a Negro so he joined it. Why shouldn't he have? Do you ask for a man's credentials when you're sick and he promises to relieve your pain? Now, 16 years later, he loses his job and his family's bread and butter because he is suddenly labeled "a known subversive":

That's not the end of the story. He found another job — as a truckdriver. I don't think it paid as well as the one he lost but he couldn't be fussy. Then his firm got a defense contract. He was fired again, same reason. Maybe he'll find another job, maybe he won't for a long while. What is to happen to him, not only economically but morally? Is he fairly to be disgraced because some narrow-minded group of officials don't have enough sense or decency to know a subversive from a hole in the wall?

It's a nasty story, but I dare say it's not the only one of its kind. I wonder what this man would say of the kind of "Americanism" that gives him freedom of speech
with one hand and then takes away his very bread and butter for having exercised it in a way that isn't popular any more. What kind of "Americanism" is that grants him the freedom of assembly our Constitution talks of with one hand and then ruins his insignificant career with the other because he exercised it? What harm to national security is there in allowing this man to live and work? Even if he were a Communist, which he isn't and never dreamed of being, how could he sabotage the nation's defenses by selling stamps in a post-office or driving some contractor's dump truck, or whatever kind of truck it is? Isn't our FBI efficient enough to catch a saboteur on evidence without our having to terrorize every person who ever dared to speak up for the equality we know is ours, regardless of skin color? As I to stop believing that discrimination is bad just because the Communists say the same thing? Is the President the only one who can get away with saying that P.M.C.-laws are necessary to insure fairness in job selection? That's what it comes down to, it seems to me.

It's reached the point where I have to think more than twice about writing a letter to my own President for fear it'll find its way into some dossier and be thrown back at me someday by God-knows-who. It's quite serious about that -- I had seriously to tell myself that if we've reached that stage by now, there's no use in having any more faith in anything, so I might just as well take the chance.

And that isn't a healthy attitude for a citizen of a democracy to have. When ordinary people like me begin to think that way, Americanism is truly in danger.

I really hope you'll be able to answer these questions in my mind. I want to know how you feel about these things, so I can understand them better. I guess it all boils down to this -- how can you, as President, accept the responsibility for having started the official loyalty program and attack those who are merely carrying it to its logical extreme? (God help us if it gets any more extreme than now!)? If those are perhaps unkind words, I hope you'll try to put yourself in my place and know how I felt when I heard about the man I just spoke of. I think none of us can possibly know he must feel.

Sincerely yours,

Laurence Jaeger