

Elizabeth A. Osborne

**“AN OBJECT LESSON IN AMERICANISM”: PERFORMING
CULTURAL AMNESIA IN MOSINEE’S COMMUNIST INVASION**

It is our duty to guard against subversion, to be actively interested in our government, to be eternally vigilant. May God in His wisdom put an end to the scourge of communism, may He bless the people of all lands as we are blessed.

—Charles Larson, Wisconsin Department Commander of the American Legion¹

Thanks, dear Lord in Heaven, that this was only a dream.

Lord, deliver us from the rule of the Red regime.

—Joseph A. Saracini, “The Fall of Mosinee, Wisconsin”²

On 1 May 1950, a communist army invaded the small town of Mosinee in central Wisconsin. Occupying communist soldiers dragged Mayor Ralph E. Kronenwetter from his home at six that morning, interrogated and executed Police Chief Carl Gewess, and exiled other religious, civic, and political leaders to the stockade. They ransacked citizens’ homes and raided the public library in search of capitalist propaganda. Cars parked across the local train tracks isolated the town. Roadblocks disrupted travel, and armed soldiers demanded identification cards from anyone hoping to enter or leave Mosinee. Within hours, the paper mill,

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“An Object Lesson in Americanism”

the newspaper, and other local businesses had fallen to the invading communist army. Food prices tripled and ration cards were required to purchase potato soup, borscht, and black bread.³ Nearly half the town—more than a thousand of the twenty-two hundred total Mosinee residents—marched in a parade that led to the town square, renamed “Red Square” by the invaders. The townspeople carried red flags and banners espousing famous communist ideology (Fig. 1).⁴ *The Red Star*, a special edition of the *Mosinee Times*, issued the official “United Soviet States of America” manifesto and abolished the US Constitution and Bill of Rights.⁵

This tale of communist invasion may seem unbelievable, and in the strictest historical sense, it is. “May Day in Mosinee” was an elaborate pageant conceived of and executed by the American Legion Department of Wisconsin and the people of Mosinee to demonstrate to the world how vital it was to resist the temptations of the Communist Party. At the end of the invasion, Mosinee residents gathered in their new “Red Square,” built an enormous bonfire stoked with communist propaganda, and celebrated their Americanness with a rousing chorus of “God Bless



Figure 1.

Banners are held up during “Communist Day” activities in Mosinee, Wisconsin, 1 May 1950, during an anticommunist day of activities. *Photo:* Associated Press (ID: 500501067).

America.” Yet while Mosinee was never invaded by a real communist army, the performed invasion of this small Wisconsin town *is* a matter of history, and that performance has been recorded as one of the town’s most memorable interlude. In this moment, history, possibility, and performance intertwined, so that the performance of a potential future *became* history in and of itself. In true Cold War fashion, this is a case study in which the historical event the performance represents did not actually happen; thus, this performance of a possible future is both *history* and *not history*.

Although a mock communist invasion of a small Wisconsin town in 1950 may seem insignificant in the complex web of events surrounding the Cold War, I argue that this performance of a history that never was offers a way into thinking about how the Cold War manifested in the lives of everyday people. Discussions of the Cold War often center on major political figures, HUAC, and the Hollywood Ten. My study recenters this history on a group of patriotic Americans in Wisconsin who used performance to enact their greatest fears and cultivate resistance. These are the people whose lives collectively form the basis for the community itself, rather than the exceptions to it, and determine how the community—and, by extension, the nation—will respond to the communist threat. In this way, Mosinee serves as a turning point for reimagining and re-creating a new American identity that would fit the country’s new role as a global power in the postwar era. This pageant is a historical touchstone—an imagined future that used performance to reimagine a community’s relationship to the nation and to redefine patriotism, even as it erased May Day’s previous leftist associations.

The invasion of Mosinee was a carefully planned and executed performance of loyalty, on a specific day and in a specific place. Members of the American Legion, an American veterans organization chartered by congress in 1919 and, by 1950, zealously patriotic and anticommunistic, played the role of the invading communist army. The people of Mosinee performed compliance and, in some cases, resistance (or refused to participate in the pageant altogether). The mayor surrendered the town to communist rule, the Methodist minister hid his Bible from the invaders, and dissenters marched off to the stockade.⁶ Myriad journalists, photographers, and other out-of-towners joined these players, blurring the lines between protagonist (loyal American) and antagonist (invading communist) in this drama. As the townspeople gathered, few had knowledge of the pageant as a whole; most knew only of a few climactic events, like the morning parade, the evening bonfire, and, if relevant, a scene at their place of employment or school. Endowed with the responsibility of creating a real-world portrait of life in a communist state, but with only a skeletal outline of events, the performers cobbled together characters based on what they learned—largely from US propaganda, the American Legion, and the event’s sponsors—of how an invading communist army would act and how townspeople would likely respond. While these performers may not have focused on intense acting preparation, many were dedicated to the mission itself. Much like Rebecca Schneider’s Civil War reenactors who cross time, “putting themselves in the place of the past, reenacting that past by posing as if they were, indeed, soldiers and civilians of the 1860s,” the mock

invasion’s performers put themselves in the place of the *future*, enacting a possibility that lived strong in the American imaginary in 1950—the fear of communist infiltration—by posing as the soldiers and civilians of this imagined destiny.⁷

As a case study, Mosinee engages with current conversations on immersive simulations and participatory performances as part of the “experience economy” of the twenty-first century.⁸ Scott Magelssen’s *Simming* and Natalie Alvarez’s *Immersions in Cultural Difference* are two particularly engaging examples of this trend, though May Day in Mosinee predates the immersive simulations discussed in Magelssen’s and Alvarez’s studies.⁹ May Day in Mosinee offers a way to think about how this simulation of history—or, in this case, a future that is continually re-created in the American imaginary—has the potential to rewrite cultural memory through a process of selective amnesia and revision.

I explore May Day in Mosinee in layers, first tracing the remains of the pageant itself through the archive, then incorporating cultural history to explore how the uniquely American version of the May Day holiday shifted from a celebration of workers and the political Left to a demonstration of anticommunist loyalty. As I show, this shift occurred over a period of a few years in the later 1940s and early 1950s, and the mock invasion of Mosinee was one way in which performance aligned with cultural amnesia and a rewriting of cultural memory to create a new version of a May Day holiday that better aligned with an emerging postwar US identity. Finally, I consider how the United States’ relationship to history, memory, futurity, and optimism combine to form a particular national character that *relies* on a collective forgetting of the horrors of the past in order to focus on the possibilities of the future. It is a national trait that makes it possible for the American character to be incredibly optimistic, but that also leaves the nation perpetually vulnerable to the remaking of its collective history. In this way, May Day in Mosinee is a timely reminder of how easily cultural memory can be overwritten through performance.

I. THE OBJECT LESSON IN AMERICANISM: MAY DAY IN MOSINEE

May Day in Mosinee was to be an “object lesson in Americanism—in reverse.”¹⁰ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines an object lesson as “a striking example of a principle or ideal,” noting that the lesson itself often centers on a material object.¹¹ In Mosinee’s mock invasion, the performers played the pupils within the drama itself—interacting with the material experience of a day dictated by “communists,” then learning their “lesson” as they rejected communism and reembraced their loyalty and patriotism with vigor. Designed as participatory propaganda, the pageant blended fiction and reality to demonstrate the consequences of apathy in the face of the communist threat. The mock invasion imagined the United *Soviet* States of America as a communist police state that, communist sympathizers alleged, had more in common with the Cold War witch hunts initiated in Congress than with a real communist regime.

News crews from newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and international outlets converged on the town to serve as the audience for the mock invasion’s object lesson and to ensure that the warning spread throughout the country and the world. The *Badger Legionnaire* asserted, “one of history’s most effective

dramatizations of counter-irritants to the evils of communism smashed across the face of the world last month when the Legion and Mosinee, in a joint effort, staged 'A Day Under Communist Rule.'¹² And as Francis Schweinler, chairman of the Legion program and editor of the *Mosinee Times*, reported, "Never, in the history of this nation, has a small community had the news coverage, except for a catastrophe, that Mosinee will have for their 'Day Under Communism.'¹³ On 1 May 1950, at least 142 articles documenting Mosinee's communist invasion appeared in US newspapers and magazines. In fact, during the fifteen-day period between 25 April and 10 May, Mosinee's fall to communism appeared in more than 512 articles nationally and 8 articles internationally.¹⁴

While "May Day in Mosinee" was unique in that it was the most successful and publicized event of its kind, it was also part of a larger pattern of employing strategies of performance for civil defense during the postwar era. As Tracy C. Davis ably chronicles in *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense*, US authorities became increasingly concerned by Americans' potential response to disaster, so they set out to educate the public in order to secure some level of cooperation. Their strategies ranged from the nationwide 1951 Alert America campaign to the ever-present duck-and-cover school drills (with Bert the Turtle reminders playing regularly on televisions nationwide beginning in 1952).¹⁵ As a visceral object lesson grounded in the bodies of real Americans, the mock invasion of Mosinee serves as an intermediate step between abstract warnings of invasion and the widespread practice of rehearsing duck-and-cover responses nationwide. While Mosinee's mock invasion was isolated to a single town, it was a significantly more immersive and lengthy daylong invasion in which real Americans confronted "real" invading communists. In the case of Mosinee, the American Legion created an imagined moment that was then broadcast nationally as a *potential future* of the nation. How did this imagined enactment of communist practice effectively rewrite and reimagine the communist threat for a generation of Americans? How did the performed invasion bring the vision of a pageant designed to be an object lesson in Americanism to life? And how did the object lesson for those participating in the performance differ from those who read about it in the newspapers?

Legion officials distributed the full schedule of events to civic leaders and journalists by 30 April 1950. The schedule included a brief description of the event as designed "to EXPOSE ... THE TREACHERY, BETRAYAL AND ULTIMATE SLAVERY Masked by the term COMMUNISM" (Fig. 2).¹⁶ The night before the invasion, American Legion officials staged several hours of events for Legionnaires and journalists. It began with the following charge:

"Comrades, our hour has come. We are on the threshold of epoch-making historical events that will shake the capitalist world to its very foundation and send shivers through the spines of the bourgeoisie.

"We are at the zero hour when the sweet wine of revenge against our capitalist exploiters and oppressors will be ours. We count the hours when the poor and down-trodden workers will rise and overthrow the whole rotten regime of the United States... The hour of victory is approaching, be prepared with rifles in hand for bold deeds and destiny."¹⁷

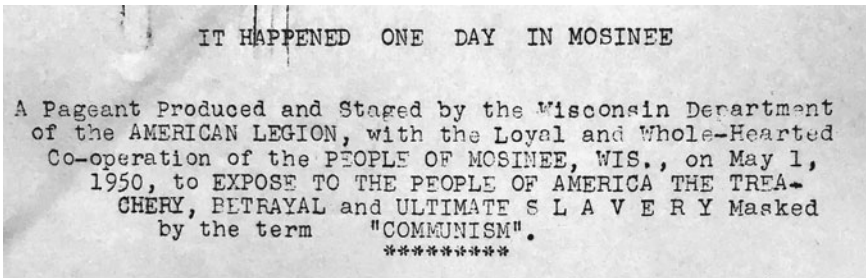


Figure 2.

Excerpt from “It Happened One Day in Mosinee, Schedule of Events,” Benjamin Gitlow Papers, 1918–1963, Box 5, Folder 5, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

At 7:30 P.M., they dramatized preparations of “Communist party ‘cells’ in Mosinee,” and at 9:30 P.M., they held a press conference where they presumably distributed the schedule and outlined the different ways in which the press could interact with the invasion.

The schedule for the invasion proper described the following events: the arrest “by Communist Combat Team” of Mayor Kronenwetter at his home; the arrest, interrogation, and subsequent execution of Police Chief Carl Gewess; the “violent seizure” of the paper mill; the arrest and confinement of clergymen; a morning parade designed to convey the population to “Red Square” for the subsequent “mass meeting” in which the mayor would hand over power to the commissar; the seizure of the public library, resisters, and the “sporting fire-arms” of John Drenkler (above Drenkler Tavern); an address to the high-school students, renamed the Youth Communist League for the invasion; and a movie theatre scene in which the current film, *Guilty of Treason*, was replaced midfilm with communist propaganda featuring Stalin. Each of the above events included a specific time and location, making them easy for journalists to find. The schedule also noted, more generally, that between the “Scenes at ‘Concentration Camp’” (4 P.M.) and “Scene at Theatre” (7 P.M.), three hours of “various dramatic scenes [would] be going on in different parts of the city—inspections of homes for anti-Communist literature, etc.”¹⁸ At 8:15 P.M., the grand finale began in Dessert Park, where:

Loyal Americans from all parts of Mosinee and Marathon County gather; “Communists” cast aside their subversive roles and join in raising the American flag. Boy Scouts burn all Communist banners, etc. in huge bonfire. . . . Then whole multitude will join in singing “GOD BLESS AMERICA” and then start peacefully home thankful to God that they live in A M E R I C A.¹⁹

The schedule of events, distributed to the leading participants 30 April and published 3 May 1950 in the *Mosinee Times*, noted that it was specifically engineered for the media and was “not released to the public in order to avoid crowds at the points of activities.”²⁰ Clearly focusing on the press, the schedule concludes with a section describing locations of typewriters, long-distance telephone lines, and a teletype machine and operator dedicated to serving only members of the media. The schedule and volume of materials that led up to the mock invasion demonstrate the careful planning and focus on the media.

In the midst of the dramatic increase in discussion of communism and performances of loyalty, Mosinee’s “Day Under Communism” served as a logical manifestation of the nation’s collective drive to thwart communism. According to Paul Thielen, the American Legion’s Director of Public Relations, the Mosinee event had two very specific goals that worked in concert: publicity and the spread of “Americanism.” Thielen’s letter to *Mosinee Times* editor Francis Schweinler is one of the first documents describing the proposal of John Decker, the American Legionnaire who initially conceived of the mock invasion:

What we plan is this: On some day this spring, preferably May Day, we would like one community, and it could be Mosinee, to teach its citizens and the entire state an object lesson in democracy by actually living a period of 4, 8 or 24 hours, a life under communist rule.

Such things as this would take place but of course it would be all “mock” operations; All town officials who were designated as anti-communists would be purged; the *Mosinee Times* [*sic*] would be closed and Schweinler arrested; . . . Boy Scouts would become communist youth groups; priests and ministers would be jailed.²¹

As previously shown, many of the events Thielen described came to fruition in Mosinee.

After Thielen’s initial approach, Schweinler helped engineer acceptance of the mock invasion among Mosinee’s business and political elite, including “67 heads of organizations of gov’t bodies,” Mayor Kronenwetter, and paper mill vice-president and general manager N. S. Stone.²² Supported by members of the Mosinee American Legion (Post 106) and the *Mosinee Times*, these individuals spread word of the event and encouraged mass community participation. Stone’s letter to paper mill employees offers insight into the recruiting efforts. In it, he explains how the paper mill would participate in the mock invasion, clarifying that, while the events would be optional, if “everyone cooperates willingly and in the right spirit, the day will be a great success and a real boost for our community.” He concludes, “Let’s all get behind this program.”²³ Stone even notes that a number of volunteers, including management and other executives, will be hauled off to the stockade in keeping with the spirit of the event. Similar calls for uniform participation pepper the *Mosinee Times* in the weeks leading up to the pageant, suggesting that participation may not have been compulsory, but it was highly encouraged.

A few days before the invasion, each citizen received a letter that included ration cards, entry permits, and a red star, as well as a letter from Schweinler that said, “YOU are the person who is revealing to the world how it is to live under communists.”²⁴ The entry permits allowed citizens to enter and leave the town on the day of the invasion, and they required the signature of the “commissar”—which many of the townspeople lined up to obtain the day before the event in order to travel to jobs outside of town on the day of the invasion. The ration cards would allow them to procure black bread and potato soup during the invasion, and photographs in *Harvester World* show that some lucky children also used their ration cards to obtain rare and luxurious cookies during the invasion.²⁵ The small, red paper stars, representative “costumes” that citizens chose to wear on their sleeves or leave at home, denoted whether they were participating in the invasion or existed outside of the imagined reality of the day’s pageant. According to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, “a tour of the town’s principal streets, showed that most of the residents wore the stars, thus signifying their willingness to take part in the demonstration.”²⁶

For their part, the American Legion operated under the assumption that the more authentic the mock invasion appeared, the more powerful the object lesson would be. They took great pains to make the invasion as believable as they could imagine. They hired two high-powered, reformed communists, Joseph Z. Kornfeder and Benjamin Gitlow, one a “former spy, trained in Moscow,” and the other a reformed Russian communist who cofounded the US Communist Labor Party.²⁷ To project further the notion of a communist military state, Legion personnel encouraged Kornfeder and Gitlow to integrate the military and political tactics employed by the Soviet army. Kornfeder explains, “As chief commissar in Mosinee, I was doing just what I learned in Lenin University: Use force to gain command, and then stamp out freedom. While in Moscow, I never dreamed I would be illustrating Americanism by using this same technique in a day of mock Communist rule.”²⁸ In many ways, Kornfeder and Gitlow did bring a sense of authentic Soviet Russia to the mock invasion—or at least a Russia that seemed authentic enough to Americans indoctrinated by decades of anti-Soviet and anticommunist propaganda. Hammer and sickle symbols hung throughout Mosinee, a vast array of permits regulated the townspeople’s behavior and opportunity, and the special issue of the *Mosinee Times*, renamed the *Red Star*, became evidence of a thoroughly developed manifesto of communist rule.

Gitlow and Kornfeder planned the invasion carefully, and the townspeople of Mosinee played a crucial role. After all, it is difficult to convey the importance of resisting a communist invasion without some population *being* invaded. Particular moments, such as the morning parade, mass meeting, and grand finale, required as many townspeople as possible. In contrast, the 2 P.M. seizure of the high school followed by student indoctrination and the 3 P.M. seizure of the paper mill—both conveniently near the ends of the school/workday—needed only the student body and mill employees. Small dramatic scenes took place throughout the day as well: invaders confiscated John Dregler’s “sporting fire-arms” in a photographed moment and conducted “inspections of homes for

anti-Communist literature, etc.”²⁹ Presumably, most of the photographed scenes were arranged in advance so that journalists would be on-site, though I have not found evidence of this in the archive. As photographic evidence shows, townspeople also wandered the streets and engaged with whatever parts of the invasion they happened across, whether it was dishing up potato soup, gaping at the “cleansing” of the library, popping into the theatre for the special showing of communist propaganda, or staging some sort of dissent and getting tossed into the stockade.³⁰

Just as crucially though, after the morning parade, the day of the mock invasion became just another Monday morning for many townspeople. The high-school students went to school. People who worked out of town, who had lined up to get their permits signed the night before the invasion, went to work on Monday morning; thus, though they participated in the invasion through their exit and entrance permits, they also left town for the majority of the invasion’s twelve hours. The paper mill was full of workers because the *Chicago Sun-Times* documents a worker revolt when the communists seized the mill and announced the new twelve-hour workday and four-dollar salary; the committee had to break from the invasion to reassure the workers that this particular communist “reality” was only part of the pageant.³¹ As many of the townspeople went to work or school, they vacated downtown Mosinee so that key scenes from the performed invasion could be staged and photographed for the national audience without local crowds. In addition to removing the pressure and distraction of a local audience, this strategy effectively relieved the invaders from the need to continue the performance throughout the entire town. They could occasionally break character, discuss upcoming scenes, skip moments that did not work well, or engage in chitchat, and at least some of the Legionnaires playing invading communists likely did so. These between-scenes activities are given credence by a practice I explore later in which photographers frequently asked for scenes to be repeated multiple times, demonstrating that such breaks from the pageant’s narrative were not unusual.

These wide variations suggest that the performed experiences of individual townspeople would have been wildly different, just as the townspeople’s “object lesson” would have functioned differently than that of the national audience. The national audience learned from the day as a whole through staged photographs and journalists’ stories—a coherent, reasonably clear plotline about the communists taking over the political, legal/justice, education, religious, economic, and cultural systems of their towns and cities. Although the people of Mosinee could learn this lesson from the national news coverage after the event, their lived experience of the invasion, fragmented as it was, likely played a significant role in their overall impressions as well. The grand finale would bring both object lessons to a conclusion. In it, all “loyal Americans” could embody the process of collectively rejecting communism and reclaiming their Americanism. They could “cast aside their subversive roles and join in raising the American flag,” burn communist banners and propaganda in an enormous bonfire, and sing “God Bless America” together in an expression of loyalty and patriotism.

Certainly, this rejection of communism was necessary symbolically for the pageant as a whole to function; the lesson would have been much gloomier had Mosinee failed to reject the communist invasion at the end of the day. Yet this critical culmination of resistance—a performative purging of communism and disloyalty and the high point of the lesson—is described only in the most skeletal terms in newspaper accounts, the schedule of events, interviews, and photographic remains, and very few details have emerged. This suggests that the finale itself was less for the national audience (which needed only the dramaturgical closure) and more for the performers, whether townspeople or invading Legionnaires.

In fact, I suggest that the finale served as the symbolic and performative lesson for the participants: their embodied, performed rejection of communism in this moment *was* their object lesson in Americanism. And I wonder—though it is speculation because the information regarding what actually happened at the finale is so sparse—how much slippage between performance and lived experience there was at that grand finale. Recall that, prior to the invasion, Schweinler sent each household letters endowing them with the power and responsibility to demonstrate to the nation what it would be like to live under communism. The invasion occurred in a nation in the grip of anticommunist fervor (and fear), in a state that produced the rabidly anticommunist Senator Joseph McCarthy, and in a town that volunteered to stage a mock communist invasion as an object lesson in Americanism. The finale itself took place at the end of a long day of a performed “invasion” in which nonactors enacted a series of scenes that compromised one freedom after another—at least one of which was taken seriously enough to halt the pageant and clarify that it was not, in fact, real. In this collective gathering, roughly two thousand people from Mosinee and Marathon County gathered together in “Red Square,” threw their communist propaganda into a “huge bonfire” and, surrounded by American flags and symbols of patriotism, joined together in a rousing chorus of “God Bless America” as they listened to speeches about loyalty, patriotism, Christianity, and the American way.³² And, recalling my earlier assertion about these performers enacting (and reenacting) a communist takeover that existed only in the American imaginary, whether or not the participants consciously connected this idea, the urgency of the war against communists permeated the event.

On a day when the line between performance and reality was already blurred, the finale seemed designed to erase the line completely. In this charged atmosphere, it is easy to see how the raising of the American flag, the burning of communist propaganda, and the collective singing of “God Bless America” could become far more than a series of acts executed by the townspeople. The performed rejection of communism might have become more real than anything else the townspeople did that day; and that performance of rejection, amidst the heightened emotional climax of the finale, the burning bonfire, and the press of the crowd, may have served as an intense performative transformation. This *was* the object lesson for the people of Mosinee.

In spite of the bonfire that was to destroy the communist propaganda from the mock invasion, the people of Mosinee preserved the material remnants of their lesson. Ration cards, entry permits, copies of *The Red Star*, and communist

flags, as well as records created at and about the invasion—photos, newspaper articles, film footage—endure. They are important markers of the day that Mosinee fell to communism, reminders that the American Legionnaires and the citizens of Mosinee performed this vital service to the nation. While we might assume that the continued existence of this ephemera suggests a failure of that cleansing bonfire, or a lack of commitment on the part of Mosinee residents or Legionnaires in their wholehearted “reconversion” to patriotic Americans, remember that the goal of the mock invasion was to create an object lesson in Americanism; the final, and most crucial, component in any lesson is inscribing it in the memory of the student. Though it was not a part of the mock invasion itinerary, the last step in the mock invasion’s object lesson about maintaining one’s vigilance against the communist threat required a historical record that would remind the American people that they had indeed “learned” a lesson. Thus, the archiving of this performance, the process of turning it from a potential future into history, is the final piece of its successful execution, and, as we know, the archiving of textual remains is a time-honored way to recall the lessons of the past.

II. LIVING UNDER THREAT: MAY DAY AND CULTURAL AMNESIA

Communism loomed large in the US popular imaginary during the 1950s. As historian Steven M. Gillon explains, “the Soviets committed the new state to the goal of world revolution and the destruction of capitalism. Communism challenged the basic tenets of the American dream: it threatened democratic government, supported state power over individual freedom, and cut off free markets.”³³ Figures obtained from the Newspaper Archive: Academic Library Edition database offer one way of seeing just how prominent the discussion of communism was in the national discourse in these pivotal years. A search for the terms “communism” and “communists” in this database for the decade between 1946 and 1955 reveals a sharp increase in published discussion of communist activity, with a spike in 1950, when the number of articles circulating in US periodicals leapt by more than 148% to 212, 299, and an all-time high in 1953 with the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and the growing power of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s investigations into suspected communist activity.³⁴

The fear and paranoia that the performed communist invasion represented had been carefully created and nurtured by anticommunists, including the US government, for decades. In the wake of World War II and with the rise of the Cold War, communism served as an important piece of the power jockeying between the United States and the USSR. On 9 February 1950, in the speech that would propel him to fame, Senator Joseph McCarthy spoke before a crowd in Wheeling, West Virginia, and announced, “I have here in my hand a list of 205 [State Department employees] that were known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party.”³⁵ Though McCarthy’s assertion and the often vicious House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigations that followed are probably the best-known manifestation of the anticommunist fervor that gripped the nation, this moment is really one in a series of escalating tensions. “May Day in Mosinee” occurred in the year that followed

the Soviet Union’s successful testing of the atomic bomb, Mao Tse-Tung’s triumph in China, and former State Department employee Alger Hiss’s conviction of perjury surrounding accusations that he had spied for the Soviets. It was a period characterized by secrets and fear that manifested in multifaceted ways, whether through intense propaganda and misinformation campaigns, the ever-present patterns of spying and espionage, or the compulsion to root out one’s enemies and the secrets that they protect. And in this moment, the enemy could lurk anywhere: the USSR, the US State Department, your place of employment, or even your home. How did the persistent threat of communism influence the reimagining of American identity during the Cold War?

Because of communism’s potential to destroy the American way of life and the fact that communist sympathies were sometimes difficult to recognize in individual citizens, demonstrations of loyalty became normalized in US society during the Cold War era. This was most obviously apparent in the federal government. In 1947 President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9835, which required government employees to swear loyalty to the US government and formed the Federal Employee Loyalty Program, which endowed the FBI with the authority to investigate the loyalty of more than two million federal employees and hundreds of businesses. It is not surprising, then, that Americans began performing their loyalty at every opportunity. Scholar Richard M. Fried documents the profusion of such celebrations, blending the history of patriotic spectacles and pageantry in the early twentieth century with the surges of nationalism that followed WWI and WWII and the effectiveness of patriotic pageantry in enlisting everyday citizens in the war efforts.³⁶ The period saw a proliferation of loyalty-focused events: the touring “Freedom Train” and accompanying “Rededication Weeks” created by the American Heritage Foundation (1947–9); the “Program for Community Anti-Communist Action” by the US Chamber of Commerce (1948); the Junior Chamber of Commerce’s “Democracy Beats Communism” week in Kansas City, Missouri (1948); “Americanism Week” in Weirton, West Virginia (1950); “Loyalty Week” in Erie, Pennsylvania (1951); and “Freedom Week” in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (1951); to name only a few.³⁷ Two weeks after “May Day in Mosinee,” mock invasion second-in-command Benjamin Gitlow was a featured speaker at the first meeting of the All-American Conference against Communism in Chicago, in which fifty-one organizations, representing an estimated 80 million Americans, gathered with the intent of joining US “forces against communism into a unified and effective body.” Gitlow spoke on the Mosinee events and argued that they offered “one of the first effective steps taken by the American people in the psychological warfare against communism.”³⁸

May Day was itself an auspicious day for Mosinee’s communist invasion. As historian Donna T. Haverty-Stacke has shown in her comprehensive cultural history, May Day was a uniquely American holiday that, by the 1930s, had been claimed by the American Communist Party. It began in earnest in 1886 with a workers strike in Chicago and quickly became “an annual event for labor’s push for the shorter workday.”³⁹ This working-class celebration gained traction, often leading to walkouts and days-without-workers so that, by the early twentieth century, many factories closed on May Day while workers attended parades and

festivals with speeches and activities for the whole family. In their discussion of American festival culture, Geneviève Fabre and Jürgen Heideking argue that “public celebrations do not just ‘reflect’ social practices and reality, but they possess the power to ‘construct’ political concepts and create cultural meaning.”⁴⁰ In this way, Fabre and Heideking argue, festivals like the workers’ celebration of May Day have the ability to shape the larger cultural networks of power and social structures. As a day focused on a specific meaning, May Day served as a constructed political concept with events that united certain groups of people and created cultural meaning, whether those events were strikes, walkouts, parades, or negotiations between the representatives of the workers and those who held the purse strings. In so doing, May Day highlighted and reinforced the power of the working class.

If May Day was a tool that leveraged the mass power of a united working class and publicly demonstrated their desires to the middle and upper classes, it also critiqued capitalism itself and those it inevitably left behind. As the political Left claimed May Day, it became widely associated with anarchists, socialists, and communists. By 1947, members of the New York United May Day Committee could be targeted for investigation by the Justice Department, and by 1948 the *New York Times* referred to May Day as a day “no longer to be reserved solely for a show of strength by Communists and their followers.”⁴¹ Historian Matthew Dennis documents efforts to “counteract radical May Day observances by sponsoring patriotic days” as early as the 1920s. In fact, by 1949 the effort to retake May Day was so widespread that forty-nine governors had issued “proclamations urging observance of Loyalty Day on May 1.”⁴² And so, when the New York City branch of the Veterans of Foreign Wars planned a Loyalty Day parade in 1948, they chose May Day to demonstrate the centrality of loyalty to American character. These varied popular entertainments encouraged widespread participation among Americans and shared the single purpose of performing loyalty to the United States as part of a new national identity. They were performances that organizers hoped would become performative as Americans—even Americans who might sympathize with the communist front in some way—actively performed their loyalty for their communities so as to demonstrate and reinforce their love of their nation.

By 1950, Loyalty Day parades, rituals, and ceremonies had spread across the country in communities large and small, and scheduling springtime loyalty events on May Day had become part of the widespread practice of rewriting American culture.⁴³ As Haverty-Stacke argues in her examination of this intentional erasure:

In the process of this revision of its history, May Day became Cold War America’s forgotten holiday. In the creation of a new Cold War American nationalism, visible in the 1950s Loyalty Day and “I Am an American Day” celebrations, the real history of May Day had no place. . . . May Day had to be forgotten in order to prioritize the emerging popular understanding of America as the leader of the free world, a nation that stood against the Soviet communist monolith.⁴⁴

Building on Dennis’s work, Haverty-Stacke describes a process of “purposeful forgetting”⁴⁵—a form of cultural amnesia—which she asserts happened through an editing process that replaced May Day, leftist holiday and rallying point, with May Day, conservative festival wherein each American was expected to perform a new American patriotism replete with loyalty. It is no surprise, then, that the Legion in Mosinee, Wisconsin, chose May Day for the pageant that would demonstrate to Americans why it was so important to reject communism and embrace democracy, freedom, and capitalism. As Thielen explicitly notes in his press release, May Day was selected because it was “a traditional Communist holiday,” and the Legion leadership felt a performance would “have a more far-reaching effect and create a greater impact than any amounts of oratory.”⁴⁶ Even Richard Fried, who researched the mock invasion in the 1980s, cites a personal interview with then-Brigadier General Francis Schweinler who asserted that, as Fried put it, “no competition with Loyalty Day was intended.”⁴⁷ The mock invasion certainly did not compete with the spirit of Loyalty Day activities. If anything, it demanded participants commit to its cause even more deeply than the typical Loyalty Day parade because these performers created the worst-case scenario that they wanted to avoid. As one more piece in the process of enacting cultural amnesia, May Day in Mosinee wrote over the old with a new pageant of American loyalty and patriotism.

In the case of May Day in Mosinee, this intentional erasure is linked to two interwoven levels of cultural memory. As memory scholar Astrid Erll reminds us, cultural memory relies upon both the sociocultural and the symbolic, and neither can function without the other. The sociocultural component points to the inherent collectivity in the shaping of memory; nothing is ever purely individual because individuals are influenced by the community that surrounds them, the media they use, the infrastructure that helps them to make meaning out of the events they encounter, and so forth. Societies, in contrast, do not “remember” anything literally, “but much of what is done to reconstruct a shared past bears some resemblance to the processes of individual memory, such as the selectivity and perspective inherent in the creation of versions of the past according to present knowledge and needs.”⁴⁸ These two levels of memory are inextricably intertwined, because cultural memory resides in the community on a symbolic level, but that community consists of individual people who collectively agree on the stories that characterize that memory, and those individuals remain subject to the myriad ways that sociocultural forces shape them. Cultural memory, then, depends on an ongoing, ever-shifting, and mutually reinforcing relationship of remembering and forgetting between the members of a community and the sociocultural context that surrounds it. Because of this constantly fluctuating relationship, and because there is no requirement that cultural memory have a basis in history or fact, the choice to write over the May Day festivities with a new performance of loyalty demonstrates an awareness of how cultural memory—or amnesia—can be reinscribed through performance.

As Paul Connerton argues in *How Societies Remember*, “Our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past. . . . And we will experience our present differently in accordance with the different pasts to which

we are able to connect that present.”⁴⁹ In other words, a community’s experience of the past—what that community remembers, what it forgets, and the lens through which it sees its collective history—alters how that community experiences the present. Performance offers one way for a community to pass its history on to future generations, and it has the potential to do so in a way that encourages future generations to empathize with, or even imagine themselves in the place of, those historical figures. By replacing May Day (the day that leveraged the power of the working class, critiqued capitalism, and united the anarchists, socialists, and communists) with May Day in Mosinee (the day in which the capitalist United States defeated an invading communist army in a small American town), the American Legion effectively (and affectively) rewrote this community’s experience of the past. And since this community’s experience became national news, it was one piece of the rewriting of the national cultural memory of May Day as well.

Following the Mosinee invasion, Fred Blair, vice-chairman of the Communist Party of Wisconsin, wrote a letter to Francis Schweinler in which he denounced the mock invasion as a “Nuremberg spectacle” and asked for a debate and a similar day in which “real Communists” could oversee Mosinee, rather than those “who were expelled from the Communist Party because they couldn’t live up to the principles of Communism.”⁵⁰ Schweinler responded with an editorial in the *Mosinee Times* in which he reinforced this “hostile takeover” of May Day:

We can say, without fear of contradiction, that the Communists will continue [*sic*] to attack the project here, for we know that such a program struck a hard blow to their cause. So hard, in fact, that it drove the usual Communist-inspired May Days right off the front pages of the papers, and off the radios of the nation. That’s hard for them to swallow, and they must try to find an angle to recoup.⁵¹

With his editorial, Schweinler interprets the Communist Party’s distress as evidence that the mock invasion succeeded because it replaced not only the communist May Day celebrations themselves, but also the public record of those festivities, with a demonstration of patriotism and loyalty. “May Day in Mosinee,” as the name clearly denotes, wrote over the Communist Party’s May Day gatherings and advocacy in the newspapers, replacing the political Left with an actively anticommunist performance. As Dennis argued, “purposeful remembering requires purposeful forgetting.”⁵² Just as the people of Mosinee rejected communism and celebrated their loyalty to the United States in the day’s finale, so too could the American people symbolically reject the radical holiday by collectively “forgetting” it and replacing it with their own performance of loyalty—their new memories of a May Day performance revolving around patriotism.

III. MORE OR LESS AUTHENTIC: JOURNALISTS, A REAL COMMUNIST INVASION, AND DEATH

May Day in Mosinee was clearly a carefully planned and executed performance, designed to overwrite the historical impact of the leftist May Day celebrations with a new version of American patriotism. If the story ended there, May Day in Mosinee would be a well-timed performance of historical interest in this small Wisconsin town, but the twists and turns continued in real-world ramifications. Whether through the influence of journalists on the event itself, the reaction from real communists, the political machinations, or the actual deaths that followed the event, May Day in Mosinee existed as far more than a performance. How was the “reality” of the “authentic invasion” complicated by an infusion of the *really* real?

On one level, the “authenticity” of the invasion itself was suspect from the beginning. Press agents wrote many of the hundreds of articles that spread the word of the Mosinee invasion on the ground during the performance, but the sheer presence of so many journalists altered the focus of the mock invasion. Multiple sources described the interference of the media in Mosinee, and it was clear that event coordinators catered to the press. Of particular note was the repetition of key events for the benefit (and often at the behest) of the news crews. Mayor Kronenwetter “was hustled out into the cold and the snow-laden street, being practically dragged down the front steps for the benefit of the massed photographers, newsreel, and television men. . . . This was repeated three times because some of the photographers didn’t think it was done roughly enough and because others arrived too late for the first shots.”⁵³ Journalists composed citizens for impact in photographs, as in the often-published images of local and religious leaders in the stockade, or the three nuns standing behind the stockade barbed wire. The *Badger Legionnaire* corroborates that the press coverage “tended to slightly destroy authenticity because of the numerous ‘repeats’ of the various sequences.”⁵⁴ And, as previously noted, the event planners distributed the schedule of events only to the leading participants and the press prior to the mock invasion with the express intent of minimizing crowds of townspeople in various locales.⁵⁵ In so doing, the coordinators ensured that the press (and the national audience they catered to) served as the primary audience for the major events. Because of this choice, many participants’ impressions of the “Day Under Communist Rule” were fragmented; they saw only those events in which they directly participated, such as the parade or the evening rally and bonfire. By design, then, the lessons of the mock communist invasion as a whole were geared toward the larger, national audience rather than the locals who embodied the performance.

The repetition the press required further disrupted any sense of verisimilitude in the performance and encouraged the performers to exaggerate their actions, so as to ensure “authenticity” for the mass national audience that would consume the imagined performance. Each time a photographer asked for a replay of an event, or suggested the performers weren’t rough enough, cruel enough, or, presumably, “communist” enough, the participants reimaged what the event was

and what it meant to be a communist invader. In these moments, the lack of a written text or rehearsal process left the performers to their own devices. As in contemporary constructed documentaries in which directors and producers attempt to create an unscripted feel, these nonprofessional performers were carefully placed into positions that *seemed* natural and then asked to play out the scene.⁵⁶ All the while, the Legionnaires playing the invading army did so as members of a virulently anticommunist organization who chose to volunteer their time and pay their own way to Mosinee in order to participate in this event. Richard Fried documents a phenomenon in which the invaders became caught up in the performance: “One [reporter] recalled: ‘One had to be on hand to realize how many persons accepted the coup as a possibility. They believed ... that the Communists were about to take over everything.’ ‘Swept away by the idea,’ *faux* Communists were ‘meaner than Hell.’”⁵⁷ For some, the line between performance and reality, acting and nonacting, became blurred. These performers may have taken an additional step into that imagined future communist takeover that they enacted, perhaps spurred on by journalist prompts that their own picture of “communist invader” was not quite *something* enough; so they adjusted for their “mistake” and reenacted the moment until it was deemed “right enough,” then moved on with a revised concept of the imagined future communist America, and into a series of adjustments that could have repeated endlessly, with a cumulative effect over the course of the day.

Even in the midst of the mock invasion opportunity for dissent remained. Some residents chose not to take part in the event, or dismissed the importance of the communist threat, as did the unnamed merchant quoted in the *Wausau Daily Record-Herald* who described the entire event as “bunk,” with no other explanation.⁵⁸ Others became tired of the day of oppression—or the restricted diet of potato soup and black bread—and ran roadblocks, heckled the invading army of Legion soldiers, or departed for the restaurants of the neighboring town of Wausau.⁵⁹ Still others repudiated communism point blank. Members of the press photographed houses where residents rebuffed all attempts to remove their American flags. One yard sported a sign with a hand-drawn skull and crossbones and a warning: “BEWARE! Any Communist caught on this property will be SHOT without pause.”⁶⁰ Another Mosinee resident hanged a “communist” in effigy. The accompanying notice announced: “This Communist tried to pull down the *RED, WHITE + BLUE*” (see Fig. 3).⁶¹

Such pockets of resistance might be interpreted in multiple ways. These residents might have been engaging with the pageant as dissenters—as patriotic Americans who refused to surrender even when the battle had been lost. The dramaturgical framing of the pageant made space for agitation by locating a stockade in the center of the town. The commissars filled it with dissenters all day long, ranging from those who planned to dissent as part of the scheduled events (including some of the management from the paper mill company, the reverend, and other town leaders) and townspeople who misbehaved in some way during the pageant. Alternatively, these residents might have been refusing to take part in the performance entirely in a way that went beyond simply refraining from donning the red star on their sleeves. They may have reasoned that *failing to perform loyalty* was



Figure 3.

A “communist” is hanged in effigy at Mosinee, Wisconsin, 1 May 1950, as the American Legion of Mosinee staged a “Communist Day.” *Photo:* Associated Press (ID: 500501076).

tantamount to *disloyalty*, and thus decided to actively demonstrate their patriotism rather than to perform an unwilling allegiance to communism in an occupied town, even if that conversion was embedded within an acted pageant designed to strengthen American resolve. While I am unable to connect specific households to outcomes, families that hung communist effigies or otherwise flaunted their patriotism could have operated either within or outside of the mock invasion, taking part either by performing dissent within the pageant’s frame or by actively performing their loyalty outside of the pageant.

Another form of resistance arose as well—this one from decidedly outside the pageant’s *mise-en-scène*. Until just a few days before the event, the American Legion had hesitated to engage in widespread publicity so as to reduce the planning time for actual communist intervention: “There are some fears lest this Mosinee stunt should backfire on us. National Americanism Director Tom Sawyer counsels not to publicize the event too much in advance for fear the Commies might figure out some way to make use of the Mosinee demonstrations.”⁶² These fears would prove to be well-grounded.

On the morning of the staged invasion, residents woke to find on their front stoops communist leaflets denouncing the mock invasion. The night before, as members of the American Legion and reporters slept, real communists snuck into Mosinee and papered the town. Leaflets included copies of the Communist Party newspaper, the *Daily Worker*; an invitation to join a peace rally in Milwaukee (as an alternative to the mock invasion in Mosinee); and an indictment of the version of communism portrayed in the mock invasion itself.⁶³ A bold accusation stretches across the top of the flyer:

SO THIS IS SUPPOSED TO BE COMMUNISM
SAYS WHO?

...

THE TRUTH IS

Communism guarantees everybody the right to go to his own church without interference and to speak his mind without fear of losing his job.

Communism is equality and brotherhood—not division among people because of how much money they have, the church they attend, or the color of their skin.⁶⁴

Daily Worker articles similarly advocated workers’ rights, racial equality, and peace, challenging Americans to reimagine their responses to the intensifying tensions of the Cold War. Mock invasion organizers reacted to the invasion of real communists with dismay, ironically ordering additional security to protect the town about to be “invaded by communists” from a real (and peaceful) invasion of communists.⁶⁵

The Communist Party of Wisconsin claimed credit for this alternative invasion, saying that a few party members in the Mosinee area distributed the literature.⁶⁶ Yet troubling this activity further yields another layer of Cold War intrigue, as this particular act of resistance demonstrated how deeply embedded the communists had become in the United States. If the distributors came from outside Mosinee, they managed to sneak past the roadblocks, circumvent security, and avoid detection as they placed approximately six hundred information packets on doorsteps and front porches.⁶⁷ Mosinee residents would have been able to move about unmolested, but that would mean that Mosinee harbored unknown communists who, presumably, performed their loyalty so well that they tricked even the people who knew them best. Ironically, then, in spite of its goals to the contrary, I suspect the alternative invasion reinforced the importance of the mock invasion.⁶⁸ Moreover, the Communist Party provided the performers with real communist

literature—in addition to the props of the performance—to throw into the bonfire during the performance’s grand finale. Again, the boundary between the performance and reality blurs as the performers—real citizens who were “putting themselves in the place” of the future, reenacting that future as if they were a part of it—repudiated both their *performed* communism and any *real* communist sympathies. They were simultaneously themselves and themselves-in-the-imagined-future.

One last, irreversible touch between performance and reality changed the way May Day in Mosinee resonated through the free world. Mayor Kronenwetter—who was dragged from his home at six in the morning clad in his polka-dot pajamas, surrendered the town to the communists, and emerged victorious to retake Mosinee at the rally—planned to use the invasion to make the political leap from local mayor to a congressional seat. As he took back his town from an invading communist army, Kronenwetter announced that he would be the Democratic candidate for Congress in the Seventh District.⁶⁹ Ralph Kronenwetter was one in a family of local politicians who rarely made the leap to state or national politics, but with the mock invasion he made national news as the mayor who defeated the invading communist army, which was a solid foundational platform in Wisconsin. Unfortunately, Kronenwetter’s political machinations would come to naught. He suffered a cerebral hemorrhage just after he took back the town, passed out in the midst of the rally, and never regained consciousness.⁷⁰ He was pronounced dead on 6 May 1950 in a story that brought the Mosinee invasion back into public consciousness nationwide. Moreover, the following day the popular Methodist Reverend Will LeDrew Bennett passed away. Age 72, Bennett had played a spirited role in the mock invasion when he attempted to hide his Bible from the invaders and was imprisoned in the stockade. He called the doctor on Saturday (6 May); the doctor found “nothing seriously wrong” but administered a sedative. Bennett planned to preach the next morning, but he returned to bed to rest and suffered a heart attack.⁷¹

While the deaths of Mayor Kronenwetter and Reverend Bennett suggest the potential for something nefarious in Mosinee, the timing of these events seems coincidental, if exacerbated by the excitement and fatigue that such a large-scale event would likely exact from town leaders.⁷² As the accompanying article in the *American Legion Magazine* asserted, “It was 14 hours of the most smashing, dramatic demonstration of what communism really is and what it means to the ordinary citizens ever staged in an American town.”⁷³ And as veteran theatrical practitioners know, “smashing, dramatic demonstration[s]” take a toll on those who produce them, particularly when those producers are not only theatrical neophytes but ideologically dedicated to conveying the material to an audience in a convincing manner. For these men, the repetition of scenes requested by photographers and blurred boundaries between the performance and reality may have contributed to their unfortunately fatal fatigue.

May Day in Mosinee was designed to be authentic—except, of course, that it was staged, produced to further an anticommunist political agenda, and performed by people who hardly rehearsed and were often unaware of the complete narrative they participated in creating. The invasion was a performance designed to

convince Americans that the communist threat was possible—a demonstration of a future that was close enough to believable to inspire fear and the resulting loyalty and patriotism. The communist invasion documented for the nation was colored by numerous factors: the Legion's agenda; the mayor's hope to use the event as a springboard for his own political career; journalists who asked that important scenes be repeated over and over to get the ideal photo; performers who based character and action on widespread anticommunist propaganda and intensified their reactions at the request of the media; and two former (and disgraced) members of the Communist Party who had a vested interest in presenting communism in an unfavorable light.

As reality and performance collided, the boundaries became blurred and permeable. Dissenting townspeople hanging communist effigies in their yards may have demonstrated opposition as part of the pageant narrative, or they may have held themselves outside of the pageant altogether in an effort to actively perform their loyalty in a historical moment when loyalty pledges were commonplace. The Communist Party's papering of Mosinee the morning of the invasion presents a jarring juxtaposition between the ersatz version of communism performed for the nation's imagined communist takeover, and the version of communism claimed by the US Communist Party. The communist invasion of Mosinee was both staged and authentic, real and not real; it is history because the performance happened, *not* history because it was a performance portraying a reality that never existed, and cultural amnesia in action because it wrote over the leftist tradition of May Day with a new performance of American loyalty.

IV. CONCLUSIONS: REMEMBERING, FORGETTING, AND FUTURITY IN THE UNITED STATES

In *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, Rebecca Schneider describes "what might be considered a particular US relationship to memory and futurity."⁷⁴ She refers to John O'Sullivan, the nineteenth-century political columnist and editor who coined the phrase "Manifest Destiny," and his 1839 quote, "It is our unparalleled glory that we have no reminiscences of battlefields. . . . Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity?" As Schneider explains, "O'Sullivan wasn't denying that battles happened. Investing in collective denial, he simply refused to remember them."⁷⁵ Here, time and cultural memory bleed together to form a country whose national imaginary is based on a specific type of communal forgetfulness. Recalling Matthew Dennis's assertion that "purposeful remembering requires purposeful forgetting,"⁷⁶ an integral part of American innocence is tied to the purposeful forgetting of the traumatic past and the movement forward into the future. As Schneider notes, it is not that the nation has not had these traumatic experiences—widespread genocide of Native Americans, slavery, the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the French and Indian War, to name a few—but that the traumas are purposefully forgotten, left on the cutting room floor as the nation looks instead to the future. Cultural amnesia is partner to the

rewriting of cultural memory, as Mosinee’s mock invasion demonstrates with its revision of May Day.

This idea of the United States is perpetually reconstituting itself in the national imaginary as a place of futurity; as Schneider notes: “History is not remembered (America has no reminiscence) as it was, but experienced as it will become.”⁷⁷ The mock invasion of Mosinee spread across the nation in part because it, too, was framed as a reconstitution of futurity. Just as Sinclair Lewis’s antifascist novel, *It Can’t Happen Here*, tore across the nation in the 1930s and served as one of the Federal Theatre Project’s most successful nationwide adaptations in 1936, May Day in Mosinee was a dire warning during a time of heightened national threat. In it, patriotic Americans stepped forward to create a scenario in which they protected the idea of America from the communists who would symbolically dismantle the nation. These people staged an object lesson in which it may have *seemed* too late to act, but through performance they were able to save their town and move toward a future nation united in patriotism, loyalty, and the American way.

The danger of staging a “real” event that takes place in an imagined future, in a nation that is perpetually “experienced as it will become,” is that the *performance* could corrupt that fantasized future in some way. In other words, since the mock invasion of Mosinee takes place in an imagined future and American identity is always already reconstituting itself as a place of futurity, in practice the mock invasion might have undermined the American ideals it set out to teach just as easily as it reinforced them. Had the mock invasion itself been subverted by the peaceful communist invasion, or the news coverage failed to infiltrate the nation, or the mayor succumbed to his cerebral hemorrhage earlier and redirected national attention from the invasion to his illness, the object lesson could well have failed. And with that failure, the carefully crafted imagined future that the mock invasion created might have tainted something much larger. If, as Alexis de Tocqueville suggested in the early nineteenth century (and the enduring mythos of the American Dream would support), optimism was an essential component of the American character, then the mock invasion’s larger framing—the representation of a communist invasion that the American people had the power to resist through their own vigilance—was vital to its success. This structure ensured that the future remained optimistic, an inherently American characteristic tied to the tendency to look to the future rather than the past.

In this performance of futurity, the American Legion and the participating citizens of Mosinee effectively created history by enacting what they imagined a communist invasion to be and then forcing that mock invasion into “history” by collectively rejecting it, purging the town of physical remnants via a cleansing bonfire, and choosing to reimbrace their “Americanness.” This performative purging was designed to excite real-world change in its audiences in their own desire to reject communism, their ability to shore up their psychological defenses against it, and their willingness to put that rejection into action should they witness suspicious activity. Originators crafted the performance from a specific picture of communism and an agenda designed to convince the nation of the superiority of US capitalism. This enactment of a potential future in which communists take

over the town passed from the present and into an alternative, consciously rejected past—an embodied memory of a communist rule that existed only as a performance. Although we might debate the ultimate effectiveness of such civil defense campaigns, the mock invasion of Mosinee certainly excited national conversation, and many of the people of Mosinee attested to the power of their “object lesson in Americanism.”

Mosinee’s communist invasion was not the only performance in this vein, but it was the most successful. While Gitlow’s speech at the All-American Conference to Combat Communism suggested that Mosinee might serve as a model for future mock invasions, subsequent attempts in Hartley, Iowa (June 1950), and Rushville, Indiana (December 1951), failed to garner much in the way of media attention or civilian participation, despite radically raised stakes in the given circumstances. In Rushville the backstory involved the bombing of major cities and a thorough purging of Christian churches. The script included the hostile takeover of a Catholic church, kidnapping the priest and nuns, and holding children and parishioners at gunpoint, as well as the discovery of a “mass grave containing bodies of 476 martyrs.”⁷⁸ These events, horrifying in reality, seem to have pushed too far. There was little community participation in the event, and only one regional newspaper, the *Indianapolis Star*, sent a reporter to chronicle the story. Even the local newspaper did not cover Rushville’s mock invasion.

Perhaps the Rushville script exceeded the limits of credulity for what audiences were willing to accept as anticommunist propaganda. Perhaps, since the given circumstances dictated that the cities had all been bombed and the communists were merely sweeping through the smaller towns to quell remaining pockets of resistance, the scenario seemed too bleak. If the future had already been destroyed, into what imagined space might reenactors step? In the performance, Rushville was destined to be forgotten as a traumatic, failed (imagined) historic battle, one in which the ideals of the United States crumbled. It had become one of the moments consigned to the cutting room floor.

Richard Fried argues that “Mosinee proved a disappointing precedent in anti-communist pageantry,” and Mosinee did indeed fail to inspire a series of anti-communist or loyalty-oriented pageants.⁷⁹ However, May Day in Mosinee demonstrates something much more important. Cultural memory cannot survive without cultural amnesia. In the United States, this amnesia is only amplified by the peculiar innocence that characterizes American identity as oriented toward the future rather than the past or present; history is easily written over, altered, or forgotten as the nation looks to the future. May Day had been one thing in the United States: a day that brought the workers together to advocate, celebrate accomplishments, and create unity, and that eventually came to incorporate the political Left and to critique capitalism and those who benefited most from the capitalist system. By the early 1950s, May Day had become something different: a day for Loyalty Day parades, rituals, and ceremonies. May Day in Mosinee was one of many examples of Matthew Dennis’s “purposeful forgetting,” Schneider’s “collective denial,” or what I am calling cultural amnesia, in which the nation’s past is reassembled through a process of remembering and forgetting that edits out those moments that no longer fit with an emerging national identity.

Beyond its immediate anticommunist impact, Mosinee also serves as an important reminder of the many ways performance can be leveraged, and that performance itself is neither inherently progressive nor inherently conservative. By using performance to create this imagined future, replete with an imagined idea of what communism was and how it could manifest here in the United States, May Day in Mosinee appropriated performance—a tool often used by the political Left—effectively to overwrite May Day. In essence, anticommunist and conservative factions used performance to rewrite cultural memory in a process that began one fateful day in 1950 with an imagined invasion of a small town in Wisconsin, one that could be Any Town, USA.

As we sit in the midst of the “Make America Great Again” regime, and the nation glances briefly backward before reconstituting itself as a “great nation”—an idealized concept that again exists in an imagined future—we witness performances all around us. We must remember how easily performances can rewrite, reinscribe, and incite cultural amnesia. Performances of history (or imagined futures) are more *real* to most people than is actual history; this is both a possibility and a warning that theatre and performance scholars, practitioners, and educators ignore at our peril.

ENDNOTES

1. Quoted in “Mosinee’s May Day Ends on Note of Relationship between Christianity and Democracy,” *Mosinee Times*, 3 May 1950, 1, 10, at 1.
2. Joseph A. Saracini, “The Fall of Mosinee, Wisconsin,” *Mosinee Times*, 3 May 1950, 3.
3. “It Happened One Day in Mosinee: Wisconsin City Residents Get a Peek at the Iron Curtain,” *American Legion Magazine* 48 (June 1950): 32. The title of this article parodies Sinclair Lewis’s semisatirical 1935 novel, *It Can’t Happen Here*.
4. G. F. Zimmerman, “Iron Curtain Day: Citizens of Mosinee, Wisconsin Stage ‘Communist Coup’ on May Day,” *Harvester World* 41.5 (May 1950): 6–11, at 6.
5. *The Red Star* 1.1 (1 May 1950). In addition to its inclusion in the microfilm of the *Mosinee Times*, this special issue is available in the collection “American Legion. Wisconsin Records, 1919–1969” at the Wisconsin Historical Society and the Benjamin Gitlow Papers at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte.
6. Richard M. Fried, *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 72–3.
7. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 9.
8. B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*, rev. ed. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2011).
9. Scott Magelssen, *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014); Natalie Alvarez, *Immersion in Cultural Difference: Tourism, War, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).
10. Zimmerman, 6.
11. See “object, n.,” *OED Online*, December 2018, Oxford University Press; www.oed.com/view/Entry/129613?redirectedFrom=object+lesson#eid34071559, accessed 23 February 2019.
12. “Legion’s ‘Red Coup’ at Mosinee Smashes across Face of World,” *Badger Legionnaire* 27.6 (June 1950): 1–2, at 1. The *Badger Legionnaire* lists thirty-seven specific news outlets as part of the “known line-up” covering the mock invasion, including the following: newspapers—*Detroit*

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News, Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun-Times, Milwaukee Sentinel, Milwaukee Journal, Minneapolis Star, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Philadelphia Inquirer, and Houston Chronicle; radio—WFHR in Wisconsin Rapids, WWJ in Detroit, and WTMJ in Milwaukee; radio networks—CBS, NBC, and Mutual; newsreels—Paramount News, News of the Day, Fox Movietone, Universal News, and Warner—Pathé News; television—NBC and WWJ.

13. “News Coverage for ‘May Day’ Greatest in City’s History,” *Mosinee (Wisconsin) Times*, 26 April 1950, 1.

14. Figures are based on records in Newspaper Archive: Academic Library Edition, which includes many small, local newspapers and periodicals, and excludes most national and international newspapers and magazines.

15. While invasion by communists and nuclear war are certainly not the same thing, I group them here as part of a similar practice of using the elements of rehearsal and performance to train citizens to respond to civic dangers in particular ways. Tracy C. Davis, *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 23–5, 106–7.

16. Original typography is indicated throughout all such quotations. “It Happened One Day in Mosinee, Schedule of Events,” Benjamin Gitlow Papers, 1918–1963, Box 5, Folder 5, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University [hereafter Gitlow, HIA].

17. Benjamin Gitlow, quoted in “Mosinee Seized by Reds: Security Police Stage Coup while City Sleeps,” *Wausau (Wisconsin) Daily Record-Herald*, 1 May 1950, 1.

18. “It Happened One Day in Mosinee, Schedule,” Gitlow, HIA. For photos of some of the day’s events, see “U.S. Town Stages a Communist Coup,” *Life* 28.20 (15 May 1950): 46–7.

19. “It Happened One Day in Mosinee, Schedule,” Gitlow, HIA.

20. “Mosinee’s May Day Ends,” 1, 10.

21. Paul F. Thielen to Francis Schweinler, 2 February 1950, American Legion, Wisconsin Records, 1919–1969, Wisconsin Historical Society [hereafter American Legion, WR/WHS].

22. Quoted from handwritten note addressed to Paul Thielen on copy of letter. Francis F. Schweinler to various, 8 April 1950, American Legion, WR/WHS. Paul F. Thielen to G. E. Sipple, 13 April 1950, American Legion, WR/WHS.

23. N. S. Stone to employees, memorandum, 28 April 1950, Mosinee Historical Papers, Joseph Dessert Public Library, Marathon County Public Library at Mosinee.

24. Quoted in Barry Adams, “On Wisconsin: Communism for a Day, a May Day Remembered in Mosinee,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, 4 May 2014; http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/columnists/on-wisconsin-communism-for-a-day-a-may-day-remembered/article_3d4b3e75-1649-5396-b682-3c192509dd83.html, accessed 25 May 2018.

25. Zimmerman, 9.

26. Jack McPhaul, “May Day in Wisconsin: ‘Red Dictatorship’ Rules a Town,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 2 May 1950, 9, 22, 23, at 9.

27. Worker, politician, author, and activist, Benjamin Gitlow was a founder of the US Communist Labor Party, two-time candidate for vice-president on the Communist Party ticket (1924, 1928), and secretary-general of the Communist Party, USA. Expelled from the Communist Party by Stalin himself, and from the Communist Party, USA, he renounced communism in HUAC testimony and thereafter became a popular lecturer and writer. Kornfeder, a Slovakian tailor who immigrated to the United States, joined the Communist Party in 1919, trained in “political warfare” at Moscow’s Lenin School (1927–30), and served as a covert communist agent in Latin America. Like Gitlow, Kornfeder subsequently renounced communism and became a cooperating witness before HUAC. Paul F. Thielen to Francis Schweinler, 3 April 1950, American Legion, WR/WHS; C. P. Trussell, “Stalin Held Responsible for Browder Heading Communists: Charge Supported with Documents,” *Baltimore Sun*, 9 September 1939, 11; “Peace and Good Will and a Clenched Fist,” *New Brunswick (New Jersey) Daily Home News*, 9 November 1955, 16; “Reds Fire Up Anti-U.S. Mobs in S. America,” *Daily News*, 13 October 1959, 10; Zimmerman, 11.

28. Kornfeder, quoted in Zimmerman, 11.

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29. As far as I have found, Dregler’s firearms were the only weapons to have been seized. Newspapers have been careful to note that the weapons of invading soldiers were unloaded and had the firing pin removed, and unplanned seizures would have presented a safety hazard. McPhaul, “May Day in Wisconsin,” 9; “It Happened One Day in Mosinee, Schedule,” Gitlow, HIA.
30. Zimmerman, 7–10.
31. For context, factory workers in the nearby city of Milwaukee earned between \$1.30 and \$2.07 per hour, depending on their skill level, particular job, and late-shift incentives, with an average of \$1.53. Two-thirds of these employees worked between 37.5 and 40 hours a week, while the rest worked additional hours, typically with the benefit of a shift differential. McPhaul, “May Day in Wisconsin,” 9; US Department of Labor, “Occupational Wage Survey: Milwaukee, Wisconsin,” Bulletin no. 1099, March 1952, 14.
32. The mayor was supposed to make a speech as well, but accounts about whether or not he gave one conflict, owing to the cerebral hemorrhage he suffered that night. Zimmerman, 6.
33. Steven M. Gillon, *The American Paradox: A History of the United States since 1945*, 3d ed. (Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2013), 10.
34. The Newspaper Archive: Academic Library Edition database is constantly expanding with new material, so these numbers will likely grow as more materials are added.
35. The number of alleged communists within the State Department shifts between 57 (McCarthy) and 205 (some newspapers), depending on the source. M. Stanton Evans, *Blacklisted by History: The Untold Story of Senator Joe McCarthy and His Fight against America’s Enemies* (New York: Crown Forum, 2007), 180–90, quote at 180.
36. Fried, 1–9.
37. *Ibid.*, 22–7.
38. “51 Organizations Join to Fight Reds: Represent 80 Million in U.S.,” *New York Times*, 15 May 1950, 11.
39. The Chicago strike in 1886 preceded two important events in labor history: the 3 May 1886 McCormick Riot in which police fired on strikers, killing at least two; and the Haymarket Square Riot the following day, when a bomb was thrown as police advanced and shots were fired, ending in the deaths of at least seven policemen and four protesters. Donna T. Haverty-Stacke, *America’s Forgotten Holiday: May Day and Nationalism, 1867–1960* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 2, 33; Timothy Messer-Kruse, “Strike or Anarchist Plot? The McCormick Riot of 1886 Reconsidered,” *Labor History* 52.4 (2011): 483–510.
40. Geneviève Fabre and Jürgen Heideking, “Introduction,” in *Celebrating Ethnicity and Nation: American Festive Culture from the Revolution to the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Jürgen Heideking, Geneviève Fabre, and Kai Dreisbach (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 1–24, at 2–3.
41. Matthew Dennis, *Red, White, and Blue Letter Days: An American Calendar* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 251; Alexander Feinberg, “750,000 Witness Loyalty Turnout,” *New York Times*, 2 May 1948, 3.
42. Dennis, 251.
43. Fried, 18–27; Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945–1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 426–40.
44. Haverty-Stacke, 220.
45. *Ibid.*, citing Dennis, 7.
46. Paul F. Thielen, press release, April 1950, American Legion, WR/WHS.
47. Fried, 180.
48. Astrid Erll, “Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction,” in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 1–15, at 5.
49. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (1989; repr. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2.
50. Fred Blair, Letter to the Editor, *Mosinee Times*, 3 May 1950, 1.
51. “As We See It,” *Mosinee Times*, 3 May 1950, 4.

52. Dennis, 7.
53. Ruby Cooper, "Mosinee Mayor Dies: Victim of Legion 'Raid,'" *Daily Worker*, 9 May 1950, 1, 9, at 9.
54. "Legion's 'Red Coup' at Mosinee," 1.
55. "Mosinee's May Day Ends," 1, 10.
56. Stephen Lacey and Ruth McElroy, "Real Performance: Ordinary People and the 'Problem' of Acting in Constructed Documentaries," *Studies in Documentary Film* 4.3 (2010): 253–66, at 259.
57. Fried, 78. Italics in the original.
58. "Mosinee 'Restores' Democracy but Observance Is Marred by Grave Illness of City's Mayor," *Wausau (Wisconsin) Daily Record-Herald*, 2 May 1950, 14.
59. "Notes on Those Who Made Notes," *Mosinee Times*, 3 May 1950, 3.
60. "Anti May Day 1950," Associated Press Photo ID 500501085, 1 May 1950; online at www.apimages.com/metadata/Index/Watchf-Associated-Press-Domestic-News-Wisconsin-/94be25a1111-d44d2aee01d5ef11f773f/1/0, accessed 3 May 2019.
61. Italics and punctuation in the original. "Anti May Day 1950," Associated Press Photo ID 500501076, 1 May 1950.
62. Jack Cejnar to Paul F. Thielen, 7 April 1950, American Legion, WR/WHS. Ten days later, Cejnar reiterated this concern to Thielen in a second letter when he "urged that no picture of Stalin be used" because it might convince readers abroad that Wisconsin supported communism. Jack Cejnar to Paul F. Thielen, 17 April 1950, American Legion, WR/WHS.
63. "For Peace: May Day 1950," Gitlow, HIA; "Real Communists Bring Truth to 'Red Day' Town," *Daily Worker*, 1 May 1950, 7.
64. "So This Is Supposed to Be Communism," Mosinee Historical Papers, Joseph Dessert Public Library, Marathon County Public Library at Mosinee.
65. Jack McPhaul, "Town Holding 'Red' Day Gets Real Commies," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 1 May 1950, 4.
66. "Real Communists Bring Truth," 7; "Reds Infiltrate Town in Wisconsin to Deride Mock May Day Seizure," *New York Times*, 1 May 1950, 1, 3.
67. "Reds Infiltrate Town," 1.
68. "Real Communists Bring Truth," 7; Francis Schweinler, "'Commies' Call Mosinee Plan 'Police-State Idea' in Attack," *Mosinee Times*, 3 May 1950, 1.
69. "Mosinee Mayor Stricken at End of Red May Day," *Milwaukee Journal*, 2 May 1950, 1.
70. "Community Pays Last Respects to R. Kronenwetter," *Mosinee Times*, 10 May 1950, 1.
71. "Reverend Bennett Dies in His Sleep Early Sun.; Buried Tues.," *Mosinee Times*, 10 May 1950, 1; "Two Mosinee Men Who Had Roles in 'Red Coup' Program Are Dead," *Wausau Daily Record-Herald*, 8 May 1950, 1.
72. Dozens of newspapers across the country featured stories on Mayor Kronenwetter's death, citing complications from a fishing accident, heart attack, and cerebral hemorrhage as possible catalysts. See, for example: "Mayor, Minister Dead after Mock Red Coup," *New York Times*, 8 May 1950, 25; Ruby Cooper, "Mosinee Mayor Dies," 1; "R. E. Kronenwetter Stricken at Close of May Day Show," *Mosinee Times*, 3 May 1950, 1. See also Papers of Benjamin Gitlow, 1910–1968, call no. MS0108, Box 1, Folder 27, J. Murrey Atkins Library Special Collections, University of North Carolina at Charlotte.
73. "It Happened One Day in Mosinee."
74. Schneider, 3.
75. *Ibid.*, 21, 23.
76. Dennis, 7.
77. *Ibid.*, 25.
78. Fried, 80–3.
79. *Ibid.*, 85–6, quote at 85. Fried suggested Mosinee failed to inspire subsequent pageants because of its national and international success, the timing of the McCarthy hearings, and the Korean War (86).