

## The Happy Cold Warrior

From the May 19, 2003 issue: The first 90 years of Arnold Beichman.

by David Brooks

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IN 1927, young Arnold Beichman went to Yankee Stadium to see Babe Ruth play. After the game, Beichman hung around the players' exit to get another glimpse of the Babe, who eventually emerged from the clubhouse, resplendent in a belted camel-hair coat, and climbed into the driver's seat of his big Packard touring car. Young Arnold surged from the crowd, held up a program, and asked for an autograph. Babe Ruth turned and barked: "Get the hell off the running board, kid." Immediately, Beichman became the celebrity of his neighborhood. He was the kid the Babe had spoken to. How had the Babe said it? people wanted to know, when they saw him on the street. What were his words exactly?

Arnold Beichman turns 90 this month. Babe Ruth was the first of hundreds of notable historical figures Beichman has met in the course of his life--from Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy to Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem, from Joe DiMaggio to Frantz Fanon and Michel Aflaq, founder of the Baath party and ideological guru to Saddam Hussein. This is why people go into journalism, to meet the key people and be there for the key events of the age. But Beichman's life also has a theme and a cause: anti-communism. As long as the Soviet Union existed, Arnold Beichman was there working for its destruction. This is why people go into opinion journalism, to be part of some large intellectual fight that brings one's life gloriously to a point.

Beichman was born May 17, 1913, on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. His father was a cotton goods peddler and storekeeper, and his parents spoke Yiddish at home. His father barely spoke English, but he did speak Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, and Italian (that last so he could do business with the Italians who lived around Mulberry Street in Little Italy).

Beichman read his way through the local public library and edited his high school paper. He noticed the basketball players were nice to him because they wanted to get their names in the paper. "Suddenly I realized what power I had. That's what got me into journalism." He was admitted to Columbia College, which then had a 10 percent Jewish quota, and became the first non-fraternity, Jewish student to be made editor of the college paper. One day, in the early thirties, the ambassador from Nazi Germany was scheduled to speak at the college. A group of Communist students marched into the office of the school paper and demanded that Beichman write an editorial saying that the ambassador shouldn't be permitted to speak. Beichman said innocently that he wouldn't do it, on free speech grounds, and also because the ambassador from the Soviet Union had recently been given a Columbia podium. The Communists exploded and called Beichman a red-baiter, the first but not the last time that charge would be thrown at him. "I was naive," Beichman recalls. "And if you are naive you can't be a Communist."

While at Columbia, Beichman attended a conference of student journalists in Washington, at the then-segregated Mayflower Hotel. Some students from black colleges were there, and they took part in the

dancing at one of the evening parties. Southern students surrounded them and chased them from the floor. Beichman led a delegation of northern students who threatened to pull out of the conference unless apologies were made and the black students were permitted to attend the final banquet. They got their way, but the black students, along with Beichman, were seated at a small table near the kitchen and the waiters refused to serve them, finally pulling out a black cook to bring them their food.

The incident impressed a New York Times editor, who hired Beichman, after graduation, to do some freelance pieces. Beichman wrote for the Times, then Newsday, and finally was hired by PM, the legendary left-wing daily, which accepted no advertising because it didn't want the capitalist taint. Beichman was brought on by Jimmy Wechsler to fight off the staff Communists, who had been hired by Dashiell Hammett, Lillian Hellman, and Ralph Ingersoll, PM's founder. "Brooklyngrad needs you!" Wechsler summoned. Beichman rose to become city editor and assistant managing editor, and thus took part in a series of ferocious battles for control of the news coverage, amid vicious attacks from the Communist press. One secretary disappeared and showed up later on the payroll of the New York office of the Soviet news agency, Tass. At one point Ingersoll got permission from Earl Browder, the head of the Communist party of the United States, to fire a few of the more incompetent Communists, just to preserve the paper's credibility.

It was during this period that Beichman did the most amazing thing: He became a fellow traveler. This was during the Spanish Civil War, the so-called national front period, when leftists and Communists worked together against Franco. Arnold did publicity for an outfit he knew was a front group, supposedly raising money for the anti-fascists in Spain. Eventually he deduced that not some of the money, but all the money being raised in the name of Spain was in fact going to the Communist party.

During World War II, Beichman published the first American reports of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, having found a man who had escaped from the battles and could provide maps and a firsthand account. After the war, he interviewed Holocaust survivors as they landed in New York. He came across one beautiful young woman who had seen her five children killed but who had been kept around to serve the Nazi officers. Beichman innocently asked her how she could have preserved the will to live after her children's murder. "That's what I cannot forgive God for," she replied. "You still want to live no matter what. But I will never have children. That I know."

Beichman was finally fired from PM, during yet another political skirmish, and went to work for a series of trade union papers. "The reason I stayed with the labor movement," Beichman says, "is that I regarded them and [labor leader] George Meany as the only people you could trust in the fight against communism. Intellectuals and General Motors and the U.S. Senate you couldn't trust. But Meany didn't budge."

Beichman had by this time become reasonably well known, and one day he received a note from Walter Winchell, the notorious gossip columnist. Winchell had been fed some of the details of Beichman's messy divorce, but had decided, for whatever reason, that he wasn't going to publish them, earning Beichman's lasting gratitude.

In 1949, Stalin launched a peace campaign, and a group of 800 intellectuals gathered at the Waldorf Astoria to call for the United States to endorse Soviet foreign policy. Beichman, Sidney Hook, James Burnham, Mary McCarthy, Dwight McDonald, and others organized a counter-demonstration. Through his connections with the hotel service workers' union, Beichman got the anti-Communist group a suite at the Waldorf, and they successfully undermined the conference, with Hook and others embarrassing the Soviet delegation with uncomfortable questions and harsh arguments.

In the 1950s and '60s, Beichman was one of the New York intellectuals who worked to delegitimize communism. "A staunch anti-communism was the great moral-political imperative of our age," Diana Trilling once declared, and that became the credo of Beichman's professional life. He headed the American

Committee of the Congress of Cultural Freedom (refusing to accept what turned out to be the CIA money that eventually tainted the international branch of the Congress). He fell in with the Partisan Review crowd, and became friendly with Irving Kristol, whom he regards as his most important intellectual influence.

One story captures the ethos of that clique in those days. One afternoon, Beichman was walking home when his wife Carroll came rushing out onto the street saying that Diana Trilling had just called, and Arnold should hurry over to Commentary editor Eliot Cohen's apartment, for something terrible had happened. Beichman arrived to find that Cohen had committed suicide by placing a plastic bag over his head. His body was lying in the kitchen. Soon word spread, and people started pouring into the apartment. Shocked by the sight of the body, they started drinking. The body could not be moved until the coroner arrived, but friends kept arriving, pouring themselves cocktails, and even bringing in roast beef sandwiches. At first, the conversation was about Cohen, but then it drifted to so and so's review of such and such, and so and so's essay about this and that. "It became like an unusual cocktail party," Beichman remembers, with Cohen's body there in the kitchen.

BUT BEICHMAN was not merely a New York intellectual. After World War II, he was plagued by guilt that he had not served his country in combat. He had tried to get into the Army Air Force, and then into the Army, but he was too old and had children. After the war, in compensation, he sought out war zones. Writing pieces for publications like Newsweek and the Christian Science Monitor, he covered wars in Yemen, Algeria, the Congo, and Vietnam. During the 1950s, he reported on stories across the Middle East, visiting Baghdad, Tehran, and Damascus.

In 1959, he interviewed Diem in Vietnam. Then in 1964, he wrote an essay from Vietnam called "As the Cookie Crumbles" based on interviews with U.S. military officials. He argued that the United States was unprepared for a guerrilla war and that it would take 10 years to get out. Also that year, he filed a story from Saigon saying that the Johnson administration was planning to begin a bombing campaign against the North after the November election. The story appeared on the front page of the New York Herald Tribune the day of the Republican Convention. LBJ flew into a rage, calling Dean Rusk and Robert MacNamara, demanding that Beichman be kicked out of Vietnam (Johnson was finally dissuaded).

Then, in the mid-1960s, Beichman says, "I decided I was getting dumber," so he went back to Columbia to get a Ph.D. "The only wisdom I have to impart is that everybody at the age of 50 should go back to school for a graduate degree."

Beichman wrote a book about the United Nations and--this being Columbia in the late 1960s--found himself again in the middle of the action. Knowing that he had been a student radical, some of the 1960s radicals came to him for advice. "What's your ideology?" Beichman asked, but of course they had none. Beichman was also appalled by the cowardice of much of the faculty, who hissed administrators trying, belatedly, to preserve order. "I remember warning Jacques Barzun," Beichman recounts. "They just didn't know what was going on under their noses, any more than the *ancien régime* knew before the Bastille. They didn't know how revolutions began."

Beichman went on to write a book called "Nine Lies About America" defending the United States from the waves of anti-Americanism. During his book tour he found himself on the "Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson along with the actor Jon Voight. Carson asked Voight what he thought of Beichman's pro-American arguments. "I'm frightened by America today," Voight responded. To which Beichman--by now an old pro at winning debates--turned to the audience and asked, "Is anybody else afraid of America?" to which the audience roared, "NO!"

I met Beichman in 1984 at the Hoover Institution, where he is still a fellow. I was 23 at the time, but sensed immediately that here was a guy with more youthful energy than anybody in the place. Time

magazine once called him "the hyperthyroid Arnold Beichman," which is not too far off. For the past quarter century he has poured out a series of essays, reviews, and columns (for THE WEEKLY STANDARD and the Washington Times, among others), generally on communism, tyranny, and anti-Americanism. In the late 1980s, he finally visited Moscow, having earlier been denied a visa by the Andropov regime ("Everybody here is a Communist," he observed, his eyes wide open). Then in 1991, he saw his life's work come to fruition with the collapse of the Soviet Union. That year, he wrote a column calling for November 9, the day the Berlin Wall fell, to be celebrated each year as World Freedom Day. Last year, President George W. Bush followed up on the suggestion and officially made November 9 a day of recognition of our victory in the Cold War.

Beichman has recently written quite a bit about the war on terror. There are similarities between the Cold War debates and the terror war debates, but as Beichman points out, there is a crucial difference: This time, there is no central enemy authority, there is no global apparatus.

Beichman and his glamorous wife, Carroll, an intellectual and dry wit in her own right, now spend their summers on their farm in western Canada (Carroll is Canadian) and their winters at the Hoover Institution. They breeze through Washington a couple of times a year and take a few of us out to dinner. Sometimes they talk about their kids, who are scattered around the world, or Arnold will mention his lifelong hobby, flying (he once co-piloted a twin-engine Cessna across the Atlantic), or they will unfurl yet another adventure from some distant land or recount a meeting with some great figure from history. If Arnold is at somebody's house and there are children around, he retells the Babe Ruth story. As a result, there are scores of homes across the country where he is best known, as he was in 1927, as the kid who was spoken to by Babe Ruth.

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