



# Crusade for Freedom

The **Crusade for Freedom** was an American propaganda campaign operating from 1950–1960. Its public goal was to raise funds for Radio Free Europe; it also served to conceal the CIA's funding of Radio Free Europe and to generate domestic support for American Cold War policies.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

General Dwight D. Eisenhower inaugurated the Crusade for Freedom on 4 September 1950. The first chairman was Lucius D. Clay, Eisenhower's successor as military governor of occupied Germany. The Crusade for Freedom, officially managed by the National Committee for a Free Europe (NCFE), had direct ties to the Office of Policy Coordination, the State Department, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

One of the Crusade's first actions was to create a Freedom Bell, designed after the American Liberty Bell. This bell traveled around the United States, along with a Freedom Scroll for people to sign, and was then sent to West Berlin, where it was dedicated by Clay on 24 October 1950.<sup>[3]</sup> Crusaders also organized rallies, parades, and contests to mobilize support from ordinary Americans.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Origins

The Crusade was conceived during 1948–1950 under the auspices of Frank Wisner and the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC). The OPC began seeking ways to implement NSC 20/4, a National Security Council directive to "place the maximum strain on the Soviet structure of power and particularly on the relationships between Moscow and the satellite countries." After the National Committee for a Free Europe (NCFE) was formed in May 1949, its backers decided that to appear legitimate the organization would need to seem independently funded.<sup>[1]</sup>

NCFE hired public relations experts Abbott Washburn and Nate Crabtree to help create a public image for its efforts. According to Washburn, "They said, 'if we can get something that will raise some money, too, that's great,' but it was clear that their first desire was involvement by the public to make this a volunteer thing."<sup>[5]</sup> Washburn and Crabtree suggested using the Liberty Bell as the symbol for the Crusade and, under instructions from the NCFE, sought out General Lucius D. Clay as its chairman. (Clay had won popularity and recognition through his supervision of the Berlin Airlift).<sup>[1]</sup>

Early on, the Crusade gained promises of support and cooperation from key individuals and groups, including John J. McCloy, high commissioner in West Germany, and the Advertising Council, a high-profile public-relations group previously known as the War Advertising Council.<sup>[6]</sup>



Message urging Americans to send Freedom-Grams through the Crusade

## Eisenhower speech

The Crusade was launched with a speech by General Eisenhower, who preceded Clay as the military governor of Germany. The speech, given at 11:15PM (EST) on 4 September 1950 (Labor Day), was broadcast to millions of people over all major radio networks. It is now identified by historians as one of the major early public speeches of the Cold War.<sup>[1][7]</sup> Eisenhower said:<sup>[8]</sup>

To destroy human liberty and to control the world, the Communists use every conceivable weapon—subversion, bribery, corruption, military attack! Of all these, none is more insidious than propaganda. Spurred by this threat to our very existence, I speak tonight—as another private citizen, not as an officer of the Army—about the Crusade of freedom. This crusade is a campaign sponsored by private American citizens to fight the big lie with the big truth.



Crusade for Freedom stamp depicting the Big Truth above the Big Lie

Eisenhower also introduced the concept of the Freedom Scroll:

In this Battle for Truth, you and I have a definite part to play. During the Crusade, each of us will have the opportunity to sign the Freedom Scroll. It bears a declaration of our faith in freedom, and of our belief in the dignity of the individual, who derives the right of freedom from God. Each of us, by signing the Scroll, pledges to resist aggression and tyranny wherever they appear on Earth. Its words express what is in all our hearts. Your signature on it will be a blow for liberty.

The text of Eisenhower's speech appeared in all major newspapers, as well as magazines *Time* and *Newsweek*, which received the text in advance for inclusion in the September 4 issue.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Freedom Bell

Washburn and Crabtree's Freedom Bell in West Berlin was designed by Walter Dorwin Teague in New York. Written on the bell were words from Abraham Lincoln: "That this world Under God shall have a new birth of freedom."<sup>[3]</sup>

The bell was created in England and shipped to New York City for a parade following Eisenhower's speech. Traveling by truck, it made a circuit around the country and returned to New York by 8 October. It arrived in West Berlin on 21 October and was officially dedicated by Clay on 24 October 1950.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Organization

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Jurisdiction over the Crusade for Freedom was shared among several agencies, and the chain of command was ambiguous. The Psychological Strategy Board assumed ultimate control over the project (along with other propaganda and psychological warfare operations) in May 1952.<sup>[9][10]</sup>

Corporate members were many and included Henry Ford II and Gardner Cowles Jr., executive of the Farfield Foundation (another CIA front), donor to the Gardner Cowles Foundation, and sponsor of the journal History.<sup>[11]</sup> The Crusade also gained the support of religious leaders such as Rabbi Bernard J. Bamberger, president of the Synagogue Council of America, and Archbishop Francis Spellman.<sup>[12]</sup>

The campaign benefited from the direct collusion of the American media—including The New York Times and the San Francisco Examiner—which knew of its CIA connections but chose not to report them.<sup>[13]</sup>



School children pose beneath the massive Freedom Bell in West Berlin in December 1958.

## CIA

The CIA provided much of the Crusade for Freedom's funding, spending \$5 million in five years (equivalent to upwards of 55 Million in 2023). According to Christopher Simpson's *Blowback*, the CIA, through the Crusade became the biggest political advertiser in the United States during this period.<sup>[14][15]</sup>

The Crusade for Freedom helped to create public legitimacy for ex-Nazis who collaborated with the U.S. government to call for the downfall of the USSR.<sup>[16]</sup> The CIA also used Crusade for Freedom to send money to this group covertly, by providing funds to a group called the International Refugee.<sup>[17]</sup>

## Activities in the United States

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The Crusade for Freedom gained support from hundreds of national and local organizations, conducting a countless array of events across the United States.<sup>[4]</sup> Some programs were national in scope:

### Fundraising

The official domestic goal of the Crusade for Freedom was to solicit donations from American citizens, and it succeeded in raising \$1,317,000 in its first year. However, these funds represented only a small portion of the total amount spent on Radio Free Europe and other propaganda activities.<sup>[18][19]</sup>

The Crusade encouraged Americans to donate "Truth Dollars", small donations that confirmed their investment in the project without creating a major financial barrier. The 1954 fundraising campaign (the Crusade's most successful) used images of George Washington on money as a symbol of American freedom.<sup>[20]</sup>

## Leaping Lena

Leaping Lena was a homing pigeon, reported lost in early August, 1954 during a routine flight in West Germany, and then found again bearing an anti-Communist note signed "Unbowed Pilsen." She was flown to the United States, and treated as a Cold War hero. She was then adopted by Radio Free Europe and the Crusade as a mascot.<sup>[21][22][23]</sup>



Advertisement urges Americans to donate Truth Dollars. The 1954 fundraising campaign (the Crusade's most successful) used images of George Washington on money as a symbol of American freedom

## Freedom Scroll

The Crusade for Freedom asked Americans to sign a "Freedom Scroll" with the following text:

In the belief that freedom is the most precious of human rights, I gladly sign my name to this Freedom Scroll as evidence of my participation as a free citizen In the Crusade for Freedom, supporting the National Committee for a Free Europe and its striking arm, Radio Free Europe. In so doing, I join hands with millions of other Americans in bringing truth and hope to the courageous freedom-hungry people behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>[24]</sup>

Over 16 million people signed the scroll over the course of the campaign.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Hollywood

The Crusade for Freedom successfully generated American support for Cold War efforts abroad, promoting messages like "Fight the Big Lie with the Big Truth" and "Help Truth Fight Communism".<sup>[18]</sup> Ronald Reagan was a major US spokesperson for the campaign. Reagan also starred in pro-Crusade film *The Big Truth* (1951), which depicts RFE broadcasts into Czechoslovakia. Clips of this film were shown as advertisements (produced by the Hearst Corporation and the Advertising Council) for the Crusade for Freedom during the 1951–2 fundraising campaign.<sup>[25]</sup>

The Crusade also secured the cooperation major Hollywood directors and producers, including Cecil B. DeMille, Darryl F. Zanuck, and particularly Walter Wanger, who became a major booster for the campaign in Los Angeles.<sup>[26]</sup>

## Youth Crusade

The Crusade organized a half hour radio program, with Bing Crosby and his four sons, called "Youth Crusade with the Crosbys." Crosby asked young people to donate three cents (giving up three sticks of gum) for the sake of freedom in Europe. Wednesday, 3 October 1951, was declared "Youth Crusade Day", and students of all ages listened to the Crosby radio program in their school classrooms.<sup>[27]</sup>

## Balloon launches

In 1954, the Fraternal Order of Eagles conducted an "Eagles Flight for Freedom", in which 4,164 helium balloons were dispersed across the United States. These balloons were similar to those being sent across the Iron Curtain into Eastern Europe. They carried leaflets, identification cards, and envelopes for Truth Dollar donations. The finder of the furthest-traveling balloon won a \$25 bond, and the whole event was covered by Henry Luce's *Life* magazine.<sup>[24][28]</sup> The Eagles executed similar programs in 1955 and 1956, and also asked respondents to nominate people and organizations for "Freedom Awards".<sup>[29]</sup>



The Fraternal Order of Eagles launched balloons in the U.S. to parallel the balloon messages sent across the Iron Curtain

## Statement contests

The Crusade held statement and essay contests encouraging Americans to draft language for broadcast into Europe. A few of these took place in 1950 and 1951. The concept went into widespread practice in 1958–1959, with the Truth Broadcast contest, which was operated and promoted chiefly by the Advertising Council. Advertisements asked listeners to complete the sentence: "As an American, I support Radio Free Europe because...."<sup>[30]</sup>

The contest was announced through radio, magazines, newspapers, and journals. It was also promoted in the Educational Edition of *Reader's Digest*, used in 50% of American High Schools, with an exercise asking students to complete the sentence, imagine their own broadcasts, and answer some questions about Radio Free Europe. Winners flew to Munich and read their entries over the radio.<sup>[30]</sup>

## Developments



Conference at the Pentagon

The Crusade began a second American campaign, led by Harold Stassen, on Labor Day (3 September) 1951. Eisenhower, now the Supreme Commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization gave another speech.<sup>[7]</sup> These yearly campaigns continued throughout the decade.

In 1952, Clay stepped down as chairman, concerned that the Crusade was becoming "big business" and that large corporate donations would undermine its image.<sup>[31]</sup> Henry Ford II took over as chairman (he also became chairman of the American Heritage Foundation, which backed the Crusade).<sup>[32]</sup> Eisenhower (introduced over radio by Ford II)

gave his third Crusade for Freedom speech on 11 November 1952—one week after he was elected president. In the same broadcast, listeners heard the defeated Adlai Stevenson also express his support for the Crusade, stating: "The programs have a spontaneity and freshness, which no official information agency can have. Freedom speaks most clearly between man and man, when its voice is neither muffled



nor amplified by government intervention nor other official trappings."<sup>[33]</sup> (Eisenhower had reportedly been prepared to order leaflet drops over immigrant communities such as Hamtramck blaming Stevenson for "betraying" the liberation agenda in Eastern Europe.)<sup>[34]</sup>

## See also

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- Astroturfing
- Charles Douglas (C. D.) Jackson
- CIA influence on public opinion
- Church Committee
- Operation Mockingbird
- Radio Free Asia

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2. Cummings, *Radio Free Europe's "Crusade for Freedom"* (2010), pp. 2–3. "The goals of Radio Free Europe and the Crusade for Freedom could be seen as fundamentally the same: winning the hearts and minds of Americans in the ideological struggle against Communism. Their targets were different: Radio Free Europe focused on the hearts and minds of those behind the Iron Curtain; the Crusade for Freedom targeted Americans. Their commonality was to keep the true sponsorship of Radio Free Europe hidden from the public."
3. Cummings, Richard H. (29 September 2010). "The Freedom Bell in Berlin (Updated March 2011)" (<http://coldwarradios.blogspot.com/2010/11/freedom-bell-in-berlin-updated-march.html>). *Cold War Radios*. Retrieved 20 September 2012.
4. Cummings, *Radio Free Europe's "Crusade for Freedom"* (2010), pp. 2, 3. "From 1950 to 1960, millions of Americans throughout the United States willingly and enthusiastically signed 'Freedom Scrolls' and 'Freedom-Grams,' participated in fund-raising dinners and lunches, attended 'Crusader' meetings, marched in parades, launched large balloons filled with leaflets, participated in writing contests, bowled in tournaments, and otherwise were active in the belief that they were individually and collectively supporting Radio Free Europe in the battle against Communist aggression in Europe. [...] Thousands of local volunteer 'Crusaders' used their imagination, creativity, and willpower to keep the campaigns moving for ten years."
5. Abbott Washburn, quoted in Medhurst 1997 (interview with author)
6. Cummings, *Radio Free Europe's "Crusade for Freedom"* (2010), Chapter One: "How It All Began".
7. Cummings, Richard H. (31 August 2012). "Labor Day, Crusade for Freedom, and Radio Free Europe" (<http://coldwarradios.blogspot.com/2012/08/labor-day-crusade-for-freedom-and-radio.html>). *Cold War Radios*. Retrieved 20 September 2012.
8. Malcolm, Andrew (6 September 2010). "A Labor Day speech from many years ago by a non-president named Dwight Eisenhower" (<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/washington/2010/09/labor-day-speech-ike-eisenhower-1950.html>). *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved 20 September 2012.
9. Saunders, *Cultural Cold War* (1999), p. 150–151.

10. Lucas, Scott (1 June 1996). "Campaigns of Truth: The Psychological Strategy Board and American Ideology, 1951–1953". *The International History Review*. **18** (2): 279–302. doi:10.1080/07075332.1996.9640744 (<https://doi.org/10.1080%2F07075332.1996.9640744>).
11. Saunders, *Cultural Cold War* (1999), p. 137
12. Cummings, Richard H. (3 December 2010). "Give Us This Day ... Our Daily Truth: Rallying with Religion" ([http://coldwarradios.blogspot.com/2010/12/give-us-this-day-our-daily-truth\\_03.html](http://coldwarradios.blogspot.com/2010/12/give-us-this-day-our-daily-truth_03.html)). *Cold War Radios*. Retrieved 1 October 2012.
13. Cone, Stacey (Winter 1998–1999). "Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, the CIA and the News Media" (<https://archive.today/20121222235511/http://ics-www.leeds.ac.uk/papers/vp01.cfm?outfit=pmt&folder=141&paper=1226>). *Journalism History*. **24** (4). doi:10.1080/00947679.1999.12062497 (<https://doi.org/10.1080%2F00947679.1999.12062497>). Archived from the original (<http://ics-www.leeds.ac.uk/papers/vp01.cfm?outfit=pmt&folder=141&paper=1226>) on 22 December 2012. Retrieved 1 October 2012. "The unmasking of RFE and RL is significant partly because it took so long, but more so because the press and broadcast media were, in many cases, well aware of the connection between the CIA and the stations and simply chose not to report the link. According to Sig Mickelson, former president of CBS News and later of RFE/RL, Inc., thousands of people knew or had insider knowledge about what was going on, especially as time passed.<sup>4</sup> Among these thousands, Mickelson assures readers, were journalists and reporters. In an interview, he acknowledged that he himself knew about the connection while an employee of CBS.<sup>5</sup> Beyond remaining silent, many journalists and news media members also knew about and supported a charade that CIA and Radio officials concocted to hide the agency's connections to the stations. The charade, a propaganda campaign called the Crusade for Freedom, successfully persuaded thousands of Americans to donate millions of dollars to the Radios, never telling them that the Radios were already completely funded. The Crusade, in effect, was a cover, making the Radios appear to be supported only through voluntary donations."
14. Osgood, Kenneth A. (Spring 2002). "Hearts and Minds: The Unconventional Cold War" (<http://www.oocities.org/mico3002/ColdWar.pdf>) (PDF). *Journal of Cold War Studies*. **4** (2): 85–107. doi:10.1162/152039702753649656 (<https://doi.org/10.1162%2F152039702753649656>). S2CID 57569857 (<https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:57569857>). Retrieved 1 October 2012.
15. Simpson, *Blowback* (1988) p. 228. "...the CIA's \$5 million direct contribution to anti-Communist education through the CFF can serve, at least, as a yardstick for comparing the scope of the crusade promotion to other political propaganda efforts undertaken in this country at about the same time. That \$5 million contribution exceeds, for example, the combined total of all the money spent on the Truman/ Dewey presidential election campaign of 1948. It establishes the CIA (through the CFF) as the largest single political advertiser on the American scene during the early 1950s, rivaled only by such commercial giants as General Motors and Procter & Gamble in its domination of the airwaves."

16. Simpson, *Blowback* (1988) p. 217. "The Central Intelligence Agency did not sever its ties with the extremist exile organizations once they had arrived in this country. Instead, it continued to use them in clandestine operations both abroad and in the United States itself. Before the middle of the 1950s the agency found itself entangled with dozens-and probably hundreds-of former Nazis and SS men who had fought their way into the leadership of a variety of Eastern European emigre political associations inside this country. Instead of withdrawing its support for the extremist groups and for the men and women who led them, the CIA went to considerable lengths to portray these leaders as legitimate representatives of the countries they had fled. At about the same time that the agency initiated the immigration programs ... it dramatically expanded its publicity and propaganda efforts inside the United States itself. A major theme of this effort was to establish the credibility and legitimacy of exiled Eastern European politicians-former Nazi collaborators and non-collaborators alike-in the eyes of the American public. Through the National Committee for a Free Europe (NCFE) and a new CIA-financed group, the Crusade for Freedom (CFF), the covert operations division of the agency became instrumental in introducing into the American political mainstream many of the right-wing extremist emigre politicians' plans to "liberate" Eastern Europe and to "roll back communism."
17. Saunders, *Cultural Cold War* (1999), p. 132.
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19. Wilford, *Mighty Wurlitzer* (2008), p. 33. "Although Washburn's campaign raised only \$2.25 to \$3.3 million a year during the 1950s, a fraction of the NCFE's total expenditure, it did manage to divert attention from the organization's main source of funding and succeeded in imaginatively involving the American public in the plight of the captive nations."
20. Cummings, Richard H. (16 February 2011). "When George Washington Stopped World War III" ([http://coldwarradios.blogspot.com/2011/02/when-george-washington-stopped-world\\_war\\_16.html](http://coldwarradios.blogspot.com/2011/02/when-george-washington-stopped-world_war_16.html)). *Cold War Radios*. Retrieved 1 October 2012.
21. "Iron Curtain Bird Here on Crusade". *The New York Times*. 2 August 1954. p. 10.
22. "Heroine Pigeon Now a 'Citizen' ". *The New York Times*. 23 August 1954. p. 19.
23. Cummings, Richard H. (2010). *Radio Free Europe's "Crusade for Freedom"*. McFarland. pp. 116–117.
24. Cummings, Richard H. (12 February 2012). "1954 Freedom Week, Balloons, and Freedom Scroll: Combining Patriotism with Commercialism at the Grass Roots Level" (<http://coldwarradios.blogspot.com/2012/02/1954-freedom-week-balloons-and-freedom.html>). *Cold War Radios*. Retrieved 20 September 2012.
25. Cummings, Richard H. (2 December 2010). "Saturday Night at the Movies" ([http://coldwarradios.blogspot.com/2010/12/saturday-night-at-movies-ronald-reagan\\_02.html](http://coldwarradios.blogspot.com/2010/12/saturday-night-at-movies-ronald-reagan_02.html)). *Cold War Radios*. Retrieved 20 September 2012.
26. Cummings, Richard H. (9 December 2010). "From Cocoanuts to Body Snatchers: Walter F. Wanger, Hollywood and Radio Free Europe" (<http://coldwarradios.blogspot.com/2010/12/from-cocoanuts-to-body-snatchers-walter.html>). *Cold War Radios*. Retrieved 20 September 2012.
27. Cummings, Richard H. (23 February 2011). "From Bubble Gum to Bricks: Bing Crosby and the "Youth Crusade" " (<http://coldwarradios.blogspot.com/2011/02/from-bubble-gum-to-bricks-bing-crosby.html>). *Cold War Radios*. Retrieved 1 October 2012.
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33. Cummings, Richard H. (3 November 2011). "Rising Above Partisan Politics: Fighting the 'Big Lie' with the 'Big Truth' in 1952" (<http://coldwarradios.blogspot.com/2011/11/rising-above-partisan-politics-fighting.html>). *Cold War Radios*. Retrieved 1 October 2012.
34. Simpson, *Blowback* (1988) p. 234. "The gradual merging of the Republicans' election campaign and the Crusade for Freedom reached its logical culmination on the eve of the 1952 election. The party's ethnic division under Lane approved and allocated money for a psychological warfare tactic that had earlier been used by the CIA in Italy and Eastern Europe. Millions of yellow leaflets were slated to be dropped from airplanes 'over places such as Hamtramck,' the large immigrant community near Detroit, plugging Eisenhower and blaming Democrat Adlai Stevenson for the 'betrayal' of the Slavic 'Fatherland and relatives' to the Communists. The yellow paper was to dramatize the leaflet's conclusion. 'If you men and women of Polish and Czech descent can, after reading the above, vote for the Democratic candidate,' the handbill proclaimed, 'you are as yellow as this paper.' Everything was ready to go 'within 48 hours,' according to correspondence in Lane's archives, but Eisenhower's inner circle of election advisers canceled the plan at the last minute."

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## External links

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- American video showing preparation of balloons with leaflets ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjE6\\_RAcDho](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjE6_RAcDho)) on YouTube
  - TV commercial for the Crusade for Freedom, starring Ronald Reagan ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qayE8Rhwc\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qayE8Rhwc_8)) on YouTube
  - Longer video report on the Crusade, 1951 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7m8JDhYAsdA>) on YouTube
  - Q&A sheet ([http://1.bp.blogspot.com/\\_14-O\\_DNywHg/TPjaD\\_E\\_JLI/AAAAAAAAAMc/CEd0F1GPolQ/s1600/Clay+Answers+Question.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_14-O_DNywHg/TPjaD_E_JLI/AAAAAAAAAMc/CEd0F1GPolQ/s1600/Clay+Answers+Question.jpg)) about the Crusade for Freedom and RFE —

hosted on Richard H. Cumming's *Cold War Radios* ([http://1.bp.blogspot.com/\\_14-O\\_DNywHg/TPjaD\\_E\\_JLI/AAAAAAAAAMc/CEd0FIGPolQ/s1600/Clay+Answers+Question.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_14-O_DNywHg/TPjaD_E_JLI/AAAAAAAAAMc/CEd0FIGPolQ/s1600/Clay+Answers+Question.jpg)) blog

- Cartoon ([http://3.bp.blogspot.com/\\_14-O\\_DNywHg/TPVYYfZwLxI/AAAAAAAAAJc/teMBInThdao/s1600/1959+Cartoon.jpg](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_14-O_DNywHg/TPVYYfZwLxI/AAAAAAAAAJc/teMBInThdao/s1600/1959+Cartoon.jpg)) publicizing the Truth Broadcast contest
- Crusade for Freedom (<https://archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.648946>) a 1956 film produced by Crusade for Freedom

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