

## “All of These Political Questions”: Anticommunism, Racism, and the Origin of the Notices of the American Mathematical Society

Michael J. Barany  
*University of Edinburgh*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm>



Part of the [History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons](#), [Mathematics Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Barany, M. J. "“All of These Political Questions”: Anticommunism, Racism, and the Origin of the Notices of the American Mathematical Society," *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, Volume 10 Issue 2 (July 2020), pages 527-538. DOI: 10.5642/jhummath.202002.24 . Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm/vol10/iss2/24>

©2020 by the authors. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License.

JHM is an open access bi-annual journal sponsored by the Claremont Center for the Mathematical Sciences and published by the Claremont Colleges Library | ISSN 2159-8118 | <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm/>

The editorial staff of JHM works hard to make sure the scholarship disseminated in JHM is accurate and upholds professional ethical guidelines. However the views and opinions expressed in each published manuscript belong exclusively to the individual contributor(s). The publisher and the editors do not endorse or accept responsibility for them. See <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm/policies.html> for more information.

---

## **“All of These Political Questions”: Anticommunism, Racism, and the Origin of the Notices of the American Mathematical Society**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

This essay began as an extended thread on Twitter, and I would like to thank my Twitter interlocutors from the mathematics community for challenging and encouraging me to address my historical research to current debates in the discipline.

“All of These Political Questions”:  
Anticommunism, Racism, and the Origin of the *Notices*  
of the *American Mathematical Society*

Michael J. Barany

*Science, Technology and Innovation Studies, The University of Edinburgh, SCOTLAND*  
michael@mbarany.com

---

**Synopsis**

A recent controversy involving the *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* and questions of politics, racism, and the appropriate role of a professional mathematical organization began with a comparison to events the American Mathematical Society confronted in 1950. A close look at the AMS’s own archives for that period shows that the controversies that vexed the society around 1950 do indeed resonate strongly with those of today, but not in the ways recently suggested. Then, as now, the AMS confronted allegations of political and viewpoint discrimination in universities, the challenges of structural racism in American education and society, and the proper place of the AMS as a leading national organization in an international community. Then, as now, mathematicians actively debated how their membership in a professional community related to timely matters of social, political, and racial justice. Among the mid-century controversy’s legacies is the *Notices* itself, created in part out of dissatisfaction with communication channels for involving members in political decisions.

---

**1. Introduction: “Material of temporary interest”**

The *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* has come a long way since its first issue in February 1954 [1, pages 121-126]. Established at the October 1953 American Mathematical Society (AMS) Council meeting as a spinoff of the *Bulletin of the AMS* for “material of temporary interest,

which would in general be discarded quickly,” the *Notices* grew through the American mathematical community’s post-World War II ascendancy in the international profession to become the world’s most widely read magazine for professional mathematicians.<sup>1</sup> With the advent of its Letters department in the June 1958 issue, the *Notices* quickly became a favored high-profile venue for the latest hot-button questions and controversies regarding matters both internal to the mathematics profession and concerning its relation to the wider world.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, successive editors have tried to strike a balance between serving as an official conduit for news and information from the American Mathematical Society and representing the broader interests and concerns of the American and international mathematics professions.

Well before the December 2019 issue reached mathematicians’ mailboxes, the magazine’s online edition had begun to cause a stir along precisely these lines. As part of a series of invited commentaries from current AMS officers, vice president Abigail Thompson weighed in on the profession’s debates over how to create a diverse and inclusive discipline with a provocative comparison. Recent hiring practices in the University of California system, she asserted, were reminiscent of the notorious events of 1950 when the UC Regents demanded anti-Communist loyalty oaths of all California faculty.

Reactions were swift and divisive, prompting a special online-only supplement featuring individual and collective letters to the editor signed by hundreds of concerned readers. Mathematicians around the world debated questions of politics and professional autonomy, diversity and racism, free speech and responsibility, the role of AMS officers and their official magazine, and more. 2019 did indeed look something like 1950, but not necessarily in the ways Thompson suggested in her commentary.

---

<sup>1</sup> The quotation is from issue 1 of the *Notices*. The American Mathematical Society has recently digitized the entire back catalogue of the *Notices*, available on the *Notices* website. The “most widely read” characterization is from the magazine’s current “About” page.

<sup>2</sup> Pitcher [1, pages 122–123] notes that controversy over responsibility for the Letters section motivated several changes to the editorial structure of the *Notices*, including the 1976 creation of an Editorial Board.

A close look at the official archives of the American Mathematical Society around the time of the 1950 loyalty oath controversy shows a society grappling with precisely the kinds of concerns that animated responses to Thompson's commentary [1, pages 297–300]. This older collection of materials of temporary interest, thankfully not discarded but filed away by AMS Secretaries and their support staff, show a professional community struggling to define its purposes and limits in the early years of America's postwar Civil Rights Movement and Red Scare. The society's response to the crisis in California quickly became entangled in a complex web of issues old and new and exposed weaknesses in the society's approach to decision-making and communication in the face of urgent challenges. The legacies of these controversies, including the creation of the *Notices*, continue to be felt.

## 2. “Not a political affair”

The 1950 loyalty oath controversy landed in the middle of a tense and monumental period for American mathematicians and their political commitments. American Mathematical Society officers led by Marshall Stone, the society's president from 1943–1944, had deliberately used World War II as an opportunity to court military and government sponsorship for mathematical teaching and research, effectively recognizing that certain kinds of political involvement could be necessary and even lucrative for the profession [2]. They emerged from the war in a prime position to lead the effort to rebuild an international mathematics community, including a leading (but not automatic) claim to host the first postwar International Congress of Mathematicians and to reconstitute a defunct International Mathematical Union.

The Pacific war had barely concluded when Stone's successor as AMS President, Theophil Hildebrandt, insisted to the committee laying the groundwork for an American-hosted ICM that the prospective meeting should be “completely international,” underscoring “that science is not a political affair, but international in character” [3]. But it was not at all clear what it meant to be “international” or “not political” in the war's wake. Should “notorious Nazis” [4] be allowed to participate? How would the organizers assure sufficient participation from war-devastated countries whose mathematicians barely had money for food and shelter, much less transoceanic conference travel? Marshall Stone led the charge for control of the IMU organizing

process on the grounds that only the Americans could avoid the political barriers he blamed for the interwar union's demise, an argument his foreign interlocutors did not always find convincing. Part of Stone's plan, quickly embraced by the ICM organizers, was to do everything they could to avoid national, political, or related criteria for participation (see [5, chapters 1, 3, 4]).

In 1948, it became clear that the greatest challenge to the Americans' commitment to internationalism would be their own government's growing frenzy of anticommunism. That March, the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Un-American Activities challenged the loyalty of Edward Condon, the politically liberal and internationalist director of the National Bureau of Standards, precipitating alarm across the American scientific community [6].<sup>3</sup> At its April Council meeting, the AMS declared its "grave concern" at Condon's treatment and its potential chilling effect on scientists in public service [8, page 629]. Adding Russian to the official languages of its upcoming International Congress at the same meeting, the Council might not yet have recognized the full extent of their impending difficulties from American anticommunist policy.

By the summer of 1949, the AMS had effectively written off the prospect of Soviet participation, but soon had to confront the prospect that communist and fellow traveler mathematicians from friendly countries might be denied entry to the U.S. for their political beliefs. The highest-profile case was that of French mathematician and former Trotskyist legislative candidate Laurent Schwartz, who was selected in the midst of his visa troubles as one of 1950's Fields Medalists [9, pages 384–389]. French mathematicians threatened to boycott, and Stone joined their call and resigned his ICM roles in protest while retaining the IMU organization as a separate endeavor. While much of the AMS debate on the California situation played out after the 1950 Congress, news of the events in California hovered in the background of harrowing last-minute diplomatic negotiations for the ICM, and accusations and recriminations from those months remained raw even after the delegates had come and gone.

---

<sup>3</sup> For a personal and historical account of mathematicians' encounters with the House Un-American Activities Committee in the wake of the Condon Affair, including other episodes discussed in this essay, see [7].

### 3. Into the archives

The archives of the American Mathematical Society today reside in the John Hay Library of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, the long-deferred outgrowth of a legacy of AMS entanglement in operations and publications with the university and city (see [1, pages 317–325]).<sup>4</sup> The archives grew haphazardly in files assembled at AMS headquarters and held by successive AMS Secretaries over the years, only being systematically assembled and sorted years after the fact. As the outgrowth of assorted files used primarily to support AMS operations, their organization partially reflects how they would have been collected and consulted, as working records of letters and reports that the AMS Secretary might need to consider in ongoing society business.

Not all documents that crossed the Secretary's desk were kept. When a document appears in an institutional archive like that of the AMS, it indicates that someone considered it legally or politically or otherwise important enough that it might need to be seen again, and that everyone who handled it later agreed it was worth preserving. Indeed, these records show regular evidence of cross-referencing, quotation, and re-use. When an issue required sustained attention from an AMS officer, it got its own folder for each year when it was salient. Sporadic topics requiring a durable record might be clustered together based on subject headings, though it is not generally clear whether these were organized in this way initially or only in retrospect.

The result is a skewed record of what a few people in positions of authority considered useful, worrisome, or otherwise significant. These archives show only a small portion of everything that went into official AMS operations, which themselves were just a part of the wider network of activity that helped the AMS run. Reading these files, one must always ask why they were saved and what might not have been saved, and whose views and priorities are reflected.

Consider the folder “U 1949.” In a working archive, the most recent documents are typically added to the tops of folders, so to read them chronologically we must start at the back. There, with the archival heading “Un-

---

<sup>4</sup> Records cited here are from boxes 36 (1950 documents, 1951 California Report), 37 (1951-52 documents), and 15 (1952 Oklahoma Report) of [10].

American Activities,” one finds a December 1948 letter from the Bureau on Academic Freedom of the National Council of the Arts Sciences and Professions calling for scientific associations to stand in defense of academic freedom. AMS Secretary J.R. Kline’s January 1949 reply explained that the AMS Council had declined to take further specific actions, but instructed him to share its resolution from the previous April regarding the Condon Affair. This simple exchange of letters reflects an organization’s attempt to make common cause with the AMS, the AMS’s polite deflection, and the Secretary’s record of what had been sent and on what terms.

A slightly longer series of letters sits on top of these, filed here because they concerned the “United Forces for God Against Communism.” Kline had initially ignored UFGAC’s October 1949 letter informing him that the AMS had been elected a “Component Member” of their “non-sectarian and non-partisan” crusade, but learned in December that UFGAC had been listing the AMS on its fundraising missives. Kline thanked his informant and promptly sent UFGAC a registered letter explaining that the AMS “does not enter into the field of political activity” and that UFGAC should not use its name. Later, the letter’s delivery receipt was stapled on top to round out the file. Here, Kline needed to establish a paper trail of what he knew and communicated and when as a defense against further unauthorized use of the AMS’s imprimatur.

#### 4. “Arbitrary and humiliating conditions”

The American Mathematical Society Council made its first official statement on the California situation at a meeting on September 1, during the 1950 International Congress, following a turbulent summer of petitions and reversals. Their official statement, which Kline transmitted to the UC President and Board of Regents the next day, denounced the “arbitrary and humiliating conditions” imposed on the university’s faculty. This and subsequent folders concerning the California loyalty oath crisis appear in the archive under the heading “Political.”

The “Political 1950” folder continues with a November update from Berkeley’s mathematics chairman and a December 1 letter from a UCLA mathematician urging an AMS boycott of UC campuses as meeting sites, a position the correspondent believed was shared across mathematics departments at

the major UC campuses. These letters sit next to another from November 1950 detailing the AMS's initial involvement in an American Association of University Professors investigation into Pennsylvania State College's dismissal of Lee Lorch, a mathematician and civil rights activist who was fired for his attempts to overturn and then to circumvent racial covenants restricting access to housing in New York City.

These two concerns reverberated in the subsequent year across two parallel headings: California in "Political 1951" and Lorch in "Discrimination 1951," each divided across multiple folders. The "Political" folder opens with a bombshell: Kline's successor Edward Begle wrote on January 3 to Berkeley's Griffith Evans that the AMS Council had voted on December 28 to adopt the proposed UC boycott but that a general vote of AMS members at the Gainesville, FL meeting the next day had gone in the opposite direction. Ensuing documents amplify the sense of conflict: a fiery Council report denounced the UC Regents; a disappointed AMS member discontinued his donations to the society for "its unwillingness to give even moral support to those of its members who are fighting for academic freedom" and instead directed the money to those who lost UC positions; a waffling reply by the AMS Executive Director defended the society's indecision wherever "there will be a sharp division of opinion among mathematicians"; the American Civil Liberties Union Executive Director congratulated the AMS on denouncing the loyalty oaths; a telegram urged the AMS to "continue its traditional scientific detachment from matters political." In April, Marshall Stone wrote to urge the AMS to appoint a committee to resolve the Gainesville muddle.

Meanwhile, under "Discrimination," Lorch, now appointed at the historically black Fisk University, wrote of a different set of arbitrary and humiliating conditions. Four members of his new department had been denied entry to the segregated conference dinner of the March southeastern regional meeting of the Mathematical Association of America at Peabody and Vanderbilt. Lorch now wrote to transmit his department's request that the AMS (as well as the MAA) adopt a formal policy against racial discrimination at its meetings. A follow-up letter added 61 signatories in support of the first and enclosed a further supporting letter.

Following the "Political" dossier into the summer, the committee Stone requested has been appointed, with Stone as chair. A June 1951 memorandum summarized a developing loyalty oath crisis in Oklahoma. Another June let-

ter shows Stone's developing thinking about California, supplying him with requested information about the AMS response (or lack thereof) to a case of a Canadian mathematician accused of espionage, the Condon Affair, Lorch's AAUP case, the dismissal of Jewish mathematicians in fascist Italy, and the "racial complications which have arisen from time to time in connection with our meetings in the South" on which "The Council has never taken any action." A subsequent letter signals Stone's awareness of the emerging Oklahoma story, and later letters show Stone continuing to draw on the AMS archives through letters to Begle. Come August, Stone's committee was ready to report.

## 5. "Poles apart"

Or rather, Stone's three-person committee was ready to file two opposing reports. Donald Spencer, who seemed to Stone relatively unconcerned with the details of the matter, joined the committee chairman in a forceful majority report arguing that the AMS had a long history of involving itself in political matters to ensure support for mathematicians, and that "the social transformations taking place in our times tend to integrate the professional activities of mathematicians ever more closely" with systems "entrusted to politicians and administrators." Stone need not have pointed out his own past role in seeking politically-entangled support on the AMS's behalf. The majority report then outlined the legal and procedural basis for the AMS Council to sanction the University of California and to act decisively in future situations. In the California case, the report argued in detail, such actions were both justified and worthwhile.

Theophil Hildebrandt was, as Stone put it, "poles apart" in his assessment. The AMS was not a labor union, and therefore had no business in employment matters, according to Hildebrandt. "An unemotional report of situations affecting members of the Society" could be valuable, but he thought decisions taken "in atmosphere of high tension with inadequate background" lacked legitimacy. Hildebrandt closed by comparing the proposal to boycott UC campuses with World War I era boycotts of music by German composers: "such action smacks of childishness" and "will seem absurd in the future."

Hildebrandt had an ally in Kline, who opined in September 1951 that the AMS "should not be entering upon all of these political questions" and should

hold instead to “our purely scientific purposes.” The two, along with two others, petitioned the Council in November to revisit its acceptance of the majority report, having not been there to oppose it in person at the September meeting. Further letters defended the decision. But with the California situation appearing headed toward a resolution and with news of further setbacks in Oklahoma making the latter situation appear especially irremediable, appetite for a confrontation on loyalty oaths waned by the year’s end.

This attitude toward accommodation and limited action affected the response to the Fisk mathematicians’ petition, which the Council initially addressed with a bland intention “to obtain assurance” that “there will be no discrimination” if such an assurance seemed necessary. Lorch was not satisfied, and with good reason. As Alabama Polytechnic Institute (the forerunner of Auburn University) prepared to host an AMS meeting, they elected not to hold an official banquet, but also not to list any housing or dining facilities that would accommodate patrons of color. The one Black mathematician who attended drove twenty miles each way so he could sleep at home, and was told he could “technically” attend the “Social Hour” held in lieu of an official banquet but “probably would not want to do so.”

Another letter in the “Discrimination” folder urged that entertainment at meetings be free to follow “the social customs and wishes” of the host, unobtrusively endorsing de facto segregation. A subsequent report lamented that “to omit the formal social activities at meetings where the question of race is a problem is simply the price which may temporarily have to be paid” to continue to hold meetings in the South. As Begle summarized in a January letter in the “Discrimination 1952” folder, “Few, if any, on the Council wished to crusade against discrimination, but practically everyone felt that the proper thing to do would be to sacrifice the social functions when necessary.”

By the end of 1952, facing a barrage of challenges connected in one way or another to the society’s debates about politics and discrimination, AMS officers moved to extricate themselves by any mechanism available. The committee on the Oklahoma Loyalty Oath Affair recommended gently censuring the Oklahoma legislature and respective university officials for actions that, although deemed legal, had clearly damaged the standing of a well-recognized department. In November, a North Carolina mathematician wrote urgently to tell his side of a story of denied accommodation “in case a protest is reg-

istered,” as indeed one was by Howard University’s David Blackwell a few days later, alleging racial discrimination. Begle replied to Blackwell that the North Carolina meeting had technically met the AMS’s standards for non-discrimination, to which Blackwell responded “since discriminatory housing arrangements are compatible with the present requirements, a stronger statement is needed.”

## 6. “A small periodical”

Begle’s frustration with AMS mechanisms for addressing political challenges led him to convene a Committee on Controversial Questions. One member, G. Baley Price, served as well on the editorial committee of the *Bulletin of the American Mathematical Society*. Price generally agreed with Begle’s complaints and proposals, but worried that there was “no good means of communicating with the entire membership” should the need arise. In February 1952, as multiple controversial questions raged, Price wrote to “suggest that the Society establish a small periodical in which can be placed all information for members which lacks a permanent character or value.” Such an inexpensive spin-off of the *Bulletin* could “solve some of our present difficulties . . . communicating with the membership on questions of current interest.” Taking such fleeting communications out of the *Bulletin*, moreover, would allow changes to the *Bulletin’s* production and distribution that could even save the society some money. Two years later, heralded in remarkably similar terms, came the first issue of the *Notices*.

The AMS Council at first rejected the idea of a Letters column, but the *Notices* editor ultimately introduced a Letters department in 1958. The first entry discussed ethics in mathematical publishing, a subject the letter writers noted “has not yet been covered by the otherwise comprehensive Bourbaki.” The very next letter the *Notices* received, the first to run in the subsequent issue, was a report by David Blackwell on an effort to raise legal defense funds for Lee Lorch, who had been prosecuted for contempt of Congress after refusing questions about his Communist party membership from the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Lorch himself was an early contributor, too. In 1960 he denounced a politically charged invocation of “Iron Curtain countries” in a previous issue, noting the U.S. had its share of restrictions on the free movement of goods and people. Among the latter, Lorch cited Paul Erdős, whose 1952 U.S. visa troubles—still unresolved

in 1960—appear alongside Price’s letter in the “Political 1952” folder, and whose cheerful reports of travels abroad also pepper early *Notices* Letters sections.

The AMS archives do not offer a recipe for resolving institutional conflict, defending academic freedom, or promoting racial justice. They do, however, show the long-running links between these features of the history of American mathematics. Such links run not just conceptually and ideologically but in the personal and bureaucratic mingling of letters, reports, meetings, and files. These ties can offer nuance and complexity to efforts to draw simple lessons from the past, but they can also underscore moments of clarity, conviction, and connection that have been muddied by time.

## References

- [1] Everett Pitcher. *A History of the Second Fifty Years, American Mathematical Society, 1939-1988*. American Mathematical Society, 1988.
- [2] Michael J Barany. The World War II origins of mathematics awareness. *Notices of the AMS*, 64(4):363–367, 2017.
- [3] Hildebrandt to Morse, 21 Nov 1941, Papers of Marston Morse, Harvard Depository HUGFP 106.10, courtesy of the Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, MA, box 7, “ICM-Emergency Committee” folder.
- [4] Kline memorandum enclosed in J.R. Kline to Warren Weaver, 29 Oct 1946, folder 1546, box 125, Record Group 1.1, Series 200D, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, NY.
- [5] Michael Jeremy Barany. *Distributions in postwar mathematics*. PhD thesis, Princeton University, 2016.
- [6] Jessica Wang. Edward Condon and the Cold War politics of loyalty. *Physics Today*, 54(12):35–41, 2001.
- [7] Chandler Davis. The purge. In Peter Duren, editor, *A Century of Mathematics in America, part I.*, pages 413–428. American Mathematical Society, Providence, 1988.
- [8] J.R. Kline. The April Meeting in New York. *Bulletin of the American Mathematical Society*, 54:622–647, 1948.

- [9] Michael J Barany, Anne-Sandrine Paumier, and Jesper Lützen. From Nancy to Copenhagen to the world: The internationalization of Laurent Schwartz and his theory of distributions. *Historia Mathematica*, 44(4): 367–394, 2017.
- [10] Archives of the American Mathematical Society, Ms. 75. John Hay Library, Brown University, Providence, RI.