
The Political and Historical Context Connected to “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”

The late 1950s and '60s saw a merging of government and corporation. For the most part, this took place during the Eisenhower administration. This new political climate seemed to be too powerful to many in the beatnik generation. One of these is Ken Kesey, whose views on the "new government" are reflected in his novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Dubbed the "Combine," this idea acts as a ruling power in an insane asylum. The hero's (or anti-hero's) struggles against the Combine parallel the struggles of Kesey and his peers against the policies of the Eisenhower administration.

One of the Eisenhower administration's most powerful platforms was the fight against communism, which is reflected in the Combine. The foremost concern of the administration was to contain communism. This is clearly reflected in the setting: a mental institution. Just as the United States (and other countries) labored to keep communism restricted to the Soviet Union and surrounding countries, as a society we try to keep the ill separated from the healthy, equipping our institutions with window screens such as that "a technician picked up a chair...and beat the screen till the chair was no more than kindling wood" (108).

Also visible in the novel is the clash between idealism and practicality. Recalling the differences between democracy and communism, the nurse tries to serve the majority despite the patients' wishes that she serve all. After a vote to let the Acutes watch a baseball game, she remarks that it may not be done because "Forty patients, and only twenty voted. You must have a majority to change the ward policy" (124). It may also be noted that Nurse Ratched's group meetings are distinctly suggestive of McCarthyism. During the McCarthy era, people registered as Communists were asked to give the names of all the others they knew to be Communists. Ratched fosters the same disloyal tendencies in her ward by asking men to write in a book when someone says something revealing, and rewarding them accordingly. McMurphy presents the analogy of a pecking party, where "the flock gets sight of a spot of blood on some chicken and they all go to peckin' at it...till they rip the chicken to shreds" (55).

It's is easy to find similarities between the workings of the Combine and the Eisenhower administration's domestic and fiscal policies. When Eisenhower, a celebrated World War II general, was elected, a large portion of previously domestic funds were diverted to the military. The military is like the Combine in that the institution depends on having clean-cut rules and a pyramidal authority structure (it can be noted, also, that Eisenhower used this method to organize his cabinet and departments). Like the diverting of funds, the institution is drawn away from a personal approach to solving the patients' problems, preferring to remain methodical and cold. The Combine's inhumane practices are explicitly detailed in a conversation between Harding and McMurphy in which Harding explains that "if she [Ratched] can't cut below the belt, she'll do it above the eyes" (165). It can be said that Eisenhower was somewhat of a "lame-duck" president; he proposed very few bills to Congress. Like Eisenhower, the Combine encourages its patients to leave policy be, creating an atmosphere in which change is dreaded. This attitude is asserted by an aide who denies McMurphy toothpaste, "It's ward policy, Mr. McMurphy, tha's the reason" (85). The policies aren't questioned simply because they are *established*.

Another of Eisenhower's main initiatives was to return many federal powers to the states. It is for this same reason that McMurphy is stuck at the institution: the state has given the Combine the power to decide when he can leave. The theme of leaving large powers to smaller governmental factions is apparent in the actions of Nurse Ratched. Toward the beginning of his stay, McMurphy pleads with the men to try and reduce her power: "Don't you see you have to do something to show you still got some guts? Don't you see you can't let her take over completely?" (65). The men are afraid of her because she has too much power for being so "local."

Despite their many similarities, Kesey's Combine departs from the idea of corporation that was integral to the Eisenhower administration. American corporation is tied directly to the free market and our emphasis on capitalism, but the Combine does not espouse these ideals. When the men seem to be using up too many cigarettes, they are rationed, thus taking away the sense of ownership the men once possessed. During a meeting, Cheswick shows his discontent at this policy by saying, "I ain't no little kid to have cigarettes kept from me like cookies!" (149). Nurse Ratched, in an attempt to alienate the patients from McMurphy, notes that many men on the ward have lost considerable amounts of money since he arrived. She even mentions the recent fishing trip and, in order to further spread doubt, asks, "What do you suppose Mr. McMurphy's profit was on this venture?" (223). In this action, she shows that she disapproves of McMurphy's ability to make money off the others, which is the primary idea behind capitalism. Also, in staff meetings, she dominates and gives final judgement on all matters. When they are discussing what to do with McMurphy, Kesey explicitly shows that the others are only there to please her: "They figured they were proposing just what she'd want, just what she was planning to propose in the meeting herself" (135). This again flies in the face of corporation, as the first requirement of corporations is that they are led by a board as opposed to by a singular boss.

Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* can be read as an overt opposition to the Eisenhower administration. Given this, it is somewhat surprising that he did not choose to model the Combine after a corporation. Otherwise, he paralleled the domestic, fiscal, and foreign policies held by the administration perfectly. Kesey obviously intended *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to model the beatnik opposition to the government by comparing the Eisenhower administration to the all-powerful Combine.