Preface

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Two months following its release in December 1992, I participated in a book launching of *Izzy: A Biography of I. F. Stone* at Black Oak Books in Berkeley, California. During the ensuing discussion, I received a question regarding whether I had been a friend of Stone, who had died three summers previously. I responded, “Not really,” then explained something, but hardly all, about the relationship I had developed with the iconoclastic journalist. As I indicated, I first met Stone in front of the Library of Congress during mid-October 1981—I somehow passed the initial screening—before sharing a cab to his home in Georgetown, where we conducted two days of extended interviews. What I didn’t explain to the Berkeley audience was that the sessions, like Stone himself, were illuminating and exasperating, friendly and charged, as they went on for several hours each day. To my delight and chagrin, Stone was gracious and forthcoming for the most part, but he also gave vent to explosive displays of displeasure at the prodding nature of certain of my questions. I went away from a dinner I shared with Stone and his wife, Esther, at their home thinking I would not likely be in touch with him again. However, over the course of the next few years, I engaged in several telephone interviews with Stone, a number of which he initiated. As far as I can recall, many years afterward, Stone was now invariably willing to answer virtually any query and to do so patiently. In addition, he offered invaluable tidbits,

including a reference to articles he had written under a pseudonym for *Modern Monthly*, articles that demonstrated how sharply leftward he had veered during the height of the Great Depression. When I subsequently related back to him what I had uncovered about those articles, which contained a call for movement toward “a Soviet America,” Izzy exclaimed, “That’s pretty hot stuff.” An invitation to a gathering at his sister Judy Stone’s San Francisco domicile enabled me to spend a little time with Izzy once again, during the late winter of his life.

My digging into Stone’s life and career bore out an initial understanding that he was a man of the left, but one who was never beholden to party dictates or doctrinaire impulses. True, and notwithstanding attempts to portray Stone as a saintly figure on the American left, he, like it, committed errors in judgment, in his case particularly involving first the Soviet Union, and then Mao Zedong’s China, Ho Chi Minh’s Vietnam, and Fidel Castro’s Cuba. Those derived from his genuine belief in the need for wholesale, even revolutionary change beyond Western-style democracies but never within them. Perhaps that displayed foresight as well as inconsistency on his part, but then Stone was never reluctant to acknowledge as much or to change perspectives when that seemed warranted. He was most comfortable with the Popular Front ideal of the 1930s, although less so with the determination to root out Trotskyists, whom he repeatedly defended, undoubtedly to the dismay of Communist Party members. Izzy was hardly reluctant to tweak American comrades; some of them were friends of his, but even that scarcely prevented him from criticizing their sycophancy.

Throughout his long career, Stone confronted charges, sometimes not wholly mistaken, that he was pro-Soviet or enamored with what was then referred to as Third World communism. The FBI and its director J. Edgar Hoover clearly viewed Stone as a threat, compiling a massive file on him and targeting him for internment under various circumstances. Years after *Izzy* appeared, rumors began to circulate that Stone’s well-established radical sensibilities were more tainted still, that he had in fact willingly become, at a

minimum, “an agent of influence” for the Soviet Union. The charge, on its face, appeared ludicrous at the time and, in my estimation, remains questionable today. Would someone trafficking in espionage have displayed his emotions and radical sensibilities so openly, repeatedly attacking and mocking, as he did, the bureau and its director, and contesting in print and on the stump the operations of the CIA, State, and the Department of Defense? Moreover, does anyone who appreciates Stone’s fierce independence believe he would have readily accepted directives from an institution or a national government, no matter how purportedly aligned with revolutionary ideals? Rather, the assault on Stone, which escalated with the 1995 release of the Venona Papers, containing code names of Americans who engaged in espionage, has the ring of disinformation about it. At the same time, what historians have to contend with is the harsh reality that earlier protestations regarding espionage charges involving Old Left figures inside and outside the Communist Party of the United States have sometimes proved hollow following the release of long-veiled government documents.

Far fairer is the readiness of some to reexamine, as *Izzy* strove to do, both the failings and the strengths of even left-wing icons like I. F. Stone. While remarkably prescient on many issues, ranging from the need for a welfare state to questions regarding the Cold War, the red scare, civil liberties, civil rights, U.S. dealings with developing countries, and American military engagement in Indochina, Stone also got it wrong in various instances. As *Izzy* came to realize, Franklin D. Roosevelt was not a would-be fascist but rather the man who helped to save both democracy in the United States and, arguably, civilization altogether. Fascism did not threaten the United States during the early postwar period, at least not in the fashion that it now seems to do so. Left-wing revolutionaries in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa were not always beneficent figures. Would-be American revolutionaries were indeed idealistic, but some were also genuinely dangerous. Socialism offered possibilities for wholesale change but at tremendous cost, absent democratic precepts. Still, Stone was often right, especially regarding

the perils posed by large actors, whether corporations, intelligence agencies, investigative bodies, or powerful countries, to both the idea of a republic and democracy itself.

Nearly thirty years after my biography of I. F. Stone initially appeared, I am still convinced that he was both a significant and a singular figure in American journalistic, intellectual, and radical circles. Moreover, I believe, as an early reviewer suggested, that through Stone's story and career one can encounter, in rare fashion, "the intersection between commitment, professionalism, and integrity." Significant too remains Izzy's "faith in committed journalism and his belief in the need for intellectuals to take a stand." Ultimately, as I offered, Stone's life "demonstrated the possibilities of critical journalism, intellectual activism, nonsectarian radicalism, absolutist individualism, and rebel capitalism." All of those are, if anything, more necessary today than ever.

Izzy