



Photograph courtesy of *The Post-Crescent*.

Senator Joseph McCarthy (on the right) and Army counsel Joseph Welch (on the left) say it with gestures during the celebrated Army-McCarthy hearings in Washington in June 1954.

“Have You No Sense of Decency?” McCarthyism 50 Years Later

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Nathan Glazer

It seems a fiftieth anniversary – and it was just fifty years ago that the enormous power that Senator Joseph McCarthy had accumulated began to unravel – is a good time for evaluating what the phenomenon that we label with his name meant for the United States, and what its long-range consequences have been. We have this year a new large book by Ted Morgan, *Reds*:

McCarthyism in Twentieth-Century America; a new biography of Elizabeth Bentley by Lauren Kessler, *Clever Girl: Elizabeth Bentley, The Spy Who Ushered in the McCarthy Era*; a book by Thomas Doherty on the role of television in McCarthyism, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*; and undoubtedly there are a few more new titles on the topic that I haven’t noticed. It seems we have come to agreement on at least one aspect of McCarthyism – yes, there *were* Americans who spied for the Soviets, some in fairly high places. But I don’t think there is yet any agreement on the significance of the phenomenon of McCarthyism. And that is one reason we are holding this meeting.

Fifty years ago today Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin was at the very height of the remarkable power he had created for himself. It was generally known to the journalists who covered him that he was indifferent to the truth, that his charges of Communist affiliation

harmed people, that he was a bully, a womanizer, and a heavy drinker who had been involved in various shady efforts to make money since he had become a senator in 1946. But even the popular president of the United States, Eisenhower, who despised him, did not think it wise to take him on directly. McCarthy had become a unique figure in American public life. He had been launched into a prominence he knew how to exploit by his charges that the Truman administration harbored Communists in the State Department and elsewhere, despite the security program Truman had instituted. Many right-wing Republicans were saying the same thing, but none with the same ability to arouse a Communist-fearing and obsessed American public, nor with the same skill in making use of the press. The reporters had to report what a prominent and controversial senator said, but unfortunately their efforts to find out if there was any substance in what he charged lagged far behind the damning charges themselves.

McCarthy had among others denounced George Marshall, Eisenhower's respected patron, secretary of defense under Truman, in a sixty-thousand-word speech, which he had published as a book. This was only one of the things for which Eisenhower could not forgive him. McCarthy, using his typical, ingeniously poisoned turns of speech, asserted he did not know "whether General Marshall was aware he was implementing the will of Stalin . . . If Marshall was merely stupid, the laws of probability would dictate that part of his decisions would serve America's interests . . . I do not think that this monstrous perversion of sound and understandable national policy was accidental." In other words, Marshall was a traitor.

The national media, the major columnists, and the leading newspapers regularly exposed and attacked McCarthy, but with little effect. It was a rare senator who disputed him, and a number of those who did had been defeated in the election of 1952. This was the election that brought Eisenhower to the presidency, the Republicans to a majority in the Senate, and McCarthy to the chairmanship of a formally minor committee, but one from which he could conduct his amazing terrorization of a good part of America's ruling class.

And terrorization it was. John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State under Eisenhower, asking a subordinate who had come under attack to resign, said, "Don't you know I went through this kind of thing?" (As a trustee of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Dulles had defended Alger Hiss, the president of the Endowment.) "You can't pacify these people. There's no reasoning with these people." (I quote here and elsewhere in this article from David M. Oshinsky, *A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy* [New York: Free Press, 1983], an excellent account of Senator McCarthy's rise and fall.) Leaders of American industry, leading newspaper publishers, friends, and his brother Milton urged Eisenhower to do something. As the board chairman of General Electric wrote to him after a trip to Europe, "People in high and low places see in him a potential Hitler . . . the stature of your administration . . . is impaired in the countries I visited. The impression of abject appeasement should be corrected, not only for general consumption but because I have never seen the morale of State Department people, at home and abroad, so shattered." Walter Lippmann, the influential and statesmanlike columnist, wrote, "McCarthy's influence has grown as the President has appeased him . . . His power will cease to grow and will diminish when he is resisted, and it has been shown to our people that those we look to for leadership and to preserve our

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institutions are not afraid of him." But as Eisenhower said on a number of occasions, "I just will not – I refuse to – get into the gutter with that guy."

Looking at McCarthy's record and impact during the four years of his power, one is tempted to paraphrase the famous line from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*: "Who is this guy?" We cannot imagine anyone today exercising such near universal intimidation.

But fifty years ago the McCarthy phenomenon collapsed within a few months. McCarthy had unwisely appointed Roy Cohn, a young New York lawyer who had been a federal prosecutor in the trials of leaders of the Communist Party and in the Rosenberg trial, as chief counsel for his investigating committee. Cohn's friend G. David Schine – Harvard College, Adams House, and scion of a wealthy family – came along with Cohn to work for the committee. After a highly publicized investigation of the United States Information Agency (USIA) libraries abroad, which helped bring McCarthy to the attention and astonishment of a European public, Cohn began investigating presumed Communists – all of whom were already well known to the Army – who had worked in the Army Signal Corps research facility in New Jersey. Most of them had already been dismissed. Cohn's investigators then ran into the case of Irving Peress, a dentist just recently called to the service. He had been an undergraduate at City College, where he had known Julius Rosenberg and Morton Sobell. This was red meat to McCarthy – an almost or likely Communist in the Army, even if all he did was dentistry!

The Army was in the process of releasing Peress for security reasons. But it was slow and bureaucratic in its procedures, and McCarthy hoped to make something of this. At the same time, G. David Schine had been drafted into the Army, and Cohn was busy harassing top civilian and military figures in the Army to get special treatment for his friend, who, he asserted, was crucial to the committee's investigations. As

so often happens in congressional investigations, the issue of executive privilege arose: could the committee badger officials in the executive branch on just what they had done in the Peress and in other cases? On February 24, the Secretary of the Army, meeting with Senator McCarthy, had caved in and agreed the committee could. On this occasion, *The Times of London* wrote, "Senator McCarthy this afternoon achieved what General Burgoyne and General Cornwallis never achieved – the complete surrender of the American army." Philip Graham, publisher of *The Washington Post*, wrote to Sherman Adams, Eisenhower's chief of staff, "do believe me that if you do not break now with this monster you will become his pawns."

Finally Eisenhower decided action had to be taken. With his approval it was agreed a full record of Cohn's obnoxious efforts to get preference in the Army for Schine should be prepared: Cohn's behavior could be the weak link in McCarthy's armor. On March 11, on orders from the White House, this record of telephone calls and abuse was delivered to all the members of the McCarthy committee. The clear implication was that the motivation for the McCarthy-Army investigations was to put pressure on the Army to release Schine from Army duties. In response, McCarthy released a set of predated memoranda, which clearly had just been prepared, whose theme was that the Army was persecuting Schine to put pressure on McCarthy to back off from his own investigation into the Army's handling of Communists. Someone was lying, and so we come to that familiar place so often reached in great moments of American politics, when the issue becomes not who is right and who is wrong, but who is telling the truth and who is not.

The Army selected a special counsel for the hearings, and so Joseph Welch, of Grinnell College, Harvard Law School, and Hale & Dorr of our own Boston, went to Washington to encounter the phenomenon of a McCarthy hearing.

The hearings were televised and reached an enormous audience. The key moment came on June 9, 1954. Welch had brought an assistant with him – a young lawyer from Hale & Dorr, Fred Fisher, who told him that he had been a member of the National Lawyers Guild, a Communist-dominated lawyers group. Welch sent him back to Boston. But the McCarthy people had already found out (*The New York Times* had already told the story), and Welch was worried. He engineered a deal with Cohn: Welch wouldn't raise the issue of Cohn's own record of evasive maneuvers to avoid the draft, and Cohn would not bring up Fred Fisher.

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But McCarthy couldn't resist: "in view of Mr. Welch's request that the information be given once we know of anyone who might be performing any work for the Communist Party, I think we should tell him that he has in his law firm a young lawyer named Fisher whom he recommended, incidentally, to do work on this committee, who has been for a number of years a member of an organization which was named, oh, years and years ago, as the legal bulwark of the Communist Party . . . I am not asking you at this time why you tried to foist him on this committee . . ." And so on, in vintage McCarthy. Welch had of course not recommended Fisher for work on the committee, and Fisher had left the National Lawyers Guild some years before – but no matter.

Welch was prepared: "Until this moment, Senator, I think I never really gauged your recklessness and cruelty. . . . Little did I dream you could be so reckless and so cruel as to do an injury to that lad. It is true he is still with Hale & Dorr. It is true that he will continue to be with Hale & Dorr. It is, I regret to say, equally true that he shall always bear a scar needlessly inflicted by you. If it were in my power to forgive you for your reckless cruelty, I would do so. But your forgiveness will have to come from someone other than me."

But McCarthy returned to the attack. Welch responded: "Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator. You have done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?" Welch's performance – and he was a performer – received a thunderous burst of applause. To quote David Oshinsky, whose account I am following, "McCarthy . . . knew he had come off poorly, but he did not seem to understand why. 'What did I do?' he kept asking the people around him. 'What did I do?'"

I think had our meeting today been simply labeled "Have you no sense of decency?" with no subtitle, most of this audience would have known what we were going to talk about. It is a famous quotation.

Oshinsky writes, "The reviews were now pouring in and they were not kind to McCarthy. It wasn't the Fisher incident or any single mistake: it was rather the cumulative impression of his day-to-day performance – his windy speeches, his endless interruptions, his frightening outbursts, his crude personal attacks. In Wisconsin newspapers long sympathetic to McCarthy were describing his behavior as 'brutal' and 'inexcusable.' In Washington Republican leaders were cutting his speaking engagements and his role in the 1954 campaign." His approval ratings were also dropping – from 50 percent "favorable" in February to 34 percent in June.

In the Senate, negotiations for some kind of motion of criticism proceeded, and led eventually to a vote on a motion of "censure," sixty-seven to twenty-two. McCarthy was censured specifically for his attacks on fellow senators and Senate procedures, for his failure to cooperate with the very first committee set up to examine his charges in 1950 and his abuse of its members, and for his attack on the select committee that had been assembled to examine the question of his own censure. He had attacked this committee as the "unwitting handmaiden," "involuntary agent," and "attorneys in fact" of the Communist Party. These attacks, the resolution read, "tended to bring the Senate into dishonor and disrepute, to obstruct the constitutional processes of the Senate, and to impair its dignity."

McCarthy was only forty-six, but he had been in and out of the Bethesda Naval Hospital for various ailments exacerbated by his drinking. With the 1954 elections, the Democrats regained control of the Senate and McCarthy lost the chairmanship of his committee and control of its staff. His departure from the front pages was as rapid as his ascent to dominate them in 1950. His fellow senators now ignored or shunned him. Supreme Court decisions were meanwhile limiting the reach of congressional investigations and of state sedition laws, and limiting dismissals of faculty members who had taken the Fifth Amendment. The atmosphere of hysteria over American Communists in which McCarthy had flourished began to lighten. McCarthy died on May 2, 1957. But he had given his name to a phenomenon, and we have to ask, what did it all mean?

In all this, I have as yet said nothing about Communism – and indeed much of the writing about McCarthy has little to say about Communism: McCarthy, rather, becomes the main issue, which is why many anti-Communists, including Whittaker Chambers, believed he hampered the cause. McCarthy had almost nothing to do

with the conflicts that divided the country on the issue of Communism in American life: the Hiss trials, the Rosenberg case, the trials of Communist leaders under the Smith Act, the investigation into Hollywood, the loyalty oaths on college and university campuses – all these for the most part preceded him. All his bluster about Communists and Communist influence produced only one major case, the indictment of Owen Lattimore, the China scholar, for perjury – a charge that was eventually dismissed. And yet McCarthy's name has, for many of us, come to embody the anti-Communism of the late 1940s and 1950s.

So the original question that McCarthyism obscured remains: What was the weight of Communism and Communists in American life? Did it warrant to any degree the hysteria – we can call it that – over Communists that prevailed during the McCarthy years?

We do have to note that some very alarming things were going on in the world as McCarthy burst onto the scene, and these certainly affected American reactions. During the very year in which McCarthy became a front-page phenomenon, Alger Hiss was found guilty of perjury – in fact, of being a Communist spy; the United States decided to build the hydrogen bomb, perhaps in response to the shocking discovery a few months before that the Soviet Union had an atom bomb; Klaus Fuchs was arrested as an atom spy; the Rosenbergs were arrested and various persons thought to be part of their espionage group fled the country before they could be arrested; North Korea launched a massive and destructive attack on South Korea; and, by the end of the year, American troops were in retreat before a huge Chinese counter-attack. It was generally believed that the Soviets had acquired the atom bomb through Communist espionage. We were engaged not only in a cold war heightened by the fear of nuclear war, but in a real war in Korea, in which Americans were being killed at a greater rate than later in the Vietnam War. How do we slot the real issue of Communism into the McCarthyite phenomenon?

When I first agreed to revisit McCarthyism for this meeting, I thought I would certainly find discussion of this issue prominent. I thought of the very well known, indeed notorious, comment of Irving Kristol in an article on McCarthyism in *Commentary* in March 1953: "there is one thing the American people know about Senator McCarthy; he, like them, is unequivocally anti-Communist. About the spokesmen for American liberalism, they feel they know no such thing." This article was a sensation in the circles in which I lived at the time, New

York intellectuals. I was so alarmed about what it would do to *Commentary's* reputation among liberals – Kristol and I were both editors of *Commentary* at the time – that I immediately rushed to write an article for *Commentary* that was more unequivocally anti-McCarthy. But it seems these agitations, however large they loomed in my life, and the life of many of those here I would guess, did not make much of a mark in the larger McCarthy debates. In the half dozen books on McCarthy I have consulted, I have found to my surprise no reference at all to Kristol's article or to that quotation, and very little discussion of the real scale of Communist influence in American life and of what response it warranted.

But isn't *that* the issue? If we are interested in understanding McCarthy and McCarthyism, don't we have to take account of the reality of Communism in America first? Dwight Macdonald, of *Partisan Review* and *Politics*, whose subsequent political course was very different from Kristol's, had very much the same thing to say at the time (as I learned from Geoffrey Wheatcroft's review of Ted Morgan's book on McCarthyism). Macdonald wrote, "the liberals have never honestly confronted their illusions in the 30's and 40's about Communism but have instead merely interposed a disingenuous defense, a blanket denial to McCarthy's equally sweeping attack" (*New York Times Book Review*, January 4, 2004). Leslie Fiedler had made the same point even more sharply: Liberals had accepted the paradox "that (a) there were really no Communists, just the hallucinations of 'witch hunters,' and (b) if there were Communists, they were, despite their shrillness and bad manners, fundamentally on the side of justice" ("Hiss, Chambers, and the Age of Innocence," *Commentary*, December 1950).

There were three issues intermingled here. One concerned the weight of Communism in various sectors of American life and the specific role of Communist espionage in weakening the United States during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. The second was whether this role justified the huge crackdown on Communists and anyone connected with Communist-influenced organizations during this period. The third was whether American liberal opinion had been derelict in judging the significance of Communist influence and in guiding opinion on it. All big questions, still disputed. The short answers I would give are, respectively: Communist influence, particularly in intellectual life, was greater than modal liberal opinion recognized; despite that, the American response was indeed hysterical and excessive; but Kristol, Macdonald, and Fiedler had a point – liberals had been derelict in recognizing the

true nature of Communism and Communist influence, and that helped discredit liberalism in American public opinion. But I believe we in the New York anti-Communist world made too much of liberalism's response to Communism at a time when the greater problem was to bring American opinion to some kind of reasonable balance on the kind of threat posed by American Communists.

Anthony Lewis

I thought I might begin by saying where I was on the day that Joseph Welch made his famous plea. It was the day my first child was born. I had been covering the Army-McCarthy hearings for *The Washington Daily News* – a paper that, alas, no longer exists – but I missed that day.

Even for those of us who lived through McCarthy's time close up, it is shocking now to hear or even read his words. I did a bit of reading in preparation for this discussion, especially Richard Rovere's wonderful book, *Senator Joe McCarthy*. When Nat cited a few quotes from it earlier, I noticed that there was an undercurrent of laughter at some points. It's so extreme, it's so absurd, that you're tempted to laugh; but it wasn't funny. I think many of the people in this room were there, and you know it wasn't funny. Read those words again, as I just have, and their brutality is still shocking.

I'll give another quote about George Marshall. Nat spoke quite rightly of Marshall as a principal target of Joe McCarthy. I don't have to tell you that Marshall was a man of enormous reputation: Chief of Staff of the Army during World War II, the person who really organized the American military campaigns, Secretary of State, the author of the Marshall Plan, and, above all, in virtually everyone's mind, a symbol of honor. Here is what McCarthy said of Marshall: "A man steeped in falsehood . . . who has recourse to the lie whenever it suits his convenience . . . Part of a conspiracy so immense and an infamy so black as to dwarf any previous venture in the history of man . . . [His activities show] a pattern which finds his decision . . . always and invariably serving the world policy of the Kremlin."

The power McCarthy held at his zenith is hard to believe. Rovere writes: "He held two American presidents captive – or as nearly captive as any presidents of the United States have ever been held." Truman and Eisenhower, from 1950 through 1954, could never act without weighing the effect of their plans upon McCarthy and the forces he led; in consequence, there were

times when because of this man, they could not act at all. Yet at his peak, 50 percent of Americans polled said they had a "favorable" opinion of him and another 21 percent had no opinion.

William F. Buckley observed at the time, "McCarthyism is a movement around which men of good will and stern morality can close ranks." I remember one more quote, because it meant something to me at the time. During the 1952 presidential election campaign, when Adlai Stevenson was opposing Eisenhower, McCarthy called Stevenson "a graduate of Dean Acheson's College of Cowardly Communist Containment." He had a way with alliteration. I want to mention one other example of McCarthy's style. He

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always used to speak of "twenty years of treason": twenty years going back, twenty years of Democratic power, four terms of Roosevelt and four after Truman was elected on his own. During the Army-McCarthy hearings, at one point, he suddenly spoke of twenty-one years of treason. That was a message about Eisenhower.

Nat has spoken of the reasons underlying Americans' susceptibility to McCarthy's demagoguery: the fear of Communism, the reality of Soviet extravagant aggressiveness in the world, and America's fear of that power. But it wasn't the first time in American history that fear has paralyzed American political thinking. Fear of foreign or alien-seeming power has been a periodic characteristic of American life from the very beginning. In 1798, Congress passed and President Adams signed into law the Sedition Act, which made it a crime to criticize the President of the United States. It did so on the argument that the statute was needed to combat French Jacobin terror: the notion, at the time, that French Jacobins were going to infiltrate the United States, a brand-new country, and overthrow its government. It wasn't just radicals who held that view. Abigail Adams, who I suppose most people in this room would regard as rather admirable and sensible, spoke of the Jeffersonians, who were her husband's opponents, as the "French party."

There is something that is absolutely essential about Joe McCarthy, and it's the reason I may disagree a little bit with Nat. America was lucky because McCarthy was not a serious demagogue. He did it all just to get his name in the paper and to have something to talk about that would make him famous. He didn't believe that there were 205 Communists in the State Department when he stood up in Wheeling, West Virginia, and said, "I have in my hand a list of 205 Communists" in the State Department. He didn't believe it and he didn't care, one way or the other. He was completely cynical, and his cynicism was evident in a very peculiar way.

The first senator to speak against him was Ralph Flanders, a rather mild Republican from Vermont. After Flanders denounced McCarthy in the Senate, I saw McCarthy go over to Flanders, put his arm around him, and sort of "chat him up." That's the way he was. He didn't understand why people that he denounced shouldn't like him, because it was all just a game. According to Rovere, after verbally attacking Dean Acheson, McCarthy encountered Acheson in one of the small elevators in the Senate office building and gave him a big hello. Acheson just looked at him icily and said nothing. McCarthy was hurt: "Why is he doing this to me?"

The press learned some important lessons from McCarthy. Nat remarked – and I quote him on this important point, not just about then, but about now: "Reporters had to report what a prominent Republican senator said." But what happened then was that the press treated itself too often as a stenographic machine. They just recorded it. "Senator McCarthy said today that he would announce tomorrow [very often, he announced a day ahead what he was going to say the next day] the name of America's leading Communist spy." But the next day came, and he either did or didn't; usually he didn't, because all he cared about was the headline of the moment, and anyway, he didn't know the name of America's leading Communist spy. But then some members of the press began to realize that they were not really being detached, neutral, or fair; they were playing McCarthy's game. Two reporters, in particular, did a wonderful job of reporting McCarthy's record of promised proof that never panned out: Philip Potter of *The Baltimore Sun* (I thought then and I think now that, like Cassius, he had a lean and hungry look) and Murrey Marder of *The Washington Post*. They followed him, reported what he said, and then put it in the context of his previous remarks.

Their work reached a climax at the Army-McCarthy hearings. It's hard to believe now, even to imagine, what those hearings were sup-

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posed to be about. McCarthy's counsel in the committee investigations, Roy M. Cohn, was determined to help his friend G. David Schine escape the draft. He made strenuous efforts, going as far as the Secretary of the Army, Robert Ten Broeck Stevens, to move Schine out of regular Army service and into other roles, including an assignment to the McCarthy committee. Stevens gave way to Cohn's demands up to a point, but in the end, he drew the line, leading to the hearings.

As Nat has said, the Army charged that it was pressured and threatened by McCarthy and Cohn to gain favors for Schine. McCarthy countered by claiming that Stevens and his colleagues were protecting Communists and compromising Army security. Throughout the hearing, McCarthy focused on one unfortunate man: Irving Peress, an Army dentist who took the Fifth Amendment when questioned about his membership in the Communist Party, but was later ordered to active duty, promoted, and honorably discharged. McCarthy's constant rallying cry was "Who promoted Peress?" – as if it were the most important issue about freedom and Communism since the arrival of Lenin at the Finland Station.

During the time I covered the hearings for *The Washington Daily News*, I really misunderstood what the Army's lawyers, especially the wily Joe Welch – a superb lawyer – were doing. There were some completely absurd events in the course of the hearings. At one point, McCarthy displayed a photograph of himself with Secretary of the Army Stevens, showing both of them smiling and appearing friendly. As McCarthy said, "Well, how can you say I'm against him? Look at this photograph. We're pals." The next day, Welch demonstrated that McCarthy's photo had been cropped from the original picture that included a large number of people. I don't know if that incident was terribly serious, but Welch made it seem as though this was a

piece of knavery and trickery by McCarthy to make it look as though just the two of them were together. "Who cropped the photograph?" became the great question of the day – but it was never answered. I was frustrated when such issues were left unresolved. I knew some of the lawyers involved and I kept saying, "Well, why don't you get at some of these things?" But, as I eventually realized, that wasn't the point. The facts were unimportant. Joe Welch wanted to destroy McCarthy by showing the country what he was really like – and he did.

Finally, I want to say a word about McCarthy and Harvard University, and specifically about Wendell J. Furry, then an associate professor in the department of physics, and Leon J. Kamin, a researcher. McCarthy called Furry to testify in connection with a charge of espionage at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. At first, Furry invoked the Fifth Amendment. The Harvard administration was, to put it mildly, not supportive: President Nathan Pusey said that Harvard "deplored" Furry's response. But many Harvard faculty members felt and acted otherwise. Eminent figures in the physics department formed a committee to raise money for Furry's defense. Furry's lawyer, Gerald Berlin of Boston, consulted with law school professors whose names sound like an honor roll: Paul Freund, Albert Sacks, Mark Howe, Kingman Brewster, and Benjamin Kaplan. The provost of the university, Paul Buck, was also helpful.

At a hearing held in Boston, Professor Furry finally testified about his past, admitting that he had been a member of the Communist Party for a brief period, ending in 1947, but he refused to name others. He was indicted on the charge of contempt of the Senate. But, in 1956, Federal District Judge Bailey Aldrich dismissed the charge, finding that the McCarthy committee had exceeded its authority during the hearing at which Furry appeared. The Harvard Corporation placed Professor Furry on probation for three years and delayed his promotion, but the incident eventually righted itself. Judge Aldrich also dismissed a second charge arising from that hearing, this time against Leon Kamin, who did not have tenure at Harvard and subsequently went to Canada to teach at McGill University.

The McCarthy episode showed us how easy it is to instill fear in this country. The late Richard Hofstadter spoke famously about "the paranoid strain in American politics." From the Sedition Act to the outrageous prosecutions during World War I to the World War II detention of Japanese-Americans in what amounted to prison camps, fear has pervaded American society – and it remains with us today.

Sam Tanenhaus

It's a pleasure to speak after two of my intellectual heroes, although I'm going to disagree with them a bit. I want to begin by asking a different question: Try to imagine what it was like to be someone who wasn't afraid of Joe McCarthy because, as we've heard, about half the country wasn't. In fact, 65 percent of the Republican Party supported him at his height. On the Senate censure vote – sixty-seven to twenty-two for censure – the Republican Party was split in half, with twenty-two voting not to censure McCarthy. To the very end, he retained the loyalty of some of the most influential Republicans in the United States, including the Republican Senator who would become, in effect, his heir as leader of the conservative movement in America: Barry Goldwater.

Why was half the country impressed by McCarthy, or, at least, why did they respond favorably to him? There are several explanations. The reference to twenty years of treason resonated with American conservatives in the early 1950s. They had been concerned about FDR's management of the country: first, the appropriation of the nation's economic forces, then a massive military build-up, and, in 1940, the unprecedented run for a third term. Speaking in support of Wendell Wilkie, the Republican candidate for president in 1940, Herbert Hoover said: "We have seen the rise of totalitarianism in Germany, Russia, and Japan, and now we see it here at home. We see a president who has nationalized the economy, who has eliminated political opposition, and who now will create a military-industrial state." Well it happened, only it happened a generation later, during the Cold War.

Tony Lewis quite rightly mentioned a series of repressive acts that were committed by administrations, going all the way back to the Sedition Act in 1798; but he left out the McWilliams case. In 1942, FDR decided to prosecute several dozen Americans – some of them fascists, some of them fascist sympathizers, some of them merely opponents of intervention – on the grounds that they were Nazi spies. A judge threw the case out of court two years later. In their 1954 book, *McCarthy and His Enemies*, William F. Buckley and L. Brent Bozell wrote, "Where were the liberals 15 years ago, when those who were on the right, some fascists, some not fascists, stood in the dock and were called the same names that McCarthy now calls liberals?"

McCarthy was not, in fact, the inventor but the galvanic force, the inheritor, of a kind of rhetoric that had been growing in American

politics for over a generation. We have already heard about Dwight Macdonald's quite nuanced discussions of McCarthyism. Macdonald published a book, *Henry Wallace: The Man and the Myth*, in time for Wallace's third-party candidacy, a candidacy that seemed to be – or was accused of being by Macdonald, among others – a Communist front. It was the last great gasp of so-called fellow-traveling in American politics. At the very end of that little book, Macdonald says, "Henry Wallace may not be a Soviet agent, but he acts like one" – a statement that is precisely the same formulation that Joe McCarthy made about George Marshall, Dean Acheson, and Owen Lattimore.

Let me say a few words about Owen Lattimore, a China specialist and a journalist who taught briefly at Johns Hopkins University. Lattimore was a kind of ad-hoc informal advisor to the State Department who traveled to Russia in 1944 with Henry Wallace when Wallace was Vice President. Lattimore was the subject of one of McCarthy's most notorious lies. When pressed to reveal the identities of the 205 Communists he claimed were in the State Department, McCarthy responded: "Well, I'm going to identify the most important espionage agent in America, the guy who runs the whole show, Alger Hiss's boss." It was Owen Lattimore, who might have been called a fellow-traveling intellectual, but never an espionage agent. When McCarthy and his defenders were challenged on this statement, their defense was precisely the one that Dwight Macdonald had made in the case of Henry Wallace: "Who cares whether Owen Lattimore is really a Communist agent, since he acts like one?" – that is, he supported the purges, defended the show trials, and had edited a magazine that included documents on Communism stolen from the State Department.

These examples further underline McCarthy's enormous power, which both Nat and Tony mentioned earlier. However, I would point out that during the Eisenhower presidency, John Foster Dulles was more paralyzed than Eisenhower. Eisenhower took office in January 1953 and within about six months or so, he had begun the process of neutralizing McCarthy. Actually, by the time the hearings began, McCarthy was more or less finished. His popularity peaked in the very end of 1953 and in any case, never exceeded 50 percent.

Both my fellow panelists are quite right to say that McCarthy was not a "Hitlerian" figure. Did McCarthy terrorize America? I think that's an open question. Did he cause a great deal of damage? Absolutely. Did he destroy reputations? No question. Was he a bane for democracy? Certainly. But I'm not sure to what extent he

really threatened the fabric of society. The polls show that, by the end of 1954, only 1 percent of Americans thought Communism and threats to civil liberties were a major concern in the country.

The question of interventionism was really the great cause of the American Right, and it continues to be. In his new book, *Reds: McCarthyism in Twentieth-Century America*, Ted Morgan described the most interesting, but not surprising, new finding about McCarthy, namely that he was an isolationist leading up to World War II. McCarthy came from Wisconsin, a real center of antiwar sentiment in World War II with a large German population. In addition, the

McCarthy was not, in fact, the inventor but the galvanic force, the inheritor, of a kind of rhetoric that had been growing in American politics for over a generation.

famous progressive political family the La Follettes were antiwar. McCarthy was a state judge in Wisconsin when he made one of his first statements that gained him public attention. During a visit to Washington, D.C., shortly before Pearl Harbor, he denounced Congress, including the Wisconsin delegation, for trying to push the country into war.

One of the mysteries to me, as I write about American conservatism, is how quickly and seamlessly the American Right moved from an isolationist, anti-interventionist position leading up to Pearl Harbor to an extreme interventionist position afterwards, particularly when it came to the Soviet Union. Why was it that, suddenly, conservatives wanted to fight the "great war" they hadn't wanted to fight before? The answer is that most of them didn't. Robert Taft and Joe McCarthy both opposed the Korean War initially. Yet some of us remember that when Douglas MacArthur wanted to take the war to China, Harry Truman fired him, and MacArthur became a martyr to the Right. In fact, the American conservative movement opposed almost all those interventions early on, and McCarthy identified the perfect surrogate enemy. McCarthy's approach was, in its crude way, a very clever formulation. Basically, he said, "Why send American soldiers to die in Korea when all the Communists we have to fear are here at home? If we can get Dean Acheson and George Marshall and all the other bad

McCarthy actually took the language of the anti-Communist Left and turned it into the language of the extremist anti-Communist Right.

guy out of the State Department, they won't lure us into these death traps overseas."

In other words, isolationism never really went away; it remained one of the submerged themes in American foreign policy that is still evident today. Isolationism was reborn as unilateralism. In fact, the two consort fairly easily. In the years leading up to World War II, the antiwar argument from the Right was that we did not want to involve ourselves in European wars. It actually doesn't take a great leap from that to say we, alone, will fight the Cold War: We'll oppose NATO and the Marshall Plan as, again, the conservatives did and we'll make it our single crusade against the enemy. And we are seeing this again in the war in Iraq.

In his presentation, Nat quoted a 1953 comment by Irving Kristol to the effect that the American people knew that McCarthy was an anti-Communist but "about the spokesmen for American liberalism, they knew no such thing." Last summer, William Kristol, Irving's son and the editor of the *Weekly Standard*, wrote a column in *The Washington Post* on the Democrats' views on Iraq that included this line: "The American people know George Bush will fight a war against terror. About Dick Gephardt, they know no such thing."

The important point is that McCarthy sustained this rhetoric: He actually took the language of the anti-Communist Left and turned it into the language of the extremist anti-Communist Right; now it has become the standard currency of the American Right. If you were an admirer of McCarthy at the time of the hearing we just saw, you didn't believe that he got the worst of the exchange with Joseph Welch. And – I would suggest – some of the Right still don't think so. If you read Ann Coulter's new book, *Treason*, McCarthy is a hero. He not only wins that exchange, but he becomes the leader of the new conservative movement. In a way, she's right.

The subject of my next book, Bill Buckley, joined McCarthy's cause because Buckley knew exactly what McCarthy was and saw how effective he was politically. McCarthy gave a tinge of populism to smoldering sentiments, which led New Dealers like Walter Winchell to become rabid McCarthyites. He sounded like the old leftists. He borrowed their language in a down-market version. The New York journalist Murray Kempton once reported on a book publishing party for Buckley and Bozell's *McCarthy and His Enemies*, where the star attractions were Joe McCarthy and Roy Cohn. He observed that among the guests most fascinated by McCarthy were old ex-Communists including Max Eastman. They came to see Joe McCarthy, because McCarthy kept the old fight alive. He had the same enemies that the old Left had: the well-bred, Ivy-League-educated, establishment-reared intellectual class. In the 1930s, it had come from the Left; now it was coming from the Right. ■

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1. Nathan Glazer
2. Anthony Lewis
3. Sam Tanenhaus



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4. Leon Eisenberg (Harvard Medical School) and Arthur Pardee (Dana-Farber Cancer Institute)
5. Richard Parker (Harvard University) and John Shattuck (John F. Kennedy Library Foundation)