

BARRISLER



VOL 7
NO 3
FALL 1980

How McCarthyism Silenced America

by Alger Hiss



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During the last few years there has been a marked rise in public interest in the McCarthy era—that bitter, misnamed and confused period (of imprecise duration) of national hysteria. Social and political moods come in wide swings; for convenience, historians later like to try to fit them neatly into their respective decades. Walter Lippmann, whose large contributions to American political sanity have recently been recalled for us in Ronald Steel's biography, said that the law of American politics is the law of the pendulum.

We tend to skip a generation in choosing any past period for reex-

by **Alger Hiss**



Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, making a television appearance in April, 1954. McCarthy tells his audience that CBS newsman Edward R. Murrow "as far back as 20 years ago, was engaged in propaganda for Communist causes." Murrow subsequently replied, saying that the Senator's attack was a "typical tactic of attempting to tie up to Communism anyone who disagrees with him." *Photo: courtesy United Press International.*

amination. The immediately preceding period seems to have little attraction. Perhaps it is too close to permit perspective, which may simply mean we know it too well in terms of our mundane daily lives to see it in terms of myth, of awe, or of revulsion.

More simply still, this tendency may reduce itself to the inability to view our own experienced slice of history with detachment, just as children are often able to attain a more detached, though still affectionate, relation to grandparents than to parents. Or it may be that we are deeply bored

with the period just mercifully ended, as we are with last year's styles.

Whatever the underlying cause, in the past five years or so, there have been TV programs, books, at least one popular movie, retrospective articles in the press and even college courses about the McCarthy era. The volume of material produced for popular consumption had already reached such a level by the spring of 1977 that the *New Yorker* was led to complain playfully of "all the recent books and movies and television shows about the McCarthy era" (March 28, 1977).

The wave of fashion continued and, if anything, has increased since then.

Relatively early among the major instances of the trend was "The John Henry Faulk Story," produced by CBS, which set forth the harassment of a popular radio comedian by professional red-baiters. (Ironically, it was CBS that originally had succumbed to the winds of prejudice and had black-listed Faulk.) NBC's contribution was also a docu-drama, "Tail Gunner Joe," devoted primarily to McCarthy's manipulation of the media. Most recently PBS presented a short documen-

tary in which those who had known the fearsome Senator throughout his career were interviewed. At this writing, BBC is in the process of producing a major docu-drama about Robert Oppenheimer, the brilliant physicist who was one of McCarthy's most prominent victims.

Woody Allen, that leading trendsetter of taste in sophisticated commentary on American mores, was among the first to take part in the revival with his movie "The Front." Not only was the film about the Hollywood blacklist, but Allen assured himself that his collaborators knew the era at first hand: the author, director and important members of the cast had themselves been blacklisted.

More recently, there have been productions on both the East and West coasts of "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been . . . ?"—a play depicting the ordeals of Hollywood personalities summoned to testify before the original inquisitorial committee, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). (This drama was distilled by Professor Eric Bentley from his 1971 compendium of HUAC testimony and related material, whose title, "Thirty Years of Treason," paraphrased and mocked McCarthy's vulgar slander against the Democratic Party.)

MCCARTHY: ONE FOR THE BOOKS

Three notable books that are a part of the recent trend are Lillian Hellman's "Scoundrel Time," David Caute's "The Great Fear," and Professor Gary May's "China Scapegoat: The Diplomatic Ordeal of John Carter Vincent." Miss Hellman tells of her own harrowing and heroic appearances before HUAC; Caute's thick volume describes in detail, as a result of meticulous research, the extent of suffering and deprivation undergone by great numbers of harmless, patriotic Americans during the American Inquisition; and Professor May's book, as its subtitle indicates, sets forth McCarthy's hounding of one of our most gifted and dedicated diplomats from the Foreign Service.

Among other significant books on the postwar witch-hunts which have appeared in the 70s are Robert Griffith's "The Politics of Fear, Joseph McCarthy and the Senate" (1970); Ross Koen's "The China Lobby in American Politics" (a book that in 1960 had been withdrawn from pub-

lication and thus "lost" until republished in paperback by Harper and Row in 1974); Robert Fried's "Men Against McCarthy" (1976); and "The Nightmare Decade: The Life and Times of Senator Joseph McCarthy" (1971), by Fred J. Cook.

What seems to me the most authoritative article in the daily press on McCarthy and his evil doings is a piece by Alfred Friendly, former managing editor of the *Washington Post* who, as young reporter, occasionally covered McCarthy from 1950 to 1952. It is aptly titled, "McCarthyism Revisited: The Role of the Press in a Dark Hour" (*Washington Post*, February 13, 1977).

For more than 20 years I have lectured and taken part in seminars at a number of high schools, colleges and universities. In the late 50s and early 60s, true to the "leapfrog" pattern mentioned earlier, there was a good deal of student interest in having me talk to them about the Great Depression and the New Deal. Then, in the late 60s and early 70s, the trauma of the Vietnam War caused students to ask me to lecture on the beginning of the Cold War, itself no minor factor in the virulent anti-Communism of the McCarthy period. Almost uniformly in the last four or five years, I have been asked to cover the McCarthy era in my lectures and classroom seminars.

So far as I can tell, the student interest is independent of, and little influenced by, the books and films and articles prepared for an older audience. My discussions with students have convinced me that their concern with McCarthyism is personal and emotional, not a matter of intellectual, historical inquiry and certainly not the following of a current sophisticated fashion in popular culture. Their concern was sparked by the continuing campus reverberations of the sharp shocks of Vietnam and Watergate. Many were too young to have experienced directly the anxieties of the anti-war generation or even the public anger at the arrogant deceptions and illegalities disclosed by the Watergate constitutional crisis. But the echoes of those convulsions, and of the 1960s civil rights and student movements, brought to thoughtful students a disquieting feeling that those violent and disturbing events might have antecedents equally inconsistent with the American Dream. And as they learned of the indecen-

cies of the McCarthy era, they were led to ask whether such events could occur again.

As they had no personal knowledge of the period, their stirrings of anxiety prompted a desire to learn about the origins of the whole postwar preoccupation with anti-Communism of which McCarthyism was both a part and a cause. For some of them, there was a fascination with the discovery that Joe McCarthy was a Johnny-come-lately, that his predecessor in exploiting public fears of the bugaboo of domestic Communism had been Richard Nixon. Technically, the decade of hysterical red-baiting that began soon after the end of the war could more appropriately be called the "Nixon era." Nixon, already well known to them as having been a threat to constitutional government and having cynically continued and expanded the Vietnam War, thus provided a link with another earlier, shameful period of our recent history.

Joe McCarthy, the opportunist—voted the worst U.S. senator by the Washington press corps—had sought a campaign issue for re-election. Another opportunist—Nixon—and HUAC had already demonstrated the vote-catching possibilities of red-hunting. In a real but horrifying sense, as the late Professor H. H. Wilson of Princeton put it, anti-Communism became American anti-Semitism.

Not only did the period of apocalyptic rhetoric and vicious attacks begin before McCarthy's participation, it lasted after he had been personally discredited and censured by the Senate in the mid-50s, and continued even after his death in 1957. Remnants, as students readily see, are evident even today. It took until 1975 for Congress to terminate HUAC's existence. In the same year, legal action instituted earlier by the American Civil Liberties Union finally accomplished the elimination of loyalty oaths for federal employees. And Americans are still reluctant to sign petitions to enable unpopular or radical candidates to win a place on the ballot.

As recently as February of 1980, an official of the Department of Justice investigating Nazi war criminals who had fled to this country explained, in terms that caused no expression of surprise, why his office had lacked

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McCarthyism (Continued from page 13)

diligence in pursuing these Nazis:

"Back in the early 50s and mid-50s when this work really should have been done rather than in 1980, McCarthyism was at its height, anti-Communism was at its height, and most of these people were anti-Communists. There was a tendency to measure their worth as citizens on the basis of their anti-Communism rather than on what they had done during the Holocaust." (*New York Times*, February 6, 1980).

But whether the term "McCarthy era" is technically accurate, it is nevertheless appropriate to name this ugly time in our recent history after the unprincipled demagogue who for a brief few years personified its worse aspects. Dean Acheson properly called him "a cheap, low scoundrel," and added, "to denigrate him is to praise him."

In my discussions with students, whether in the formal patterns of classroom and lecture hall or in quite informal small groups, I have found that one particularly disturbing question recurs: How could it have happened? In turn, this question was but a subsidiary issue to the still larger concern: Could it happen again?

Their questioning of what went wrong was based upon the fear that the protective devices of press, law and tradition, which guard against mass irrationality and mob hysteria, could again prove insufficient. In particular, having taken at face value the complacent, self-congratulation of our press for the accomplishment of investigative journalists during Watergate, students ask: What happened to the press? The exploits of Bernstein and Woodward, enshrined by Hollywood and so well described in their own accounts, have led to marked increases in applications to journalism schools by talented and idealistic young people. Where, students naturally wonder, were the counterparts of today's investigative journalist in the 1950s?

"It was clear within a week or a month," Alfred Friendly has told us, "to the overwhelming majority of reporters covering him" that Mc-

Carthy "was using fraudulent material to regurgitate a succession of malicious, useless and transparent lies uttered for self-aggrandizing purposes. . . ." (*Washington Post*, February 13, 1977). Yet the press had printed his every word, and with inflammatory headlines. How could this have happened? Could it happen again?

Questions of this kind led to others. Why had the Senate, to whom the fraudulence of McCarthy's charges must have been equally apparent, permitted such conduct on the part of a member—conduct which could only reflect on the integrity of the Senate as a whole? Why had Truman, known for his political courage and short temper, responded to the similar demagoguery of McCarthy's immediate predecessors by establishing a program to investigate the loyalty of all federal officials? Did Truman really think the loyalty of his officials questionable? Didn't he realize that this was playing into the hands of demagogues? Why didn't sober citizens put a stop to the witch-hunts?

In these student discussions, an examination into the origins of McCarthyism, and into the factors in our society which let it continue, led to re-examination of other scapegoating periods in our history. The Salem witch-hunts; the Alien and Sedition Acts (while the Founding Fathers were still in charge of our destinies); the Know-Nothing Movement of the mid-19th century (hostility to Roman Catholic immigrants); the Palmer Red-Raids at the end of World War I (when J. Edgar Hoover began his trade of supersleuth and paramount red-hunter); the rounding up of Japanese, both alien and American citizens, in the months following Pearl Harbor—did these periods of shameful hysteria bespeak a national vulnerability to the virus of scapegoating in times of stress? And if so, would the undeniable stresses following upon military defeat in Vietnam and the discovery of arrogant disregard of the Constitution by Nixon bring about a new attack of the American disease?

It is difficult but necessary for young people, not only students, but most Americans under forty, to grasp the extent and fury of the hysteria that

gripped the country from the late 40s until the mid-50s. All over the country, thousands of Americans entered into a nightmare world of inquisition—by Congressional and state legislative committees, FBI agents, and local vigilantes, all of whom publicly sought to point the finger at "subversives."

Many thousands of teachers, office workers, seamen, union members, government employees, editors, social workers, actors, lawyers, accountants, radio and TV entertainers, writers—people in every walk of life, the obscure and the prominent—were publicly attacked, driven from their jobs, and ostracized by neighbors and fair-weather friends. As David Cauter pointed out, these victims of the McCarthyite purges were guilty of "no crime worse than the opinions they held, or had once held" (*New Statesman*, December 16, 1977). The extent of human injury was, of course, not limited to those pilloried or purged; their wives, husbands, children, other relatives and close associates add additional thousands to the list.

More importantly, the nation was deprived for years to come of the independent thought and initiative of many citizens who were either cowed by the fates of the victims or simply wanted "to avoid trouble." Cauter summarized some of the lasting results for the land of the free:

"... The long shadow of the security officer fell across factories, dockyards, ships, offices. A generation of workers learned to conform or to move on. . . . But in the process careers were ruined beyond retrieve, marriages broke up, children were alienated and abused, fathers sat for hours stunned, staring blankly at the wall."

There were other and more powerful forces which made possible the vigor of the McCarthy Red Scare and which for many months inhibited effective efforts to end it. Roosevelt's and Truman's tenure of 20 years in office naturally left the Republicans frustrated and hungry for political office. The weapon of the Red Scare used by HUAC, McCarthy, and their

supporters was directed at the Democratic administration. Opposition politicians cannot be expected to rush to put out fires in the incumbents' political mansions. In fact, many honorable Republicans (with regret, one hopes) accepted McCarthy's aid.

President Eisenhower, campaigning for election, allowed McCarthy to board his whistle-stop train as it crossed Wisconsin and was photographed with him in a pose that clearly bespoke mutual support. This was the same McCarthy who had called Eisenhower's mentor and long-time friend, General George Marshall, a "traitor." Senator Robert Taft, known as "Mr. Republican," also did not avoid McCarthy's company. And, of course, other less principled politicians made common cause with McCarthy even more vigorously.

The support given to McCarthy by the Republican party, though not the sole cause of McCarthyism, was a crucial factor in its growth. Roosevelt's popularity had been so enormous that many Republicans feared a direct attack on him could well arouse public opposition. But they encouraged or permitted unjustified attacks upon FDR's lieutenants as a method of indirect attack upon the revered

leader who had held the country together during the Great Depression and had led it to victory in the greatest war the world had ever seen.

These attacks were an oblique attack on the Roosevelt domestic and foreign policies, popular with large numbers of the people, but opposed by powerful groups, some of whom considered the New Deal socialistic, if not a bright shade of red. Other groups misguidedly regarded the United Nations as an alien international threat to U.S. sovereignty, and still others had been led to believe that the Yalta Agreement was a sell-out of American interests.

UNITY IN WAR; CONFORMITY IN PEACE

In addition, the immediate postwar political temper in America was unstable and highly vulnerable to rabble-rousing and scapegoating. World War II, unprecedented in scope and savagery, brought fear, sorrow and stress into most American homes. Added to these sources of tension were the disruptions of peacetime social and economic patterns, as the civilian population strained to accomplish the nation's enormous productive goals. Public tension, far from being eased by the joys of victory, was continued, anti-climactically, by the Cold War that followed close on the heels of the hot one. Popular morale and national unity that had been so essential to the fulfilling of the vast demands of war were soon impaired by bitter domestic partisan political hostilities.

When, within a few years, Russia exploded the atomic bomb and China became Communist, public confusion and anxiety increased to the point that irrationality was endemic. Professor James Compton says that Europe thought "America had gone quite mad" ("Anti-Communism in American Life Since the Second World War," Forum Press).

McCarthy had a knack for manipulating the press—but, to put it mildly, the press willingly took part in the process. They exploited the anxieties and fears of the public, by then easy prey for McCarthy's lurid hobgoblin horror tales.

But our dark hour was a national illness. The fires that fed the hysteria of McCarthyism were not fanned solely by the press, nor were they—even initially—lighted only by Republicans. A domestic concomitant of the Cold War, McCarthyism enfolded within its

noxious embrace many powerful business interests and ethnic groups, as well as countless mindless frightened little people. Militant trade unions were destroyed; progressive politics was eliminated from the political scene; liberal publications and publishers, together with independent publicists and spokesmen of dissent, were discredited or silenced; Roosevelt's domestic and foreign policies were frozen and stripped of their vigor.

The indecencies of McCarthyism were the poisonous froth on the surface of American politics that obscured major shifts of power among domestic forces. Most important of all, in Carey McWilliams' words, McCarthy "succeeded in welding a massive bipartisan consensus which made it possible to wage Cold War with little criticism or restraint . . ." ("The Education of Carey McWilliams").

Today, young people are faced with a revived Cold War; registration revives memories of the draft in the days of the Vietnam War; super-patriots harass Iranian students once warmly invited to come our shores—events such as these make an understanding of McCarthyism essential. Under whatever name it attempts to return, its true nature must be recognized and its terrible effects prevented.

Editor's note: Alger Hiss has been adviser to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, temporary secretary-general to the United Nations at its founding convention, and president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

In hearings before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1948, Whittaker Chambers, a senior editor for Time Magazine, accused Hiss of having passed State Department secrets to the Soviet Union. Because the statute of limitations had run, Hiss could not be indicted on espionage charges. In 1949, however, he was indicted for perjury, and the trial resulted in a hung jury. The following year, he was retried on perjury charges and convicted. Hiss' appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court was denied, and he was sentenced to five years in prison. Hiss was released from prison in 1954, after serving 44 months. His supporters maintain that he was a victim of anti-Communist hysteria.

In 1975, Hiss was readmitted to the Massachusetts bar.

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