



## **Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been?**

McCarthyism: The Last Battle In The Forty-Year War On The Red Menace

By Jerry James

*The road from legitimate suspicion to rampant paranoia is very much shorter than we believe.*

—Jean-Luc Picard in *The Drumhead*, by Jeri Taylor



On February 9, 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisconsin) gave a speech in Wheeling, WV. It wasn't recorded, but he said something like, "I have in my hand a list of 205 names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party—and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department."

This was a lie. McCarthy had no such list. But within two months, this poorly-sourced crusade was being called "McCarthyism." It was the culmination of a forty-year war—yet another manifestation of the American tendency to first fear, then hate, the Foreign Menace, a tendency that predates even the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. The Foreign Menace had been demonized by race, as in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and by religion, as in the long-standing prejudice against Roman Catholics.

This time, the Foreign Menace was Russian Red.

Were there Americans who functioned as Soviet agents? Yes. Was the ensuing reaction completely out of proportion to their number or influence? Yes. Perhaps 12,000 people had their lives and careers ruined, some without ever being confronted by anything more than a rumor. Others, out of fear, went politically silent. This time of obsession changed America.

"McCarthyism," Ellen Schrecker wrote, "got its power from the willingness of the men (few women here) who ran the nation's main public and private institutions to condone serious violations of civil liberties in order to eradicate what they believed was the far more serious danger of Communism."

### The First Red Scare

The USA and the USSR had been adversaries since early 1918, when Vladimir Lenin pulled the newly-minted Soviet state out of World War I. There were 13,000 Americans in the Allied forces that then invaded Russia, fighting against Lenin's Reds.

On May 1, 1919, a bomb went off outside the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. The bomber's political affiliation was unknowable. The Palmer Raids of 1919-1920, however, eagerly targeted the fledgling American Communist Party (ACP) among others, rounding up perhaps 5,000 suspected Reds. Roman Catholic officialdom, seeing an opportunity to finally shed its Foreign Menace stigma, quickly made sure that "Godless" always preceded "Communism."



J. Edgar Hoover

Palmer established a division to deal with the Red Menace, headed by a young lawyer named J. Edgar Hoover. (It would later become the FBI.) So well did it do its work that most people soon agreed with Warren G. Harding that, "Too much has been said about Bolshevism in America." Hoover quietly began keeping files.

Then came the Great Depression, a petri dish for radical political thought. With the rise of Adolf Hitler, the USSR sought cooperation with the West. Thus was born the Popular Front, a union with American liberals against the Nazis. ACP membership rose.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt recognized the USSR in 1933, but asked the FBI to keep

track of both Nazis and Reds. Hoover continued to gather files. What was to become the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) was originally proposed to scrutinize Fascism. Instead, it investigated the Red Menace almost exclusively.

But even in the midst of all this, the ACP was making extraordinary progress. For several years, every progressive movement—public welfare, civil rights, organized labor, anti-Fascism—was spearheaded by the ACP. It might even have been seen as the left wing of the New Deal, almost, but not quite, respectable. "And then, overnight, it all disappeared." (Schrecker)

On August 23, 1939, the USSR signed a non-aggression pact with Germany. Suddenly, the ACP loved Nazis. Ten months later, Hitler invaded the USSR. The ACP about-faced once more. American liberals would never trust them again.

Less than six months after Hitler's invasion, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Americans quickly rallied to the support of our Noble Soviet Allies and their cuddly leader, Uncle Joe Stalin. ACP membership would reach 50,000 during the war years.

### The Second Red Scare



Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin

The USSR lost 20 million people in World War II. Afterwards, Stalin was not interested in tolerating dissent. Less than seven months after the war ended, Winston Churchill coined the term, "Iron Curtain." The Republicans made National Security—in the form of anti-communism—their campaign slogan in 1946

and won back Congress for the first time in 14 years. (Joseph McCarthy lied about his war record and was elected to the Senate.) Soon, the Democrats would be seen as the party that had lost both the A-bomb monopoly to the Soviets and China to Mao Zedong's Reds.

The ACP was not illegal, but Congressional investigators treated it as if it were. Its demonization was well underway even before HUAC began asking witnesses, "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" And even if you were not nor had ever been, you might be a dupe or a fellow traveler, and thereby guilty by association. (Hoover's FBI files would here prove invaluable.) Invoking the Fifth Amendment's protection against self-incrimination was regarded as a confession of guilt. As in the days of the Inquisition, a witness had only one chance: You must admit all former sins—then show true contrition by naming others.

It became common knowledge that every ACP member was a mindless servant of Moscow and dedicated to the downfall of the USA. Worse, ACP members were indistinguishable from ordinary Americans. Without anyone realizing it, communism could spread from them like a virus—*Invasion of the Body Snatchers!*

Just enough of this was plausible to filter down to Main Street as suspicion. And since the Red Menace could be found anywhere and everywhere, suspicion soon turned to paranoia. Liberals, having once been burned, were twice shy about defending the rights of the accused.

### McCarthyism

The story goes that on January 7, 1950, Joseph McCarthy was taken to dinner by three conservative Irish Roman Catholics, men like him. They stressed that if he wanted to be re-elected, he had better adopt their theme of Godless Communism. A month later, he spoke in Wheeling.

Back in Washington, McCarthy was named to an investigative subcommittee headed by Democrat Millard Tydings. His report called McCarthy's charges "a fraud and a hoax," designed "...to confuse and divide the Amer-

ican people." But few cared. Three weeks before, on June 25, the Korean War had begun. The war would protect McCarthy from oversight for the duration. In the fall, he campaigned for GOP Senate hopefuls. Millard Tydings lost. McCarthy, once loathed, was now feared.



Joseph McCarthy and Roy Cohn

Gleefully becoming the GOP's favorite attack dog, McCarthy preached anti-communism at innumerable stops. "I don't enjoy this task," he said, comparing it to killing the skunks that had threatened his mother's chickens. It was "a dirty, foul, messy, unpleasant, smelly job but...a job that must be done." And it was a job for him, the hard-fighting Irishman who "deals with Commies via the fist."

Newspapermen loved him. And the essential naïve objectivity of American journalism played right into McCarthy's hands. Middle-of-the-roaders said, "He might be bad, but he's not wrong."

McCarthy rode to a second term on Dwight D. Eisenhower's coattails. The Senate thought they might sideline him with the chairmanship of the sleepy Government Operations Committee. But the GOC oversaw the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. McCarthy pounced, hiring Roy Cohn, who had prosecuted the Rosenbergs, as his counsel. Together, they found the Red Menace everywhere from the Voice of America to the International Information Agency's overseas libraries.

Then Cohn put his foot in it.

G. David Schine, Cohn's special friend—the truth of their relationship is unknown—was drafted. The demands Cohn made of the army on Schine's behalf were leveraged by McCarthy's investigation of the Army Signal Corps lab at Ft. Monmouth, NJ. McCarthy even made a televised speech on November 24, 1953, in which he attacked the Eisenhower administration's "whining, whimpering appeasement" in not forcing our allies to cut off trade with Communist China. But by now, the Korean War was over. His shield was gone.

On March 9, 1954, Edward R. Murrow's *See It Now* hit McCarthy hard on national television. Two days later, the army began releasing their correspondence concerning Schine to the press. This led to the first must-see event of the Age of Television—the Army-McCarthy Hearings. They stretched over 36 days, from April into June. "The nation's viewers watched the Wisconsin senator repeatedly disrupt the proceedings by calling for a 'point of order' in order to bully witnesses, deliver lectures and make crude and insulting remarks." (Schrecker)

But McCarthy's final, fatal error didn't involve a witness. Instead, he attacked Fred Fisher, who wasn't even there. Joseph Welch, counsel for the Army, had deliberately left him off his team, because Fisher had once been active in the leftist National Lawyers Guild. Welch was speaking of Fisher when he asked McCarthy, "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?"

McCarthy's positive ratings fell from 50% in January to 34% in June. Worse, his negatives rose from 29% to 45%. The day after Welch blasted him, the Senate moved to censure.

### The Aftermath

Joseph McCarthy died of acute alcoholism on May 2, 1957. Republican William Bennett saw the legacy like this. "The cause of anti-

communism... was undermined by Sen. Joe McCarthy... He addressed a real problem: disloyal elements within the U.S. government. But his approach to this real problem was to cause untold grief to the country he claimed to love..."



Herblock, *Washington Post*, March 29, 1950

Americans spent a decade purging themselves of anyone who smacked of the Red Menace. Unions, schools and civil rights organizations might not have had the entertainment industry's blacklist to consult, but everyone knew who was *persona non grata*. And any remaining hardcore American Communists were rendered moral nullities by Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 speech denouncing Stalin's crimes.

By 1958, the Red Menace—as well as any American political movement to the left of the liberal Americans for Democratic Action — was as dead as Joe McCarthy. Henceforth, Americans spying for the USSR would do it for cash, not for ideology.

Arthur Miller, who was called before HUAC, but refused to give names to the committee, wrote *The Crucible* in 1953.

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