Cultural Commentary: Joseph McCarthy and the Red Scare

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Joseph McCarthy ... and the Red Scare

Exactly thirty years ago millions of Americans were fascinated by a day-time TV drama featuring the Republican Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy. The Army-McCarthy hearings, called by one writer, “the greatest political show on earth,” were televised by ABC from April 22 to June 17, 1954. For many it was the first opportunity to see the Senator whose name epitomized militant anti-Communism and who since 1950 had attracted more attention than the President of the United States. Few viewers could know, however, that TV’s exposure would help destroy McCarthy’s political career and lead to his censure by the Senate later that year.

Between 1950 and 1954, Joseph McCarthy, whose name was part of the political lexicon, was one of the most powerful men in America. While many reviled him as a crude demagogue, others saw his campaign to cleanse Communism from American life as a heroic crusade to save the Nation. Millions rallied to his banner and accepted his view that America’s failures after World War II stemmed from spies in high places. For a time McCarthy was the G.O.P.’s most popular speaker. His allegations won praise from such large newspapers as the New York Daily News and the Chicago Tribune and from powerful newspaper chains like Scripps-Howard and Hearst. His efforts were lauded by such popular radio commentators as Fulton Lewis Jr., Walter Winchell, and Paul Harvey; and among his friends and supporters were Joseph P. Kennedy, J. Edgar Hoover, and Richard M. Nixon.

McCarthy’s grip on the nation and its obsession with subversion were the result of a Red Scare, a noxious by-product of the Cold War. Thoughout United States history, in times of unusual stress, Americans have been susceptible to conspiracy theories to explain their anxieties. Such a time was the late 1940s and the early 1950s when many Americans were confounded and frustrated by setbacks abroad. After all, most Americans believed that the United States had almost single-handedly defeated Germany and Japan, had sole possession of the atom bomb, and at war’s end in 1945, was the most powerful nation in the world. But in no time the security was gone and America faced a deadly Soviet peril. Surely something had gone wrong and for some the answer was a gigantic and diabolically cunning conspiracy.

The Red Scare started slowly after the war but, as the Soviets tightened their grip on eastern Europe, fear of Communist expansion became mixed with fear of internal subversion—especially when evidence of spying came to light. In 1945 federal agents discovered classified government documents in the office of a left-wing journal, Amerasia. In 1945, Canadian officials uncovered an extensive Soviet spy ring. Uneasy over such disclosures, President Harry Truman, just nine days after outlining the Truman Doctrine which crystallized the Cold War, initiated a federal loyalty program whereby every federal employee, whether junior or atomic scientist, would be investigated. While well intended, it was a questionable move which fueled anxiety and led to abuse.

Despite the Administration’s security system, which should have satisfied the most ardent inquisitor, talk of subversion and Communism mounted. By its activities, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), contributed to public apprehension. Established in 1938, it quickly became an instrument to attack the New Deal. HUAC charged Franklin Roosevelt’s Administration with “coddling” Reds and claimed that the New Deal was taking America down the road to socialism. As the Cold War intensified in the late 1940s, HUAC conducted highly publicized investigations of Communists in government, education, industry, unions, radio, and the movies. Long before Joseph McCarthy seized the Communist issue, HUAC bullied witnesses, smeared opponents, and cleverly manipulated the press.

In 1948 HUAC heard testimony that would lead to one of the most famous battles in American history, and, more than any single event, would lend credibility to the view that there were spies in high places. In August, Whittaker Chambers, editor of Time Magazine and former Communist, admitted that he had engaged in espionage and named Alger Hiss as a Communist spy. Hiss, a former State Department official epitomized the liberal elite who had done so much to shape the New Deal. His accuser, seedy, rumpled, with a history of instability, seemed no match for the elegantly tailored, well-heeled, well-connected Hiss.

HUAC’s investigation of Chambers’ charges, which launched Congressman Richard M. Nixon into the national spotlight, led to Hiss’ indictment for perjury in December 1948 (the statute of limitations for espionage had expired). Though the charge was lying to the grand jury, everyone knew the real issue was whether Hiss had been a spy. Thoughout 1949 the great spy trial dominated the headlines and generated emotional debate. As numerous writers have pointed out, Hiss quickly became a symbol. For many Americans the contest was a struggle between leftist New Dealers and right-wing anti-Communists.

While the Hiss proceedings were dividing the nation, two shocking events of 1949 would add momentum to the spies-in-government notion. First came the announcement of the “fall of China.” Since the 1930s America had been supporting Chinese leader Chiang Kai-Shek and since 1945 had sent millions to aid him in his civil war struggle against the Communists. In August the State Department conceded the

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loss of the world's largest nation to Communism. Secretary of State Dean Acheson defended American policy, arguing persuasively that the events in China were beyond the control of the United States, and put the blame squarely on Chiang Kai-Shek, whose regime was corrupt and incompetent.

Although the government's defense of its policy toward China was irrefutable, many Americans, not generally informed, were shocked and bewildered. The Chiang they knew was the Generalissimo seen frequently on the cover of Time Magazine, one of the war's Big Four (along with Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill), dependable and pro-American. Besides, how could the most powerful nation in the world lose China? Sensible observers noted that America never had China to lose, but deceived by the illusion of omnipotence, Americans wanted to know where the government had gone wrong.

A month later came the second shock when the government announced that the Soviet Union possessed the atom bomb. Americans, who had been assured that the Soviets were years away from developing a nuclear weapon, began to ask whether spies had turned over secrets to Stalin.

By the end of 1949, talk of spies and traitors was commonplace. President Truman's Attorney General warned that Communists "are everywhere -- in factories, offices, butcher stores, on street corners, in private businesses."HUAC, which had just published a booklet entitled Spotlight on Spies, warned in its annual report: "We feel that Communists "are everywhere -- in factories, offices, butcher stores, on street corners, in private businesses."HUAC, which had just published a booklet entitled Spotlight on Spies, warned in its annual report: "We feel that Communists "are everywhere -- in factories, offices, butcher stores, on street corners, in private businesses."HUAC, which had just published a booklet entitled Spotlight on Spies, warned in its annual report: "We feel

The beginning of a new decade brought no end to the hysteria. In January 1950, after the first trial ended in a hung jury, Alger Hiss was found guilty. If Hiss, a man of flawless reputation, was a spy, how many other bright New Dealers were Communists? Congressman Richard Nixon charged that the Hiss case was only "a small part of the whole shocking story of Communist espionage in the United States."

More was to come. In early February Scotland Yard arrested Klaus Fuchs, a British scientist who had worked on the atom bomb, for giving American secrets to the Soviets. The Chicago Tribune screamed "REDS GET OUR BOMB PLANS." It was all too much for one conservative senator who wailed, "How much more are we going to take? Fuchs and Acheson and Hiss and hydrogen bombs threatening outside and New Dealism eating away the vitals of the Wisconsin Senator's charges were "A fraud and a hoax perpetuated on the Senate of the United States and the American people." Nevertheless, even as McCarthy was exposed, his public support grew because he had tapped deep-seated fears in the land and many believed that McCarthy had actually discovered spies.

Throughout 1950 McCarthy gained momentum. Thousands of letters poured into his office and he quickly became the Republican Party's most sought-after speaker. Against all logic and on the strength of bold lies, McCarthy became a symbol of anti-Communism. A political charlatan had kindled a fire in America's heartland by offering simple answers to complex questions: China was lost because of spies; the Soviet Union had the bomb because of spies; America's failures stemmed from a conspiracy in Washington. Others, to be sure, had raised the specter of treason, but other Red-baiters lacked McCarthy's phenomenal impudence and mendacity. As one veteran Washington reporter wrote, "McCarthy was surely the champion liar. He lied with wild abandon; he lied without evident fear; he lied in his teeth and in the teeth of truth." Crude and reckless, McCarthy did not hesitate to smear his opponents and, when crossed, he got even, which made him a dangerous foe. Many followers conceded that the Senator played a little rough, but argued that excesses were excusable in a life and death struggle. Nor could other witch hunters match McCarthy's skill in manipulating the press. He pioneered the technique of holding one press conference to announce that a shocking revelation would come at another press conference later in the day. Afternoon newspapers would blaze such headlines as "MCARTHY TO NAME TOP SPY SOON." Headlines usually featured McCarthy's charges, while denials less sensational and more complex were buried at the end of the story.

Even as skillful a demagogue as McCarthy, however, could not have thrived for so long without the events of 1950. First there was the arrest of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for spying, confirming what many already accepted. In June the Korean War turned the Cold War decidedly hot and the accumulating frustrations were made to order for McCarthy. In this hysterical atmosphere, anti-Communism demagoguery became commonplace with both Republicans and Democrats raising the subversion bogey.

But none could match McCarthy for recklessness. He was the master of guilt by association and he moved quickly from one preposterous charge to another while making little effort to support his accusations. In his attacks, often bitter, frequently sarcastic, McCarthy denounced the Truman Administration for "selling out" to Communism. Secretary of State Acheson, whom McCarthy referred to as the "Red Dean," was a traitor to his country; he jumped Acheson and Truman together as the "Pied Pipers of the Poliburo." No one was safe after McCarthy accused General George Marshall, hitherto one of the most respected men in American life, of being part of the Communist conspiracy. Many Republicans who knew better saw McCarthy as the route back to the White House and, out of calculation or fear or both, indulged their colleague.

With the election of Republican Dwight Eisenhower in 1952, most assumed that
McCarthy would cooperate with the New Administration. But to Ike's dismay the Senator, now Chairman of the Government Operations Committee, stepped up his campaign to ferret out Communists. Eisenhower personally loathed McCarthy, but hesitated to grapple with him, explaining, "I will not get in the gutter with that guy."

McCarthy began his campaign with an investigation into subversion in the Voice of America, the government agency for overseas broadcasts. His chief counsel, Roy Cohn, and committee staff assistant G. David Schine, made a highly publicized tour of American information offices in Europe, searching for subversive books and terrorizing employees.

By early 1954, McCarthy was at the height of his power. A Gallup Poll of January 1954, reported that fifty percent of those interviewed expressed a favorable opinion of him. But when, in his increasingly reckless course, he turned his guns on the United States Army, the Eisenhower Administration broke with McCarthy. At issue was whether the Army was protecting and even promoting Communists. The Army fought back, charging that Roy Cohn had sought preferential treatment for his sidekick G. David Schine, who had been drafted in 1953.

The clash became the subject of a Senate investigation which was televised from April 22 to June 17. Like the later Watergate hearings, it was compelling drama, attracting millions of viewers, who quickly realized that McCarthy was a crude and cruel bully. As one columnist observed, "No one who saw that flower of evil will ever forget it."

The dramatic highlight, which assured McCarthy's denouement, occurred when the Army counsel, Joseph Welch, outraged by McCarthy's attack on a young colleague, cried out, "Until this moment, Senator, I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness ... And he added, "Have you no sense of decency, Sir, at long last?" The gallery applauded and McCarthy's bullying days were over. In December 1954, the Senate moved itself against his insults and voted to "condemn" McCarthy. Thereafter McCarthy was a voice in the wilderness, snubbed by all, save the hard-core Red baiters. His death from alcoholism, in 1957, "merely ratified his political demise," as one writer put it.

Before McCarthy's self-destruction, he disrupted two Administrations, besmirched American political life, lowered morale throughout the federal government, and contributed to a rigid foreign policy that stifled debate and inhibited the American government for years to come. McCarthy encouraged censorship, blacklists, and loyalty oaths and, while he never uncovered a single Communist, many hundreds suffered because of his obsession with subversion.

McCarthy operated in troubled times, but his brief success serves to remind us that the fabric of civil liberties is fragile and that "Great Simplifiers" are dangerous. People like McCarthy get their chance when fear and ignorance become tangled, when people do not understand life or history's complexities. While some liberals of the '50s thought they saw an emerging dictator and recalled the last days of Germany's Weimar Republic, McCarthy was no Hitler -- he had no program, his ambitions were limited. But this is no reason for complacency. Even the most optimistic student of American history must consider the possibility that in another national crisis, a real Fuehrer could emerge to tantalize us with simple solutions to complex problems.

PCBs In The Acushnet River Estuary

Much media attention has recently been devoted to potentially toxic substances disseminated throughout various components of the environment. In almost every case these substances had been manufactured and distributed under the assumption that they did not pose a threat to man. Indeed when tested by methods current at the time of their initial introduction the substances were considered benign. It was only later when technologically advanced and more sensitive methods of analyses were developed that the presence of these substances was considered to be of real concern. Unfortunately, in the interval between introduction and detection, the accumulation of these substances had frequently reached staggering proportions.

Under these circumstances, the problem can no longer be solved by the simple expedient of cessation of production. Methods must be devised to deal with the already accumulated substances. Frequently, because of the urgency, these methods constitute only stop-gap measures which do little more than transfer the pollutants from one environmental component to another while awaiting the development of technology which will permanently neutralize the pollutants.

Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are but one example of such substances. Originally made commercially available in 1929, they share with many other halogenated hydrocarbons the characteristic of excellent resistance to degradation. From the time of their introduction through 1975, approximately 600 million kilograms (kg) of PCBs were produced in the United States alone. These compounds were found to be extremely useful in a wide variety of industrial applications. Their stability at high temperatures and voltages made them ideal lubricating and insulating oils respectively. Also related to their stability was their use to extend the life of certain pesticides. Other applications included their incorporation in the manufacture of rubber and plastics as corrosion and flame retardants. Paradoxically this stability, which caused the PCBs to be so attractive in industrial and agricultural applications, is also the source of their environmental liability. Nearly the entire amount produced since their introduction can be accounted for. More than half of the total is still in service and only approximately four percent has been degraded or incinerated. Of the remainder it is estimated that 130 million kg are located in landfills or equipment dumps and 68 million kg have been released into the environment.

Figure 1
General Structure of polychlorinated biphenyls