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Source: *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Autumn, 1976, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Autumn, 1976), pp. 42-54

Published by: Wisconsin Historical Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4635090>

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McCarthyism: Interpretations Since Hofstadter

By Thomas C. Reeves

STUDENTS of McCarthyism have repeatedly lamented the absence of a precise and widely accepted definition of this complex and controversial historical phenomenon. McCarthyism has been described, among other things, as a method, a tactic, an attitude, a tendency, a mood, an hysteria, an ideology, and a philosophy. It has been linked to the outlook and activities of a single United States Senator, to a party faction, to a party, to both major parties, to the political system, to segments of American society, and to the American people as a whole. Its chronological framework has been portrayed as encompassing as few as four and a half years to as many as 350 years. Even the origin of the term "McCarthyism" remains in dispute, some attributing it to *Washington Post* cartoonist Herbert Block, others to the *Daily Worker*.

From the left and center of the political spectrum have come definitions and interpretations bristling with vilification. The *New York Times* declared in 1954: "It is the invasion of personal rights, the irresponsible attacks on individuals and institutions, the disregard of fair democratic procedures, the reckless shattering of mutual trust among the citizens of this country, the terrorization of loyal civil servants—these are all elements of McCarthyism. It is the disruption of orderly governmental processes; it is the destruction of the constitutional relationship between the equal branches of our Government; it is the assault on federal agencies most intimately concerned with the actual 'cold war' or a

potential 'hot' one; it is contempt for the Bill of Rights and for the ordinary rules of public and political decency. It is the encouragement of fear, the undermining of self-confidence, the pandering to emotionalism; it is the divisive force of accusation, recrimination and suspicion."¹ To an equally hostile observer, "McCarthyism is a complex of repressive measures, basically anti-intellectual and anti-humanist, resulting from a crisis psychology under which external attack and internal subversion are assumed to be imminent."²

Elements on the right and far right, of course, have portrayed McCarthyism in a very different light. In 1954 William F. Buckley, Jr., and L. Brent Bozell described it as "primarily the maintenance of a steady flow of criticism (raillery the Liberals call it) calculated to pressure the President, Cabinet members, high officials, and above all the political party in power, to get on with the elimination of security risks in government. . . . It is a movement around which men of good will and stern morality can close ranks."³ Joe McCarthy himself simply equated the term with "Americanism." "In my part of the country," he once said, "it means fighting communism; it means getting tough with the subversives in Government and outside, and with those who for any reason seek to protect them to escape

¹ Editorial, *New York Times*, November 11, 1954.

² Herbert M. Orrell, "McCarthyism and the Future," in *The Churchman*, 169: 6 (January 1, 1955).

³ William F. Buckley, Jr., and L. Brent Bozell, *McCarthy and His Enemies: The Record and Its Meaning* (Chicago, 1954), 331, 335.



Courtesy The Post-Crescent, Appleton

Eighteenth annual memorial service, St. Mary Cemetery, Appleton, May 4, 1975. From left to right: Rev. Hugh Wish, pastor of St. Lawrence Catholic Church, Milwaukee; Leonard Kraus, Milwaukee; and Leonard Galbrecht, Milwaukee.

the consequences of their own negligence or worse.”⁴

Though the subject is burdened with imprecise terminology and intense partisanship, McCarthyism has continued to attract widespread attention. Films and plays on the “McCarthy Era” are viewed on television, in theaters, and in classrooms across the country; newspaper stories, books, and doctoral dissertations appear with regularity. One close friend of McCarthy’s in Wisconsin reports receiving scores of requests annually for interviews and files.⁵ Part of this lingering

⁴ Quoted by Arthur Krock, in the *New York Times*, December 28, 1950. See also Joe McCarthy, *McCarthyism, The Fight for America* (New York, 1952), 88.

⁵ Columnist John Wyngaard, in the *Racine Journal Times*, May 30, 1975.

fascination surpasses purely academic concerns and a somewhat morbid sense of nostalgia, and may be traced to American involvement in Vietnam, often ascribed to an “anti-communist impulse” of the early 1950’s.

The conservative defense of McCarthyism has persuaded very few, particularly within intellectual circles, and thus the continuing debate over the nature and meaning of McCarthyism has been carried on among those hostile to the Wisconsin Senator and his adherents. This is easily illustrated by a glance at relevant book titles displayed in standard bibliographies: *Decade of Shame, Decade of Fear, The Nightmare Decade, The Politics of Fear, Inquisition in Eden, Ordeal by Slander, The Age of Suspicion, The Haunted Fifties, Washington Witch Hunt, Witch Hunt:*

The Revival of Heresy, The American Nightmare, The Paranoid Style in American Politics, Political Hysteria in America, and Joe McCarthy and McCarthyism: The Hate That Haunts America. No prominent historian has come to McCarthy's defense—a fate shared by only a handful of history's most infamous villains. Not a single major college-level textbook treats the postwar campaign against internal communist subversion in a neutral, let alone favorable manner.

WHEN McCarthy rose to prominence in the late stages of the Truman administration, political observers from the left and center saw him by and large as an unscrupulous and ambitious ultra-conservative employing well-worn techniques in a particularly brazen fashion for the destruction of New Deal and Fair Deal policies at home and abroad. McCarthyism became a synonym for reckless allegations of communist and pro-communist attitudes and activities, largely for the purpose of political gain. Not long after McCarthy was condemned by the Senate in late 1954, Joseph L. Rauh, Jr., national chairman of Americans for Democratic Action, declared the McCarthy Era at an end, explaining, "There was real and rational fear of total war, directed at specific people—the Communists. It was the deliberate exploitation of this fear by a group of desperate men in the Republican party that produced McCarthyism."⁶

But earlier, even as the Senator from Wisconsin was becoming fully known to the public through the televised Army-McCarthy hearings, there were those who were beginning to interpret McCarthyism in a deeper, more provocative way. To them it was largely a reflection of psychological and social forces endemic in American society. It was not just a political device like the "bloody shirt" which briefly attracted the gullible; it was a pretext for personal anxieties and frustrations, and its roots were deep in the American past. Foremost among this small band of thinkers was the prominent historian Richard Hofstadter.

⁶ Madison *Capital Times*, August 13, 1955.

In an essay delivered at Barnard College in the spring of 1954 and published that winter in *The American Scholar*, Hofstadter advanced what he called "nothing more than a speculative hypothesis" concerning the nature of "pseudo-conservatism," a term borrowed from an earlier study which actually meant the extreme right wing of American politics. To Hofstadter, pseudo-conservatism was "in good part a product of the rootlessness and heterogeneity of American life, and above all, of its peculiar scramble for status and its peculiar search for secure identity." He coined the term "status politics" and distinguished it from "interest politics." In hard times the latter focus upon economic issues and dominate political discussion. During prosperous periods, Hofstadter contended, the status aspirations of old family Anglo-Saxon Protestants and "many types of immigrant families, most notably among the Germans and Irish, who are very frequently Catholic" become "relatively more important," are channeled into politics, and result in the appearance of pseudo-conservatism. The old family group is disposed toward right-wing conservatism, the argument went, when it is losing caste, the immigrant group when it is gaining.

Hofstadter thought pseudo-conservatives were deeply disturbed individuals, given to "a profound if largely unconscious" hatred of American society, haunted by fears of phantom subversives, bigoted, impulsive, violent, and authoritarian. Their ideology, he contended, could be characterized but not defined, for the pseudo-conservative tended "to be more than ordinarily incoherent about politics."⁷

⁷ Richard Hofstadter, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt," in *The American Scholar*, XXIV: 9-27 (Winter, 1954-1955), and in Daniel Bell, ed., *The New American Right* (New York, 1955), 33-55. The article also appears in an updated and expanded version of the 1955 volume entitled *The Radical Right*. In a 1962 postscript, Hofstadter said he felt that while his original approach had been correct, "status politics" should have been supplemented with "cultural politics" ("questions of faith and morals, tone and style, freedom and coercion") and "projective politics" ("the projection of interests and concerns, not only largely private but essentially pathological, into the public scene"). "In action, of course, considerations of status and cultural role become intertwined with the content of projective politics, and what may be well worth making as an analytical distinction is not nec-



Courtesy The Post-Crescent, Appleton

Senator McCarthy at a Lincoln Day dinner, Green Bay, February, 1951. Behind him is Frederick J. Trowbridge, Sr., a Green Bay attorney.

Though Hofstadter's article was based on little research of any sort and was often vague and evasive, it stimulated similar inquiries by others and in late 1955 was featured in a book of essays about status anxieties and resentments and about political extremism. Edited by sociologist Daniel Bell, it was titled *The New American Right* and was greeted with widespread and enthusiastic attention. (Indeed, within the next few years, as the methodology of the social sciences became increasingly popular and universities stressed the values of interdisciplinary studies, the "status theory" became trendy, and historians employed it to explain, among other things, abolitionism, civil service reform, progressivism, the temperance movement, the Ku Klux Klan, as well as McCarthyism.) The volume contained a variety of approaches and conclusions; while its contributors often paid tribute to Hofstadter, they frequently expressed disagreement with him and with each other.

Bell thought the "radical right," as ultra-conservatism came to be dubbed, was composed of four groups: "a thin stratum of soured patricians," such as Teddy Roosevelt's son, Archibald; the "new rich," leery of taxation and eager to show that hard work and not government assistance was responsible for its wealth; "the rising middle-class strata of the ethnic groups," particularly the Irish and Germans, desirous of parading their patriotism; and "a small group of intellectuals, many of them cankered ex-Communists," such as Max Eastman. In a 1962 update of his article, Bell added "the 'old' middle class" to his list, encompassing "the independent physician, farm owner, small-town lawyer, real-estate promoter, home builder, automobile dealer, gasoline-station owner, small businessman, and the like." Also singled out for their frustrations were "the managerial executive class" and "the American military establishment."⁸

essarily so clear in the actual world of political controversy." He acknowledged being confronted with "an unusually complex social fabric." See Daniel Bell, ed., *The Radical Right* (New York, 1963), 97-103.

⁸ Daniel Bell, "The Dispossessed" (1962), and "Interpretations of American Politics" (1955), *ibid.*, 1-73. For an "ethnic" interpretation of McCarthyism, see Samuel Lubell, *Revolt of the Moderates* (New

Sociologists David Riesman and Nathan Glazer wrote of "the discontented classes" and focused their attention upon "new big money"—Texas millionaires, for example, fearful of losing their wealth. Also mentioned briefly were "the old Puritan families," "many elderly and retired people," and many youth. "Not all members of the discontented classes come from similar backgrounds or arrive at similar destinations," the authors concluded; nevertheless, mobility—a fast rise from humble origins, or a transplantation to the city, or a move from the factory class to the white-collar class—is a general characteristic."⁹

Peter Viereck, historian and prize-winning poet, interpreted McCarthyism as a "plebian revolution," a revolt by the masses against "America's real intellectual and social aristocracy." The proletariat, Viereck argued, was entering the middle class and turning against the New Dealers responsible for its new status. McCarthyism was neither anti-communist nor conservative: it was radically anti-conservative, and its roots were in populism. It was "the same old isolationist, Anglophobe, Germanophile revolt of radical Populist lunatic-fringers against the eastern, educated, Anglicized elite. Only this time it is a Populism gone sour; this time it lacks the generous, idealistic, social reformist instincts which partly justified the original Populists." Irish Catholics, newly-rich Protestant Texans, lower-middle-class South Bostonians, and "rich Chicago *Tribune* nationalists" became targets for Viereck's considerable powers of invective. "McCarthyism," he concluded, "is the revenge of the noses that for twenty years of fancy parties were pressed against the outside window pane."¹⁰ Hofstadter and Bell soon published similar, though more moderate interpretations

York, 1956), 64-74, 85, 268-270. "One can go into any German-American community in the country and find that a talk with typical residents becomes a virtual playback of McCarthy's speeches."

⁹ David Riesman and Nathan Glazer, "The Intellectuals and the Discontented Classes," in Bell, ed., *The New American Right*, 56-90.

¹⁰ Peter Viereck, "The Revolt Against the Elite," *ibid.*, 91-116. See also Peter Viereck, *The Unadjusted Man: A New Hero for Americans, Reflections on the Distinction Between Conforming and Conserving* (Boston, 1956).

of populism's alleged historical ties to modern ultraconservatism.¹¹

In sociologist Talcott Parsons' judgment, McCarthyism was an irrational reaction to America's new international obligations. It was "both a movement supported by certain vested-interest elements and a popular revolt against the upper classes." He thought the continuity between western agrarian populism and McCarthyism manifest, and he pointed to those who had unsuccessfully aspired to "full status in the American system," such as "the Mid-Western lower and lower middle classes and much of the population of recent immigrant origin."¹²

Sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset endorsed Hofstadter's concept of status politics and proceeded to identify seven groups of supporters of the Radical Right: rising ethnic groups and old-family Americans, such as the Irish and the Daughters of the American Revolution; the newly wealthy and the small independent businessmen (the "economic extremists"); the "Tory workers," a large section of the working class possibly suffering from status deprivation linked to personal failure in a period of national prosperity; traditional isolationists, steeped in "ethnic prejudices or reactions, ties to the homeland, and populist xenophobia"; "many Catholics," rapidly rising in status and possibly suffering from sexual repression; authoritarian personalities, "a certain undefined minority of the population" whose "various personality frustrations and repressions result in the adoption of scapegoat sentiments"; and the ex-Communists. Lipset thought that McCarthy's genius was his ability to appeal to several segments of society simultaneously. "To the status-deprived he is a critic of the

upper class; to the privileged, he is a foe of social change and Communism."¹³

DESPITE the hurrah that greeted the appearance of *The New American Right*, critical reaction was not long in coming. In late 1959 the distinguished historian C. Vann Woodward published a penetrating analysis of populism which conclusively disassociated it from either "status politics" or "class politics." "Whatever concern the farmers might have had for their status," he wrote, "was overwhelmed by desperate and immediate economic anxieties. Not only their anxieties but their proposed solutions and remedies were economic." Woodward also reminded us that the South, where populism was historically strongest, was the region of the country least attracted to Joe McCarthy.¹⁴

Almost a year later political scientist Nelson W. Polsby developed a table that showed the large number of varied groups identified in *The New American Right* as comprising the far right. He concluded that the status theory was much too inclusive to bear much explanatory power. A second table compared the groups listed with the results of three national polls on McCarthyites, revealing little positive correlation. To Polsby, polling data and election returns indicated a single plausible conclusion: "McCarthy succeeded at the grass roots primarily among Republicans." McCarthy's 1952 vote in Wisconsin, for example, "was concentrated in areas of Republican strength, and was neither scattered, nor distributed in some pattern unique to McCarthy, nor particularly strong."

Polsby proceeded to argue that McCarthy's success as a national figure went beyond the

¹¹ See Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform, From Bryan to F. D. R.* (New York, 1955), 5, 16-22, 70-93, *et passim*; Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (rev. ed., New York, 1962), 103-123. See also Edward A. Shils, *The Torment of Secrecy, The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies* (New York, 1956), 98-104; William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (New York, 1959), 66, 103-105, 122, 195, 205-207.

¹² Talcott Parsons, "Social Strains in America," in Bell, ed., *The New American Right*, 117-140.

¹³ Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Sources of the 'Radical Right,'" *ibid.*, 166-233. See also Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man, The Social Bases of Politics* (New York, 1960), 169-173.

¹⁴ C. Vann Woodward, "The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual," in *American Scholar*, XXIX: 55-72 (Winter, 1959-1960). About the same time, William F. Buckley, Jr., summarily dismissed all of what he called "the tortured sociological theorizing of scholars" and lamented "the virtual absence of serious literature on McCarthy. . . ." See his *Up From Liberalism* (New York, 1959), 22.

issue of grass-roots support. It involved several factors: the desperation of the GOP after its demoralizing defeat in 1948; McCarthy's membership in the Senate, which gave him power, a staff, and immunity from libel suits; the Senator's skill with the mass media and his daring misuse of evidence; the Truman administration's vulnerability on the issue of Communists in government; and Eisenhower's emasculation of executive resistance to the Wisconsin Senator.¹⁵

In 1962, after a painstaking re-evaluation of available data, Seymour Martin Lipset declared himself unable to demonstrate the validity of the status theory conclusively. He also stated that the evidence did not clearly establish a linkage between McCarthyism and either ethnic prejudice or populism.¹⁶

Four years later, Earl Latham, a political scientist, published a highly acclaimed study entitled *The Communist Controversy in Washington, From the New Deal to McCarthy*. The product of a decade of labor, it argued that McCarthyism was above all an explosion within the Republican party, triggered by its right wing, following the unexpected and shattering GOP defeat in the presidential

election of 1948. "Eager for office, disappointed by frustration, the Republican party with the help of conservative Democrats took control of the Congress in 1950, found a storm leader in McCarthy, developed the technique of prescriptive publicity [public exposure and condemnation of a person's political past by a congressional committee to achieve punitive consequences] as a formidable weapon of political harassment, and with an assist from the timorous and defensive leadership of the Administration managed to achieve in 1952 the victory they had been denied for two decades, which the politics of eighty years promised and, according to which, was overdue. . . . The Communist problem lent itself to quiet and nonsensational solutions before the late forties and after 1954. When McCarthy and the Communist issue had served their purposes, they both disappeared."

Latham exhibited a sound grasp of the earlier interpretations of McCarthyism and analyzed what he considered their shortcomings as he approached his own conclusion. How could McCarthyism be convincingly associated with the psychology of authoritarianism, he asked, in the absence of empirical studies demonstrating the authoritarian tendencies of even some of McCarthy's most avid followers? Had not tensions over subversion prior to the Truman administration occurred during periods of economic decline rather than in the prosperous years deemed necessary for status anxieties? And how was McCarthy's fall explained by the status theory? Did the groups rising and falling in the social scale suddenly forget their frustrations? Social mobility had always characterized American society, he observed, so that the distinctive phenomenon of McCarthyism clearly needed another explanation.

To Latham, that explanation was best described in political terms. "McCarthyism may have been more than a political phenomenon—but it was at least a political phenomenon. McCarthy acquired his vogue and most of his meaning from the immediate political circumstances which begot him, and for which he was the temporary instrument."¹⁷

¹⁷ Earl Latham, *The Communist Controversy in Washington, From the New Deal to McCarthy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1966), 356-423. See also Earl

¹⁵ Nelson W. Polsby, "Toward an Explanation of McCarthyism," in *Political Studies*, VIII: 250-271 (October, 1960). Lipset later agreed with Polsby's evaluation of the connection between Republicanism and McCarthyism and offered additional evidence to sustain it. He did not believe, however, that party affiliation was the chief factor in determining the composition of McCarthyites. Seymour Martin Lipset, "Three Decades of the Radical Right: Coughlinites, McCarthyites, and Birchers" (1962), in Bell, ed., *The Radical Right*, 395-398, 420-421. Hofstadter thought Polsby's primary conclusion obvious and uninteresting. "What would be most pertinent would be to find out just what characteristics divide those Republicans who have joined the extreme right from those who believe that it is a menace to the body politic, and what were the social characteristics of the rather substantial number of Democrats who were pro-McCarthy." Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York, 1965), 85-86. See also Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York, 1963), 3-5, 41-43.

¹⁶ Lipset, "Three Decades of the Radical Right," 391-421. He continued to contend, however, that the data "tend to sustain many of the generalizations" made in *The New American Right*. See Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970* (New York, 1970), 209-246.

This conclusion was amplified in 1967 in Michael Paul Rogin's award-winning book *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter*, perhaps the most important study yet written on McCarthyism. Following a careful examination of voting behavior in Wisconsin and the Dakotas and of virtually all available polling data, the young political scientist denied the assertion that McCarthyism was a mass movement (the issue of internal subversion deeply concerned very few Americans) and found that it did not possess historical roots in agrarian radicalism or progressivism. McCarthy's popular support, he determined, came predominantly from the right wing of the midwestern Republican party ("this was not a 'new' American Right, but rather an old one with new enthusiasm and new power") and from temporary public frustrations about the Korean War, frustrations that benefited moderate and apolitical Dwight Eisenhower even more than the junior Senator from Wisconsin. "Leaders of the GOP saw in McCarthy a way back to national power after twenty years in the political wilderness. Aside from desiring political power, moderate Republicans feared that an attack on McCarthy would split their party. . . . Senators, jealous of their prerogative, were loath to interfere with a fellow senator. Newspapers, looking for good copy, publicized McCarthy's activities. When the political institutions that had fostered McCarthy turned against him, and when, with the end of the Korean War his political issue became less salient, McCarthy was reduced to insignificance."

The Intellectuals and McCarthy was as much a castigation of Hofstadter, Lipset, Viereck, and those who had come to similar conclusions about McCarthyism as it was a probe into the phenomenon itself. These "pluralists," Rogin charged, misread history because of their own conservatism, elitism, and mistrust of the masses; "the root pluralist fear is of mass passion over public policy, not of concern for the public interest per se." Rogin was especially scornful of the status theory. Status anxieties, he noted, of necessity bear no particular political consequences and might

just as well result in political apathy or moderation as in extremism.¹⁸

There is little doubt that Latham and Rogin have had a profound effect upon historians. Robert Griffith and Athan Theoharis concluded in 1974: "What is called 'McCarthyism' . . . is better understood in political not sociopsychological terms. Indeed, the value and imprecise use of status theory has tended to confuse attempts to explain the nature of McCarthyism."¹⁹ Today, incidentally, the discipline of psychology has virtually discarded the status theory of historical causation.²⁰ Two studies published in 1970 suggest that right-wing extremists are as psychologically normal as anyone else.²¹

The virulent anti-communism of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations is being increasingly viewed by historians within the context of conventional politics. As a result, McCarthy himself has become less important, and more attention has been paid to the complex domestic and international developments that paved the way for his brief political prominence.²²

RECENTLY, a number of revisionists have explored the responsibility of the Truman administration

¹⁸ Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967).

¹⁹ Robert Griffith and Athan Theoharis, eds., *The Specter: Original Essays on the Cold War and the Origins of McCarthyism* (New York, 1974), xi.

²⁰ See Gerald Sorin, *The New York Abolitionists* (Westport, Connecticut, 1971), 3-17, 119-123. See also Thomas C. Reeves, *Gentleman Boss, The Life of Chester Alan Arthur* (New York, 1975), 63-66.

²¹ "The Amiable Right," in *Newsweek*, 75: 54 (March 2, 1970). Oral interviews with numerous Wisconsin McCarthyites have left this author with the same unsurprising impression.

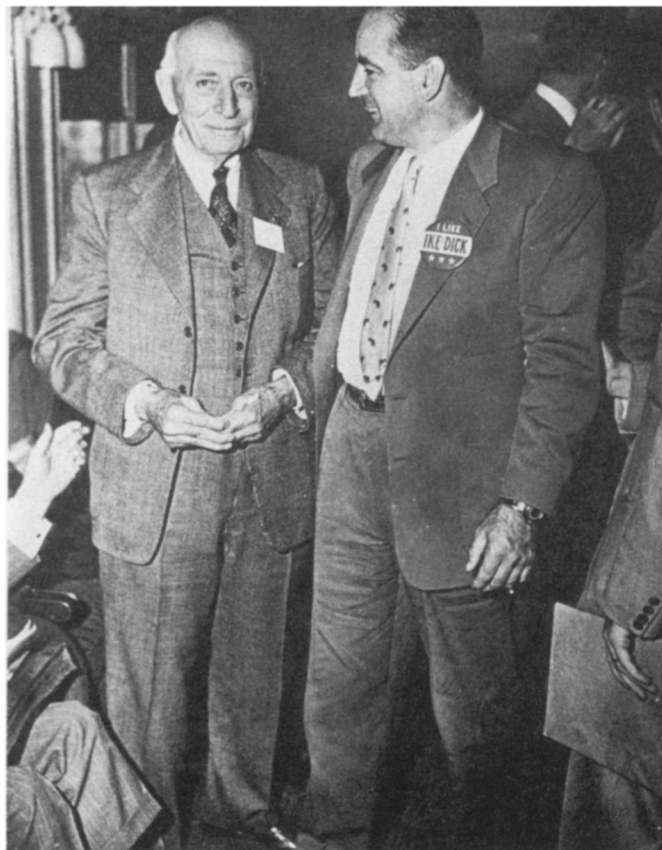
²² See Robert Griffith, "American Politics and the Origins of 'McCarthyism,'" in Griffith and Theoharis, eds., *The Specter*, 2-17; Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1970), 30-53, 101-103, 116-117, 319-320; William Preston, Jr., "The 1940s: The Way We Really Were," in *The Civil Liberties Review*, 2: 4-38 (Winter, 1975). See also John W. Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1959); Ronald J. Caridi, *The Korean War and American Politics: The Republican Party as a Case Study* (Philadelphia, 1968).

Latham, ed., *The Meaning of McCarthyism* (Boston, 1965).

and its liberal backers for McCarthyism, a task previously assumed by activists and polemicists of the far left during the late 1940's and early 1950's.²³ Few scholars of the period have failed to mention the occasional timidity of those such as Hubert Humphrey, author of the Communist Control Act of 1954, and Paul H. Douglas and John F. Kennedy, who were never heard to utter a harsh word about Joe McCarthy until his condemnation by the Senate. Explanations have dwelled upon the climate of opinion at the time, particularly in Congress, and upon the desire of these liberal politicians to be re-elected. Even fewer scholars have wholly defended Truman's loyalty-security programs. At best it is usually noted that the President had few alternatives and that his efforts probably prevented the dangers to civil liberties from becoming worse. The revisionists, however, though they differ among themselves on several points, argue as a body that Truman and his liberal adherents deliberately and effectively created a Red scare in order to establish expensive foreign policy programs, defeat Republicans at the polls, and discredit and destroy leftist critics such as Henry Wallace. In short, McCarthy and his minions owed their fleeting rendezvous with history to the very people they considered at the time among their most determined and influential enemies.

In *Seeds of Repression*, published in 1971, Athan Theoharis condemned the Truman administration for employing vastly oversimplified and excessively dramatic anti-communist rhetoric to secure support for its containment policy and to damage its left-wing political opposition, rhetoric that did not differ substantially from McCarthy's and resulted in "an obsessive national fear of subversion" and "a popular mania for absolute security that extended beyond the prosecution of overt acts

²³ For example, Curtis D. MacDougall, *Gideon's Army* (3 vols., New York, 1965). Liberals too, of course, were often critical of each other and especially of the Truman administration. See, for example, the 1947 essay "Washington Witch-Hunt" in Henry Steele Commager, *Freedom and Order: A Commentary on the American Political Scene* (New York, 1966), 73-77; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "What Is Loyalty? A Difficult Question," in *New York Times Magazine*, November 2, 1947, pp. 7, 48-51; Murray Kempton, *America Comes of Middle Age, Columns 1950-1952* (New York, 1972), 324-325.



Courtesy The Post-Crescent, Appleton
 McCarthy with David Clark Everest of Wausau, head of the Marathon Corporation, October, 1952.

of disloyalty to a suspicion of all potentially subversive ideas." The administration's loyalty-security programs, in the author's view, were cruel, unnecessary, and cynical. Even the Truman veto of the McCarran bill was sharply criticized by Theoharis, for the President had proposed an alternate bill to Congress instead of opposing all internal security legislation, and this implied a need for new, repressive legislation. The veto message, moreover, contended that the bill would not only curtail civil liberties but would hinder the fight against communist subversives. "How could an anti-communist bill aid the communists?" Theoharis asked. "Truman's rationale was simply not credible."²⁴

The following year, Richard M. Freeland, a student of Gabriel Kolko, published *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism*, a book that charged that the fears and frustrations of McCarthyism were fully developed by early 1948 and resulted from the Truman administration's "deliberate and

²⁴ Athan Theoharis, *Seeds of Repression* (New York, 1971).

highly organized effort," through "propaganda activities and police activities," to mobilize support for the Marshall Plan. "The practices of McCarthyism were Truman's practices in cruder hands, just as the language of McCarthyism was Truman's language, in less well-meaning voices."²⁵

A similar interpretation is to be found in Norman D. Markowitz, *The Rise and Fall of the People's Century*, Henry A. Wallace and American Liberalism, published in 1973. By late 1948, the author claims, "Truman and his supporters had linked the domestic policies of the Economic Bill of Rights with the foreign policy of containment, leaving in the aftermath of the elections the Achesons to indulge their geopolitical fantasies and the McCarthys to usurp the banner of the common man."²⁶ Allen Yarnell's *Democrats And Progressives*, which appeared in 1974, is of the same school.²⁷

These revisionists, some of whom prefer the label New Left, have close personal and ideological ties to those scholars and journalists who, for over a decade, have charged the Truman administration with major responsibility for the Cold War.²⁸ With a few exceptions, they share relative youth, left-liberal and radical politics (several, like Markowitz, are socialists), and an intense revulsion to American involvement in Vietnam—a conflict some of them admit influenced or at least accelerated the production of their widely

publicized and influential publications. They frequently cite and quote from each other's writings with considerable enthusiasm.²⁹

PREDICTABLY, liberal and centrist analysts who condemn revisionist attacks on Truman's foreign policy find charges of the President's culpability for the Second Red Scare equally distasteful. "It should be impossible to believe that Harry S. Truman was the inventor or, if not that, the chief distributor of anticommunism," wrote Robert H. Ferrell. "It is true, however, that anyone can believe anything he wants, like the White Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*, who made it her business to believe three impossible things every morning before breakfast."³⁰ The debate, just begun, promises to be lively.

In 1974 liberal historian Alonzo Hamby published a hard-hitting critique of Theoharis's *Seeds of Repression*, an analysis that may have set the stage for much of the ensuing clash. In Hamby's judgment, Theoharis overestimated the influence of presidential utterances on public opinion. Truman was incapable of instructing the public what to think about communism. If the President had such persuasive clout, Hamby wondered, why did he begin to lose control of the communist issue after 1948? Moreover, Truman's rhetoric was not as bombastic and truculent as has been described. When, on occasion, it did become militant, such as in the Truman Doctrine speech, it appears to have been calculated to impress a war-weary and inflation-conscious nation with the necessity for legislation that would stem Soviet aggression in distant lands. Truman might have remained silent, but, Hamby asked rhetorically, would the spread of Russian power to Athens and perhaps Western Europe have averted McCarthyism.

Hamby also requested some sort of definition of "red-baiting," a charge often hurled by Theoharis and other revisionists at Truman and his liberal friends:

²⁹ See the discussion of this issue by Lloyd C. Gardner, Barton J. Bernstein, and Richard O. Davies, *ibid.*, 47-48, 161-162, 192-193.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁵ Richard M. Freeland, *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism: Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and Internal Security, 1946-1948* (New York, 1972).

²⁶ Norman D. Markowitz, *The Rise and Fall of the People's Century: Henry A. Wallace and American Liberalism, 1941-1948* (New York, 1973).

²⁷ Allen Yarnell, *Democrats and Progressives: The 1948 Presidential Election as a Test of Postwar Liberalism* (Berkeley, 1974). See also John Steinke and James Weinstein, "McCarthy and the Liberals," in *Studies on the Left*, II: 43-50 (1962); Marian J. Morton, *The Terrors of Ideological Politics: Liberal Historians in a Conservative Mood* (Cleveland, 1972); William R. Tanner and Robert Griffith, "Legislative Politics and 'McCarthyism': The Internal Security Act of 1950," in Griffith and Theoharis, eds., *The Specter*, 174-189.

²⁸ Barton J. Bernstein illustrates the point in Richard S. Kirkendall, ed., *The Truman Period as a Research Field: A Reappraisal, 1972* (Columbia, Missouri, 1974), 161-189.

If the phrase is anything more than a bludgeon used by Popular Fronters to attack those who disagree with them, it must have one of two meanings: (1) false accusations of communism or Communist influence; (2) denunciation of communism in lieu of a positive program. Some revisionists might dissent, but most historians probably would agree that the Progressive party was indeed Communist-influenced and that Truman won the election of 1948 on the basis of a positive program rather than on red-baiting.

Hamby furthermore criticized Theoharis for blasting actions by Truman that were clearly in the best interests of civil liberties and were so recognized at the time, such as the strong opposition to the McCarran Internal Security Act. "If Truman's major objective was to establish himself as anti-Communist, he needed only to sign the McCarran bill." In fact, Hamby concluded, "Truman stood for one manner of fighting communism, McCarthyism for another, very different."³¹

Critics of Cold War revisionism have attracted much attention in recent years by attacking the ways in which New Left scholars use sources and present evidence. The attacks seem likely to reoccur in the debate with the New Left over McCarthyism. Hamby found Theoharis's work "narrow and one-dimensional, overly selective in its use of evidence," and he labeled the historian's use of public opinion poll data "extremely questionable."³²

Liberal and centrist historians—sometimes called realists or traditionalists (Lloyd Gardner prefers "defenders of the old orthodoxy")—found Alan D. Harper's *The Politics of Loyalty*, published in 1969, much to their

³¹ *Ibid.*, 131–134. Hamby is no blind defender of the administration. He labeled the loyalty-security program "a disgrace," adding, "Truman's record on civil liberties was erratic; he was more effective in opposing abuses outside his administration than in correcting injustices within it."

³² *Ibid.*, 131. See Hamby's scathing review of Yarnell's *Democrats and Progressives in Pacific Historical Review*, XLIV: 284–285 (May, 1975).

³³ Alan D. Harper, *The Politics of Loyalty: The White House and the Communist Issue, 1946–1952* (Westport, Connecticut, 1969.) Cf. Robert Griffith, "The Politics of Anti-Communism," in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 54: 299–308 (Summer, 1971).

liking. In harmony with what remains the interpretation of a majority of scholars, this was a well-documented and generally sympathetic account of the creation of Truman's loyalty-security programs in the context of the domestic and international turmoil of the time. McCarthy's success, to Harper, rested primarily upon two momentous historical events beyond the control of the President: the Communist victory in China and the conviction of Alger Hiss.³³

MCCARTHYISM, then, remains a challenging, controversial, and significant object of historical study in need of much careful and dispassionate research. Definitions must be drawn with exactness, and the perimeters of the Second Red Scare—which surely extend far beyond the world of politics and government bureaucracies into the nation's schools, libraries, churches, trade unions, business offices, and mass media—should be brought into focus and explored in depth.³⁴ The role of state and local governments during the postwar clashes over internal subversion deserves much attention.³⁵ Scholarly biographies of McCarthyites and those who opposed them are sorely needed; relevant manuscript collections are becoming available, and oral interviewing could be extremely fruitful.³⁶ Solid studies of Americans

³⁴ For an effort along these lines, see Thomas C. Reeves, *Freedom and the Foundation, The Fund for the Republic in the Era of McCarthyism* (New York, 1969). See also Thomas C. Reeves, ed., *McCarthyism* (Hinsdale, Illinois, 1973).

³⁵ For an interesting look at the possibilities of such research, see Richard M. Fried, "Electoral Politics and McCarthyism: The 1950 Campaigns," in Griffith and Theoharis, eds., *The Specter*, 192–222.

³⁶ The first comprehensive scholarly biography of McCarthy is currently in preparation. Until recently, historians, journalists, and polemicists have relied heavily upon a single, notoriously unreliable book to document all but the final seven and a half years of McCarthy's life: Jack Anderson and Ronald May, *McCarthy: The Man, the Senator, the "Ism"* (Boston, 1952). For revealing examples of its use and misuse, see Richard Rovere, *Senator Joe McCarthy* (New York, 1959); Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade—And After: America, 1945–1960* (New York, 1960); Roy Cohn, *McCarthy* (New York, 1968); Fred J. Cook, *The Nightmare Decade: The Life and Times of Senator Joe McCarthy* (New York, 1971); and Lately

for Democratic Action and the American Civil Liberties Union could tell us much about the resistance to McCarthyism.³⁷

Of course, beyond the studies already noted, much interesting and valuable work has been accomplished in this field during the more than twenty years since Richard Hofstadter's "speculative hypothesis." Karl Ernest Meyer, Frank J. Kendrick, Michael O'Brien, and David Oshinsky have given us glimpses into facets of Joe McCarthy's political career.³⁸ Vincent P. De Santis and Donald F. Crosby have described the complex ways in which American Catholics, long known for their strong anti-communism, responded to McCarthy.³⁹ Ralph S. Brown produced a super-

ior study of loyalty and security tests for employment.⁴⁰ Scholarly accounts of such formerly forbidding topics as blacklisting (secret practices designed to deny employment to those with controversial past or present political beliefs), the Institute of Pacific Relations, and the cadre of right-wing Chiang Kai-shek supporters known as the China Lobby are now available.⁴¹ The literature on congressional investigating committees has expanded.⁴² Two of the Fund for the Republic's studies on communism in American life shed light on the breadth of McCarthyism.⁴³ Nu-

Thomas, *When Even Angels Wept: The Senator Joseph McCarthy Affair—A Story Without a Hero* (New York, 1973). For information about the McCarthy papers, still—perhaps permanently—unavailable to scholars, see Michael James O'Brien, "Senator Joseph McCarthy and Wisconsin: 1946–1957" (doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1971), 411–413. See also Ronald Lora, "A View from the Right: Conservative Intellectuals, the Cold War, and McCarthy," in Griffith and Theoharis, eds., *The Specter*, 42–70; Peter H. Irons, "American Business and the Origins of McCarthyism: The Cold War Crusade of the United States Chamber of Commerce," *ibid.*, 74–115.

³⁷ Clifton Brock, *Americans for Democratic Action, Its Role in National Politics* (Washington, D.C., 1962), and Mary S. McAuliffe, "The Politics of Civil Liberties: The American Civil Liberties Union During the McCarthy Years," in Griffith and Theoharis, eds., *The Specter*, 154–170, are woefully inadequate. The ADA papers, at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, are used effectively in Alonzo L. Hamby, *Beyond the New Deal: Harry S. Truman and American Liberalism* (New York, 1973). See also Richard Fried, "Democrats Against McCarthy," in *Continuum*, VI: 336–352 (1968); Richard Fried, *Men Against McCarthy* (New York, 1976); Harry M. Scobie, *Ideology and Electoral Action: A Comparative Study of the National Committee for an Effective Congress* (San Francisco, 1967).

³⁸ Karl Ernest Meyer, "The Politics of Loyalty: From La Follette to McCarthy in Wisconsin, 1918–1952" (doctoral dissertation, Princeton University, 1955); Frank J. Kendrick, "McCarthy and the Senate" (doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1962); O'Brien, "Senator Joseph McCarthy And Wisconsin: 1946–1957"; Michael O'Brien, "McCarthy and McCarthyism: The Cedric Parker Case, November 1949," in Griffith and Theoharis, eds., *The Specter*, 226–238; David M. Oshinsky, *Senator Joseph McCarthy and the American Labor Movement* (Columbia, Missouri, 1976).

³⁹ Vincent P. De Santis, "American Catholics and McCarthyism," in *The Catholic Historical Review*, LI: 1–30 (April, 1965); Donald F. Crosby, S.J., "The

Angry Catholics: American Catholics and Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, 1950–1957 (doctoral dissertation, Brandeis University, 1973); Donald F. Crosby, S.J., "The Politics of Religion: American Catholics and the Anti-Communist Impulse," in Griffith and Theoharis, eds., *The Specter*, 20–38.

⁴⁰ Ralph S. Brown, Jr., *Loyalty and Security, Employment Tests in the United States* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1958).

⁴¹ John Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting* (2 vols., New York, 1956); John Henry Faulk, *Fear On Trial* (New York, 1964); Murray Schumach, *The Face on the Cutting Room Floor* (New York, 1964); Reeves, *Freedom and the Foundation*, 83, 85–86, 110–111, 192–194, 209–221, 224–227; Les K. Adler, "The Politics of Culture: Hollywood and the Cold War," in Griffith and Theoharis, eds., *The Specter*, 242–260; John N. Thomas, *The Institute of Pacific Relations, Asian Scholars and American Politics* (Seattle, 1974); Ross Y. Koen, *The China Lobby in American Politics* (New York, 1974); E. J. Kahn, Jr., *The China Hands: America's Foreign Service Officers and What Befell Them* (New York, 1975).

⁴² Much of it, however, is severely polemical. See Telford Taylor, *Grand Inquest: The Story of Congressional Investigations* (New York, 1955); Alan Barth, *Government by Investigation* (New York, 1955); Frank J. Donner, *The Un-Americans* (New York, 1961); William F. Buckley, Jr., et al., *The Committee and Its Critics* (New York, 1962); Herbert L. Packer, *Ex-Communist Witnesses: Four Studies in Fact Finding* (Stanford, 1962); Walter Goodman, *The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities* (New York, 1968); Eric Bentley, ed., *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938–1968* (New York, 1971). See also Donald J. Kemper, *Decade of Fear: Senator Hennings and Civil Liberties* (Columbia, Missouri, 1965).

⁴³ See Ralph Lord Roy, *Communism and the Churches* (New York, 1960); Robert W. Iversen, *The Communists and the Schools* (New York, 1959). See also Marjorie Fiske, *Book Selection and Censorship, A Study of School and Public Libraries in California* (Berkeley, 1959).

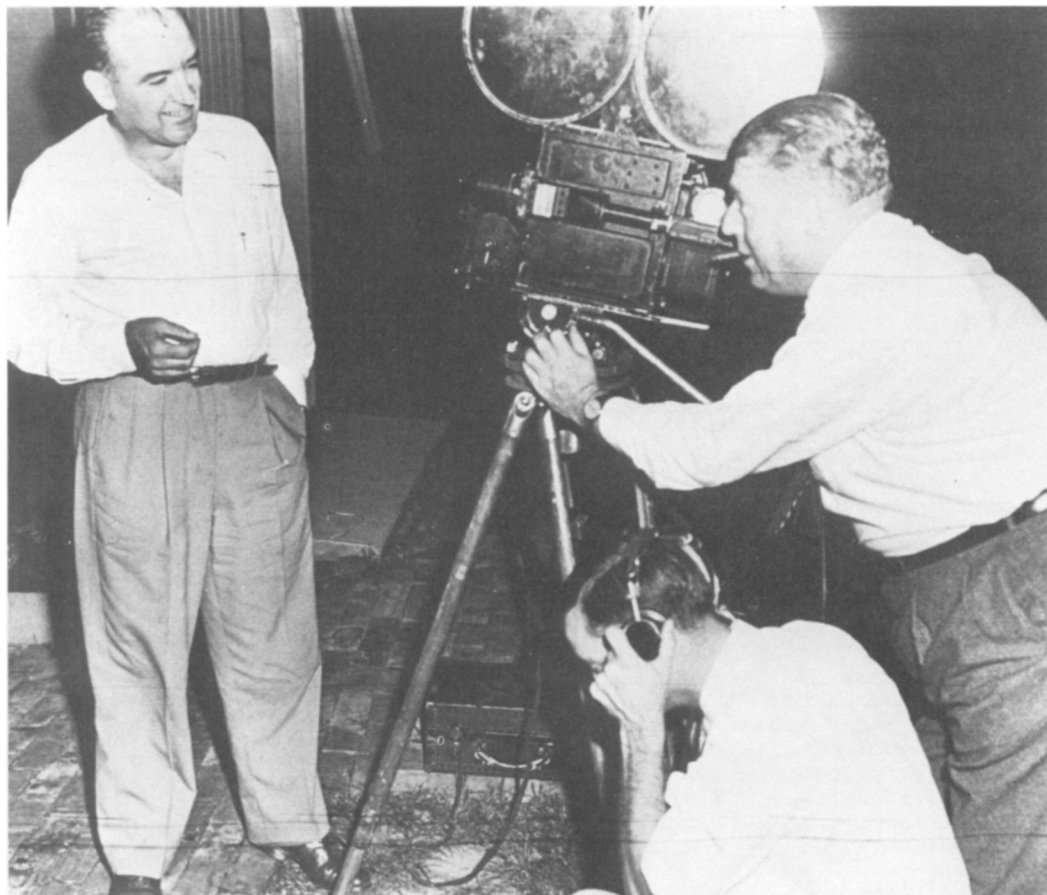
merous autobiographical accounts have increased our knowledge of the era.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ For example Dean Acheson, *A Democrat Looks at His Party* (New York, 1955); Harvey Matusow, *False Witness* (New York, 1955); Martin Merson, *The Private Diary of a Public Servant* (New York, 1955); Sherman Adams, *Firsthand Report, The Story of the Eisenhower Administration* (New York, 1961); Edward Bennett Williams, *One Man's Freedom* (New York, 1962); Emmet John Hughes, *The Ordeal of Power: A Political Memoir of the Eisenhower Years* (New York, 1963); Charles E. Potter, *Days of Shame* (New York, 1965); Alvah Bessie, *Inquisition in Eden* (New York, 1965); Robert Cutler, *No Time for Rest* (Boston, 1966); Arthur V. Watkins, *Enough Rope* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1969); Clinton P. Anderson, *Outsider in the Senate: Senator Clinton Anderson's Memoirs* (New York, 1970); Chester Bowles, *Promises to Keep: My Years in Public Life, 1941-1969* (New York, 1971); Margaret Chase Smith, *Declaration of Conscience* (New York, 1972); O. Edmund Clubb, *The Witness and I* (New York, 1974).

The difficulties of writing recent history, of course, are many: the inadequacy of primary sources, the often staggering quantity of secondary materials, insufficient perspective, and so on. And yet the task must not be shirked, for if we are to understand who and what we are, the most recent decades are as vital to a clear understanding as are the most remote.

This survey has indicated that our current knowledge of McCarthyism is inadequate conceptually, analytically, and factually.⁴⁵ But solid foundations have been laid, scholars continue to probe, and a more mature and sophisticated view of this intricate and elusive subject will surely be ours not far into the future.

⁴⁵ For a useful recent synthesis, see Charles C. Alexander, *Holding the Line, The Eisenhower Era, 1952-1961* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1975), 48-62.



Courtesy The Post-Crescent, Appleton

McCarthy on the evening of the senatorial primary election, September, 1952.