

Mc CARTHYISM REVISITED

(Arthur Miller Symposium, Rennes, Oct. 1991)

"An atmosphere of suspicion and persecution had settled over the country, one that could not be dispelled by the best of weather. One person affected by that atmosphere was Alfred Miller (sic), a young television writer...The H.U.A.C. was conducting investigations of government employees and some ordinary citizens...Mr. Miller was one of the best scriptwriters in the business. He was also an intellectual. He cared about the underprivileged but he also enjoyed earning a thousand dollars for a script....He had been called into the (network headquarters) for a script conference (But instead of the usual congratulations, he was told by the producer:) 'Sorry, Alfred, I can't use your stuff anymore' Alfred Miller felt the blood drain from his face."

(*The Front*, by Robert Alley - 1976 - Pocket Books, film adaptation by Woody Allen.)

I - Introduction

As an undergraduate in the seventies, I attended an evening conference on contemporary U.S. military strategy given by a well-known political essayist from a Houston-based newspaper. The lecturer had served as a field officer in the Central Intelligence Agency before taking up his new calling. A question-and-answer session followed his presentation and gave rise to a rather odd and tedious exchange of verbal blows between the lecturer and a notorious campus "Moonie," during which the latter managed to funnel the debate towards the virtues of McCarthyism. Much to the surprise of the audience, the former C.I.A. employee stated: "The American people condemned, justifiably, the excesses of (McCarthyism), but occasional occurrences of it are not altogether unhealthy."

One month later, the next guest lecturer, John Henry Faulk (1), made much mirth of the above statement, but conceded that no harm was really meant, especially since the previous lecturer must have been speaking less from hard-earned professional experience than on the basis of armchair "realpolitik."

For the sake of optimism, I should hope, like John Henry Faulk, that the underlying message was intended to promote bi-partisan, consensual politics in the conduct of foreign affairs and not, as my own gut feeling dictated, an appeal for sporadic outbursts of house-cleaning, of "Red-hunting," of weeding out scapegoats in the name of loyalty, of "Know-Nothing" (2) denunciation of all things alien, or of periodic bouts with "Normalcy" (3) which generally extend officially or unofficially to artistic and literary censorship.

Indeed, some undefinable altruism may well have motivated this ex-CIA officer's statement. Yet, under the same pretense of non-partisanship, Joseph McCarthy misused popular opinion in the name of the common good. The State Department was the first victim, followed inevitably by the intelligentsia. Screenwriting was easier prey than most other sectors of the performing arts because

the content of film and television scripts could be interpreted however the McCarthyites wished. Brooks Atkinson, the *New York Times* theater critic was to lament that the 1952 Broadway season had been exceptionally bad, since none of the good playwrights dared write a word anymore.

Towards the end of the "McCarthy Era," still only 29% of all Americans disapproved of the Wisconsin senator (4), which caused Hollywood, Broadway, and the founding television industry to become more popular scapegoats than the somewhat distant and unattainable State Department and the Pentagon. Some participants in this symposium may be aware of the fact that in 1951 Ronald Reagan, a reborn Republican, an erstwhile actor and president of the Screen Guild, testified before the H.U.A.C., as did Elia Kazan, a former "card-carrying" communist, as well as a close friend and mentor of Arthur Miller, soon afterwards. Both condemned a number of colleagues in the process, both for different and no doubt defensible reasons. The 214 Hollywood personalities who fell victim to such testimony obtained through considerable pressure included Charlie Chaplin and Edward G. Robinson.

In a word, for four years the country was reduced to a state of mute hysteria. No one had the courage to stop it, up to the day that the commentator Edward Murrow likened McCarthyism to a sickness in November 1954. Thanks to the "entertainment" business, which had yielded 214 victims with few protests from the left or the right, McCarthy's fate was determined by an audience of 20,000,000 viewers. I shall attempt to explore the reasons for this "occurrence."

II - A historical pattern

(Alfred's friend, Hecky Brown) knew what it meant to be blacklisted. People not only lost their jobs, but lost the respect of colleagues and friends. Their invitations were ignored. No one would play with their children. Hecky had heard that the son of a blacklisted actor was prevented from joining the Boy Scouts. (*The Front*, Robert Alley)

Since the inception of the American republic, foreign observers have relied on their own criteria to make sweeping generalizations about American thought. Forgive me if I do the same in the delivery of this paper. Worldwide opinion took a critical turn after WWII, thanks primarily to McCarthy's well-publicized charges of treason within the Truman administration and his ensuing persecution of those Americans who had belonged to the Communist Party in the 1930's and 40's. His witch-hunting of the enemy within caused such innovative, "internationalist" programs as the Marshall plan implemented in 1948 under Truman and, consequently, Kennedy's Peace Corps initiative to be viewed with suspicion. "In all countries they know of him, and in all tongues they speak of him," Adlai Stevenson said after a world tour in 1953. McCarthy and his followers did more to harm America's image abroad than any other event in our history, more, say, than the Watergate scandals (which Europeans do not find so scandalous!) or the Sacco and Vanzetti trial. He influenced American foreign policy at a time when policy-making was crucial to the course of world history, and the world might be a different place today if McCarthy

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had not stooped to exploiting the theme of communist influence-peddling in the State Department.

However, his brand of political manoeuvring and demagoguery was not, in a wider sense, new to American democracy and could be described as a recurring paradox present in other forms throughout the world's democracies. Inevitably, every democratic nation is confronted with the choice of violating the civil rights and dignity of a few citizens to uphold what seems to represent the common good.

With regard to McCarthyism, the postwar expansion of and subsequent widespread access to modern telecommunication merely tended to highlight events such as McCarthy's Wheeling, West Virginia speech in 1950, in which he accused the State Department of harboring no fewer than 205 communist sympathizers! (5)

What must be underscored is that the short-lived McCarthy era was essentially an effort on the part of certain conservative politicians (Republicans and even Democrats) to discredit the interventionism and "internationalism" of the New Deal, which was really at issue. The Presidency had become too reformist. In the 1990's, the trend has been reversed towards a reduction of the governmental role, as an extension of President Reagan's initial electoral platform. Let us remember what Reagan said in 1980: "Problems cannot be solved by big government, for big government *is* the problem."

Attacking the New Deal and federal intervention in economic and social affairs throughout the Roosevelt and Truman administrations had little support from mainstream America, even when the attacks were led on constitutional grounds. In 1938, congressional efforts to hold the New Deal in check had actually succeeded, but failed to discredit New Deal reforms. FDR's death signaled the twilight of Democratic preponderance over the nation's body politic.

Despite its followers' claim of objectivity in its effort to rectify the course of American values, McCarthyism was basely political in scope and could be considered as a repetition of a historical cycle, a pointed example of which was the gap between the Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt administrations. The twenties witnessed the Scopes trial, the Palmer raids, and two exceedingly mediocre presidents whose elections were due to the isolationist national mood after WWI. From February, 1950 to December, 1954, when the Senate passed a resolution of censure against him, Joseph McCarthy succeeded in exploiting a conservative, conformist force in both human nature and American populism that lingers on in the 1990's, in the wake of communism's debacle. To achieve this end, there has rarely been a shortage of whipping boys to pin the current social malaise upon (6):

A similarly motivated, though more politically legitimate, conservative undercurrent may be identified in ex-President Reagan's numerous remarks about the "Evil Empire east of the iron curtain" were geared towards a foreign threat and less conducive to inspiring nationwide anxiety.



A significant precedent

In order to comprehend the impact of similar reactionary movements upon American history, let us go back in history to the beginning of party politics. The American colonies prior to the revolution were ripe for the arrival of a participatory political system. A high rate of literacy combined with the taste for private enterprise and a growing dislike of what was perceived to be "foreign rule" (domestic concerns were beginning to take precedence over transatlantic links) ranked among the major factors leading to the Declaration of Independence.

The Age of Enlightenment was the backdrop for two guiding philosophies, both of which were mutually antithetical yet interactive. By advocating rejection of rule by divine right, they were able to form a crux: it was the intersection of humanism and capitalism, the common bond between the theories of Montesquieu and Adam Smith.

Interestingly enough, the concomitant split pitting Hamilton against Jefferson -- elitist entrepreneurship vs. agrarian populism -- not only resulted in the Federalist and Anti-Federalist parties, but it was also to define the quintessence of the modern Republican and Democratic parties.

The second president of the United States, John Adams, held an elitist and quasi-monarchic view of the young American Republic and had little respect for the rabble-rousing Anti-Federalists in Congress. Ignoring the principle of *habeus corpus*, he succeeded in gathering sufficient Congressional support for the Alien and Sedition Acts (7) in 1798 so as to squelch criticism of his policies by waving the specter of English hegemony and foreign interference in domestic affairs, (The French Revolution had gone too far in scope as far as most American statesmen were concerned!). The XYZ correspondence served as a catalyst for the Federalists, who were stirred by nationalist feelings targeting a group of anti-Federalist editors and

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pamphleteers of French and English extraction. The constitutionality of the Sedition Act, which extended the jurisdiction of the federal courts, was mainly questioned by Anti-Federalists, the predecessors of the modern-day Democratic Party.

The Democrats faced this sort of challenge half a century later, during the Know-Nothing nativist movement. Though torn by the slavery issue, the Know-Nothings formed one extreme aspect of American conservative values because of their vision of an Anglo-Saxon Protestant society. Known as the nativist party, they charged the Democrats of being supported by alien forces and far too worldly. Eventually, the formation of the Republican Party before the Civil War caused the movement to flag and wither away.

Another illustration prefiguring the topic at hand is the post-WWI national mood of introversion tainted with xenophobia, and anti-Bolshevism. Not only were Wilson's "14 point" proposal and the Treaty of Versailles rejected by the isolationist Senate, but President Warren G. Harding's Attorney General, A. Mitchell Palmer, launched his infamous, though somewhat widely approved, Palmer Raids aimed at radical immigrants on American territory. Men were often held for months without trials or summarily deported. In the wake of this tidal wave, Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted.

III - American demagogues, American seditionists

"(Alfred Miller's) enemies were unseen and very powerful. They were modern-day vigilantes, beyond appeal, and they could influence the top executives of the biggest corporations. The vigilantes all sounded like Senator Joe McCarthy, the leader of the anti-Communists in Congress. *'The enemies of the free world,'* they said, *'had to be ferreted out'* because they were supposedly protected by *Commie-crats*, guilty of *coddling* and being *soft* on these *fellow travelers* who were *security risks...*" (*The Front*, Robert Alley)

"To many Americans, McCarthyism is Americanism," said a radio commentator in 1950. McCarthy liked the word McCarthyism and brought demagoguery to its apogee when he, too, stated before an audience in 1952: "McCarthyism is Americanism with its sleeves rolled." The term has taken on a wholly negative connotation, encompassing illiberalism, totalitarianism, reactionary sentiment, xenophobia, the Babbit mentality of middle America, and simultaneously any nihilistic attitude, any mindless destruction of perceived intellectual values. Any teacher of logic or psychiatrist would go insane in attempting to grasp the structure of McCarthy's thought. His main tactic was the use of *ad hominem* attacks, and guilt by association.

In a reply to a journalist who, shortly after the speech in Wheeling, asked him when he had discovered the threat of communism infiltration, he stated glibly "- About 3 months ago." (8)

The history of the United States is peppered with popular revolts against liberal or worldly thinking: e.g. the Know-Nothing movement, the anti-humanism stance of the conservative factions that were largely responsible for the downfall of Jimmy Carter in 1980.

Demagogues can easily rise to the top if they inspire cynicism about the way America is governed as well as reassurance about basic necessities. I can recall from childhood my teachers' references to Louisiana Senator Huey P Long, assassinated in 1935, and their admiration for a quintessential politician whose record cannot be criticized for lack of innovativeness. On a humorous note, Long once promised and managed to keep the promise (this is no joke) that public telephones would never cost more than a nickel. The price only went up a few years ago.

Louisiana has regularly produced the most malignant and benign demagogues in the United States. In October, 1991, David Duke, a former ex-KKK Grand Vizir, was catapulted to the Republican nomination on an anti-welfare support platform. Edwin Edwards, a former Democratic governor, defined Duke's charisma bluntly: "he's an accomplished crowd-pleaser with a hollow message."

At a White House banquet during the depression years, FDR once whispered to Henry Wallace, his secretary of Agriculture, that they were seated with three of the most dangerous men in the United States: Senator Long, General MacArthur, and Father Coughlin, a Catholic conservative and radio emcee whose hatred of the New Deal could only be matched by his admiration for the development of Fascism in Europe.

General Douglas MacArthur was dramatically dismissed by President Truman as commander-in-chief of UN forces in Korea on April 11, 1951, on the grounds of insubordination, and public disagreement with the Administration's Korean policy.

The modern-day T.V. evangelists were preceded by radio evangelists, and before them, church-going Americans were heavily influenced by self-styled Elmer Gantry clones. Indeed, Senator McCarthy himself was at once a Jesuit casuist and a role model for today's T.V. evangelists (he was, like fellow demagogue, Father Coughlin, a Catholic!).

IV - The right place, the right time, the red herring

"As he emerged from the subway, Alfred Miller couldn't avoid seeing the headlines that shuttled along the corridor of lights, high above Times Square: NEW INQUIRY SEEKS REDS IN EDUCATION--MCCARTHY AND NIXON SAY COMMIES MUST BE PURGED.....EX-ARMY SERGEANT FOUND GUILTY OF BETRAYING SECRETS TO NORTH KOREANS.....PRESIDENT EISENHOWER DENIES CLEMENCY IN ROSENBERG SPY CASE...." (*THE FRONT*, Robert Alley)

How and why was MacCarthy able to rise to the occasion? It suffices to examine the context:

- 1945-1950 Truman's Fair Deal To stimulate domestic demand -- exports were too stagnant -- Truman attempted to shift the distribution of wealth to the lower classes through taxation and subsidies, but Congress was Republican.

Recession of 1948.

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- Defeat of Chiang Kai-shek. The McCarthyites contended that Roosevelt's "secret diplomacy at Yalta -- a basis for Truman's diplomacy -- had contributed to **the "loss" of China.**
- **The Korean War** (6/25/50 - 7/27/53) coincided with an economic upturn.
- Exports were up because **the Marshall Plan** had favored European and Asian economies.
- By 1950, however, a real **crisis of popular confidence** in the Truman Administration had arrived and its chief beneficiaries were the McCarthyites.
- Americans came to believe that the Soviets' development of an atomic bomb was the fruit of stolen technology: hence the pressure to convict **the Rosenbergs** (In the summer of 1953, following a month-long trial and two years of legal appeals, the US government executed Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for conspiring to commit espionage for the Soviet Union.
- **The 1950 and 1952 elections** took place in a highly charged atmosphere, under the domination of McCarthyism, with both parties claiming that they alone could save the nation from the communist hordes.
- The year 1954 was characterized by winds of change: **the birth of the Civil Rights movement coincided with** the milestone Supreme Court decision known as *Brown vs. Board of Education*, on May 17.

Who supported McCarthy then?

American liberals in favor of the policy of containment, such as Acheson, tended to heighten popular fear of communism and indirectly contributed to the McCarthyite's cause. Oddly enough, it was Harry Truman who, in the pre-McCarthy/post-war years, unintentionally confirmed the Republicans' accusation of disloyalty in his administration and exacerbated public fears by issuing an executive order directing the Attorney General to draft a list of subversive organizations. The F.B.I. had a field day with executive order 10241, filing unfounded report after quasi-veracious report, for in the 30's a considerable number of Roosevelt administration employees, many of whom stayed on under Truman, had belonged to "subversive" organizations.

J.Edgar Hoover's pre-eminence bestowed a distinctly paranoid and reactionary quality upon the content of the reports, which were not published for fear that civil libertarians, American Democrats and the general public would cease regarding the F.B.I. as a non-partisan organization.

The Cold War also fanned the fires. The John Birch Society was not to come about before the late fifties, but *"at a typical McCarthy rally, there would be, seated in the front rows, thanks to early arrival, numbers of moon-struck souls wearing badges or carrying placards identifying them as Minute Women of the USA, Sons of I Shall Return (MacArthur!), the Nationalist Action League."* (9) Need I go on? Vice-President Nixon got where he was in those days by carrying out massive telephone campaigns defaming his opponent on the grounds that she was a Red. Segments of the business community and Texas oil men, like the late H.L. Hunt, were equally avid supporters.

V - The demise of senator McCarthy

"When there was a pause in rehearsals, the monitors were tuned into whatever was currently being broadcast -- a hearing before the Senate Investigating Subcommittee, Senator McCarthy's dark, heavy jowls dominating the screens, as he jabbed the air with a blunt forefinger. The studio seemed far removed from the real world, but McCarthy's histrionics over the latest batch of Communist sympathizers served as a grim reminder of what was going on outside the T.V. studio." (*The Front*, Robert Alley)

It is inherent to conventional wisdom to blame McCarthy's downfall on his criticism of the Army, because he is thought to have felt strengthened by the historic American opposition to a strong military. However, this comprised but one factor among many.

It is important to remember the advent of television. By mid-1954, when the McCarthy hearings were in full swing, more than 20 million Americans had access to television, and hundreds of thousands watched them from beginning to end. I suppose my paper could bear mentioning Marshall McLuhan, who perceived Senator McCarthy as being cool over the radio but too "hot" a medium to be on television. Because he had so little telegenic charisma, Senator McCarthy might nowadays have taken acting classes and examined his performance on video before conducting the hearings.

The general consensus among viewers ultimately turned out to be basically negative towards McCarthy's petty rantings, inarticulate style, and inability to provide evidence against any of the original so-called 205 communist sympathizers in the State Department. As mentioned previously, Truman's crisis rhetoric was instrumental in fueling the fires of McCarthyism. Truman was convinced that Christian Democracy was opposed to atheistic communism (10). Athan Theoharis puts it succinctly: *"On the one hand it repeatedly emphasized the gravity of the situation and characterized US/Soviet opposition as a confrontation between American Christian selflessness and communist/atheistic expansionism. On the other hand, quite apart from the forcefulness of its rhetoric, the administration was actually pursuing a policy of restraint in its use of military power -- limited objectives, no nuclear deployment....Despite Soviet violations, the administration opposed congressional efforts to repudiate the Yalta agreements."* (11).

This contradiction in policy implementation lent itself nicely to McCarthy's success. The Yalta agreements, so vehemently criticized by McCarthy and eminent conservative statesmen like Senator Robert Taft (Taft-Hartley Act!), were disclosed in their entirety by the Eisenhower administration, thereby revealing that there had been no hidden concessions to Stalin! President Eisenhower adroitly defused a major McCarthyite *cause célèbre*.

VI - Is the seed in us? (12)

America has survived many extremist challenges. One is often given to wonder about the precariousness of American democracy in light of the propensity of American citizens to test it so frequently.

At the end of WWII, The average American was more concerned with his personal freedom than in revamping the war-swept countries. As far as most people were concerned, the Soviet Union was still an ally who had proven themselves, and the worthiness of Marxism as a driving force against Fascism. The vision most Americans had of the outside world was Eurocentric and Europe was in ruins. The U.S. was then in an unprecedented position of leadership, which, aside from a few committed officials, the country was neither ready nor especially willing to assume.

To understand the average American in 1945 is to understand his historical concern for personal freedom at the most basic levels. If John Doe does not like the preacher at the Baptist church he attends, then he senses the need to belong to his neighbor's church. The governor he votes for will be the one who promises lower state taxes on gasoline. No national conspiracy is responsible for his opinions, just as cliché-ridden propaganda only holds as much water as his attention span (which lasts as long as that of any human being) will allow for. Political commentary leaves most Americans indifferent except if it is an issue that somehow affects them personally and that is precisely the sentiment which Senator McCarthy's reign of terror was intended to exploit, causing the nation's leaders to tremble for four years. In spite of his nationwide popularity, voters in McCarthy's home state of Wisconsin barely returned him to the Senate at the height of his glory. He squeaked by with just 51% in the 1952 midterm elections, a sharp contrast to his 71% approval rating at the same time, for the Senator rarely bothered to look after the interests of those who had elected him, those who were well aware of his corruption.

The framers of the Constitution were unanimous in their fear of tyranny, either by the few or by the many. All Americans have a profound suspicion of government, whether its representative is a Senator from Wisconsin or a President from Missouri. Do not forget that the constitution could not be adopted until agreement on the Bill of Rights had been reached. There are areas which are off limits to legislation.

Would I be pontificating if I quoted Benjamin Franklin? As he was leaving the Constitutional Congress, a woman asked him what kind of government was to replace the Articles of Confederation. "A republic, Madam, if you can keep it!" was his reply.

Can we "keep it", indeed? To what extent can America's social fabric withstand these bouts with injustice? Excessiveness is in our nature, but we force ourselves to preconize moderate politics. Freedom of speech is an integral part of our constitution, but, as Norman Mailer recently said of his own political views, the danger of subscribing to the American left lies in acquiescing to P.C. (political correctness), whereas the right wing presents the danger of collaborating with the lunatic fringe.

To bring this paper to a conclusion, it would be appropriate to quote Arthur Miller, who wrote in his *Collected Plays* (13):

"The witch-hunt was not a mere repression. It was also a long overdue opportunity for everyone so inclined to express publicly his guilt and sins, under the cover of accusations against the victims. Long-held hatreds of neighbors could now be openly expressed and vengeance taken, despite the Bible's charitable injunctions. Old scores could be settled on a plane of heavenly combat between Lucifer and the Lord; suspicion and the envy of the miserable toward the happy could and did burst out in general revenge."

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NOTES

- (1) American T.V. commentator who was dismissed from N.B.C. in 1953 because of his anti-McCarthyite stance.
- (2) The "Know-Nothing" movement was a 19th-century, xenophobic and jingoistic phenomenon in the United States
- (3) Term coined courtesy of Warren G. Harding who was alluding to the return of Republicans to the presidency in the aftermath of the reformist and internationalist policies of the Wilson administration.
- (4) Statistics drawn from the appendices of Athan Theoharis' *Seeds of Repression*, Quadrangle Books, 1971.
- (5) The figure varied regularly, according to the image the Senator wished to convey, although the number of reporters present, and the degree of patriotism he felt that day were contributing factors.
- (6) Drawing by Jack Ohman, 1991, UP Syndicate, appearing in *The Oregonian*.

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- (7) The "Alien" sections of the act were as nothing compared to the ramifications of the "Sedition" corollary; e.g., "Be it enacted..., that if any persons shall....write, print, utter, or publish, or shall cause or procure to be written, printed, uttered or published, or shall....aid in writing, printing, uttering or publishing any false, scandalous and malicious writing or writings against the government of the United States, with intent to defame the said government."
- (8) Cf. *Senator Joe McCarthy*, Richard H. Rovere, Harper and Row, 1959. Rovere provides an anecdotal portrait of McCarthy, with whom he was acquainted
- (9) Richard Rovere's *Senator Joseph McCarthy*, p. 21.
- (10) Freeland, Richard M., *The Truman Doctrine and the Origins of McCarthyism: Foreign Policy, Domestic Policy, and Internal Security*, 1946.
- (11) *Seeds of Repression*, 1954, p. 65
- (12) A reference to James Bristol's *McCarthyism: The Seed is in us*, Pendle Hill.
- (13) Viking, 1957, p. 229.