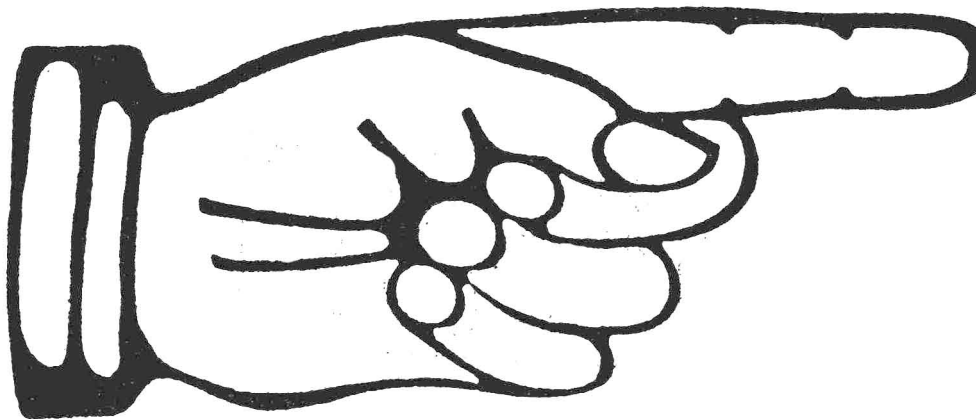




*Richard H. Rovere*

# **SENATOR JOE McCARTHY**



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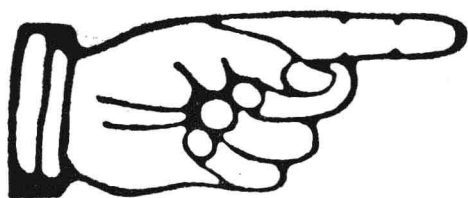


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***Senator Joe McCarthy***





*What He Was  
and  
What He Did  
—I*

The late Joseph R. McCarthy, a United States Senator from Wisconsin, was in many ways the most gifted demagogue ever bred on these shores. No bolder seditionist ever moved among us—nor any politician with a surer, swifter access to the dark places of the American mind.

The major phase of McCarthy's career was mercifully short. It began in 1950, three years after he had taken his seat in the Senate, where he had seemed a dim and inconsiderable figure. It ended in 1954, when the Senate passed a resolution of censure against him. That was three years before his death at the age of forty-eight. Both his rise and his

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fall were accomplished with breath-taking speed. At the start of 1950, he was a jackstraw in Washington. Then he discovered Communism—almost by inadvertence, as Columbus discovered America, as James Marshall discovered California gold. By the spring of the year, he was a towering figure, and from then on, except for a few brief weeks early in that summer, no man was closer than he to the center of American consciousness or more central to the world's consciousness of America. He filled, almost to the letter, the classic role of the corsair of democracy, described twenty-four hundred years ago by Aristophanes, who in *The Knights* had Demosthenes describe the future of an incredulous sausage-seller in whose very coarseness and vulgarity the great connoisseur of both irony and integrity discerned "a promise and an inward consciousness of greatness":

Now mean and unregarded; but tomorrow  
The mightiest of the mighty, Lord of Athens. . . .

The sovereign and ruler of them all,  
Of the assemblies and tribunals, fleets and armies;  
You shall trample down the Senate under foot  
Confound and crush the generals and commanders.

Through the first part of the decade, McCarthy was all of these things, and then he found the Senate and the generals and commanders rising up against him, and he collapsed. His decline was more difficult to account for than his ascent. He suffered defeats but not destruction. Nothing of a really fatal consequence had happened. He was in a long and sweaty rumble before television cameras in the spring; in the late summer, a Senate committee recommended that he be cen-



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sured; and in the winter he was censured—or, in the language of the resolution, “condemned” for conduct that “tended to bring the Senate into dishonor and disrepute.” But other Senators, less powerful than he, had been censured and gone on to greater triumphs—among them, an earlier Senator from Wisconsin, Robert M. La Follette, whose son and namesake McCarthy had defeated in 1946. (In the year of McCarthy’s death, the Senate voted the elder and censured La Follette one of the five greatest men ever to grace the chamber, the other four being Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, and Robert A. Taft.) Still he had five years on stage, and he was at stage center almost all of that time. He walked, then, with a heavy tread over large parts of the Constitution of the United States, and he cloaked his own gross figure in the sovereignty it asserts and the powers it distributes. He usurped executive and judicial authority whenever the fancy struck him. It struck him often.

He held two Presidents captive—or as nearly captive as any Presidents of the United States have ever been held; in their conduct of the nation’s affairs, Harry S Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower, from early 1950 through late 1954, could never act without weighing the effect of their plans upon McCarthy and the forces he led, and in consequence there were times when, because of this man, they could not act at all. He had enormous impact on American foreign policy at a time when that policy bore heavily on the course of world history, and American diplomacy might bear a different aspect today if McCarthy had never lived. In the Senate, his headquarters and his hiding place, he assumed the functions of the

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Committee of the Whole; he lived in thoroughgoing contempt of the Congress of which he was a member, of the rules it had made for itself, and—whenever they ran contrary to his purposes—of the laws it had enacted for the general welfare.

At the start of 1950, McCarthy was an empty vessel to the general public outside Wisconsin. There he was known as a cheap politician of vulgar, flamboyant ways and a casual approach to the public interest. It is unlikely that one in a hundred Americans knew of his existence. He was a voice making no sound in the wilderness. Then, on February 9, 1950, he made a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, in the course of which he said that the Department of State was full of Communists and that he and the Secretary of State knew their names. Later there was some dispute (there was always dispute whenever he said anything) as to whether he had stated that there were 205, 81, 57, or “a lot” of Communists, but the number was of slight importance alongside what he insisted was the fact that Communists “known to the Secretary of State” were “still working and making policy.” A Senate committee was immediately appointed to look into his startling assertions. It was the first of five investigations, held by four different committees, to be concerned exclusively with the problem of whether Senator McCarthy was telling the truth about others or, *mutatis mutandis*, others were telling the truth about Senator McCarthy. In the spring of 1950, only the first question was considered. Through March and April and May, when Communist power in the Far East was being mobilized for the war in Korea, life in Washington, political life in the United States, seemed largely a matter of determin-

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ing whether American diplomacy was in the hands of traitors.

Little of importance was learned except that McCarthy had little of importance to say. He had been talking through his hat; if there were Communists in the State Department, he did not know who they were. Nevertheless, he had cued himself in. The lights played over him. Eyes were upon him. The show was his. Within a matter of weeks, his name was known and heard everywhere, and his heavy, menacing countenance was familiar to newspaper readers, to moviegoers, to television viewers everywhere. Henceforth it would be hard to find anyone who was *unaware* of him.

And he became, quickly, an eponym. Barely a month after Wheeling, "McCarthyism" was coined by Herbert Block, the cartoonist who signs himself "Herblock" in the *Washington Post*. The word was an oath at first—a synonym for the hatefulness of baseless defamation, or mudslinging. (In the Herblock cartoon, "McCarthyism" was crudely lettered on a barrel of mud, which teetered on a tower of ten buckets of the stuff.) Later it became, for some, an affirmation. The term survives both as oath and as affirmation—not very usefully as either, one is bound to say—and has far broader applications than at first. Now it is evocative of an almost undifferentiated evil to a large number of Americans and of a positive good to a somewhat smaller number. To the one, whatever is illiberal, repressive, reactionary, obscurantist, anti-intellectual, totalitarian, or merely swinish will for some time to come be McCarthyism, while to the other it means nothing more or less than a militant patriotism. "To many Americans, McCarthyism is Americanism," Fulton Lewis, Jr., a radio com-

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mentator and the official McCarthyite muezzin, said. Once the word caught on, McCarthy himself became intrigued with it. "McCarthyism is Americanism with its sleeves rolled," he told a Wisconsin audience in 1952, and, sure enough, there was the eponym, with his hairy arms bare to the biceps. That year he published a book of snippets from his speeches and his testimony before committees, and it bore the modest title of *McCarthyism: The Fight for America*. There is injustice as well as imprecision in both meanings; if patriotism can hardly be reduced to tracking down Marxists in the pastry kitchens of the Pentagon or the bindery of the Government Printing Office, neither is the late Senator's surname to be placed at the center of all the constellations of political unrighteousness. He was not, for example, totalitarian in any significant sense, or even reactionary. These terms apply mainly to the social and economic order, and the social and economic order didn't interest him in the slightest. If he was anything at all in the realm of ideas, principles, doctrines, he was a species of nihilist; he was an essentially destructive force, a revolutionist without any revolutionary vision, a rebel without a cause.

It is pointless, though, to quarrel with words. They acquire a life and a history of their own, and we have little choice but to accept them and seek understanding. It is simply a measure of McCarthy's impact on our society that he stamped with his name a whole cluster of tendencies in American life—some of them as distant as the stars from any concern or responsibility of his. Once, Brooks Atkinson, the theater critic of the *New York Times*, held McCarthy and McCarthyism

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responsible for a bad season on Broadway. He said McCarthy had driven all good playwrights to silence or triviality. And in the New York *Herald Tribune* for May 25, 1952, at the height of that green season in which college boys are in the habit of laying siege to college girls' dormitories, the following headline appeared:

#### **RABBI BLAMES MCCARTHYISM IN COLLEGE RAIDS**

**He Says Danger of Voicing Dissent on**

**Big Issues Makes Campus Restless**

This was madness, of course, and if it can be said that the Rabbi in question\* would have been the sort to blame the rape of the Sabines on the lack of outing clubs, bowling alleys, ceramics classes, and square dances in Alba and Lavinium, it was nevertheless a tribute to McCarthyism's actual force and impact that this divine conceived his extraordinary theory. It was an even greater tribute to it that such a newspaper as the *Herald Tribune* would regard this particular sermon as worthy of notice in its sober pages.

In time, the whole world took notice of Senator McCarthy. "In all countries they know of him, and in all tongues they speak of him," Adlai Stevenson said after a trip to almost all countries in 1953. In Western Europe as well as in Eastern,

\* The story began: "Rabbi Lewis I. Newman, preaching yesterday at Temple Rodolph Sholem, 7 West 83 Street, attributed the current dormitory 'raids' by college students to 'McCarthyism,' which, he said, makes serious discussion and dissent on major issues dangerous. 'A vast silence has descended upon young men and women today in the colleges of our country, and they find an expression for their bottled-up energies in foolish and unseemly "raids" upon dormitories.'" And more of the same.

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in much of Asia and Africa, in Latin America and the Antipodes, McCarthy and McCarthyism stood for all that was held to be evil in American foreign policy and for much that was found to be disagreeable in American life. In many places, McCarthy was looked upon as being, in and of himself, an instrumentality in the affairs of nations. The *Times* of London, a journal of almost spectacular sobriety, observed once that "the fears and suspicions which center around the personality of Senator McCarthy are now real enough to count as an essential factor in policy-making for the West." Therefore, it went on, with fierce British logic, "McCarthy has become the direct concern of the United States' allies." The *Times* made him sound as though he were nuclear fission or massive retaliation, and it was by no means alone in its estimate of him. Sir Winston Churchill became sufficiently exercised to write an eloquent anti-McCarthy passage into Elizabeth II's Coronation speech.

From a distance, McCarthy may have looked, by some odd reversal of optical principles, larger than life and of greater consequence than he ever really was. But he was large and consequential enough in those years, and he was, in any case, the first American ever to be discussed and described as being himself a menace to the comity of nations and the strength of alliances. He was the first American ever to be actively hated and feared by foreigners in large numbers.

In Washington and in all the country west of Washington, he was a fertile innovator, a first-rate organizer and galvanizer of mobs, a skilled manipulator of public opinion, and something like a genius at that essential American strategy: pub-

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licity. He was by no means the first man to use Senatorial immunity or the investigative power of Congress for selfish and unworthy ends, but he was surely the cleverest; he did more with them than any other man had done before him. And he exploited the American party system in brilliant and daring ways—while being himself beyond partisanship, beyond all the established values of the system and all of its established practices. He was a Republican who had started as a Democrat and had made his first run for office as a supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt. He became, *pro forma*, a Republican in 1939 and as such won election to the Senate, seven years and a World War later. He brought himself to national attention in 1950, in the weeks after the Wheeling speech, by accusing the Democratic administration of conniving with and being supported by Communists. ("The Democratic label is now the property of men and women who have . . . bent to the whispered pleas from the lips of traitors . . . men and women who wear the political label stitched with the idiocy of a Truman, rotted by the deceit of a [Dean] Acheson, corrupted by the red slime of a [Harry Dexter] White." I fear I shall subject the reader to a good deal of unpleasant rhetoric.) The Democratic years, he said, when they were almost over, had been "twenty years of treason." Then his own party took office, with Dwight Eisenhower as President. McCarthy proclaimed the end of subversion in government. But intimations, allegations, accusations of treason were the meat upon which this Caesar fed. He could never swear off. He accused the administration he had helped bring to power of a "weak, immoral, and cowardly" foreign

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policy, of “appeasement, retreat, and surrender” before Communism, and of having “perpetrated a fraud on the American people.” By early 1954, he had extended treason’s reign to “twenty-one years.”

It tends now to be forgotten that McCarthy was almost as successful in immobilizing the Truman administration as he later was in demoralizing the successor government. Truman denounced McCarthy, though more frequently and more boldly after he had left the White House than before, but he could never ignore him or disregard his large presence on Capitol Hill. McCarthy’s attacks on Truman (“The son of a bitch ought to be impeached,” he told a press conference in 1951, after Truman’s recall of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur from his Far Eastern commands) and on the executive branch under Truman forced the administration into a series of defensive actions that used up vast stores of time, energy, and credit with the public. Dean Acheson, Truman’s Secretary of State, spent a large part of 1950 and the ensuing years explaining to Elks, Moose, Women Voters, Legionnaires, Steel Workers, and the rest that he was not corrupt, that he was opposed to Communism, and that he did not hire traitors. To prove its virtue, the State Department hired John Foster Dulles and fired a number of career officers McCarthy had been attacking. When Acheson was not fending off blows before Congressional committees, he was conducting American foreign policy, which became largely a matter of assuring allies and potential allies that McCarthy really wasn’t running the show in Washington, despite contrary appearances. It was difficult. “No American official



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who has represented this government abroad in great affairs, not even Wilson in 1918, has ever been so gravely injured at home,” Walter Lippmann wrote in 1950.

The Truman administration had to be defensive and cautious, for it knew, as the Republicans at first did not, that McCarthyism was a bipartisan doctrine. It penetrated large sections of the Democratic Party and led to much disaffection (or, better perhaps, it fed on an already burgeoning disaffection). “How do people feel about McCarthy these days?” the Republican Senator from Massachusetts, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., asked the Democratic Governor of Massachusetts, Paul A. Dever. “Your people don’t think much of him,” Dever said, “but I’m afraid mine do.” The Gallup Poll once tested his strength in various occupational groups and found that he had more admirers among manual workers than in any other category—and fewest among business and professional people. If the Democratic President, from the relative safety of the White House, could be relatively free with denunciations, many other Democrats found it imprudent ever to join him. Paul Douglas, of Illinois, the possessor of the most cultivated mind in the Senate and a man whose courage and integrity would compare favorably with any other American’s, went through the last Truman years and the first Eisenhower years without ever addressing himself to the problem of McCarthy. Senator John Kennedy, of Massachusetts, the author of *Profiles in Courage*, a book on political figures who had battled strong and sometimes prevailing winds of opinion and doctrine, did likewise. Maurice Tobin, Truman’s Secretary of Labor, once went to a Veterans of Foreign Wars conven-