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JOE McCARTHY



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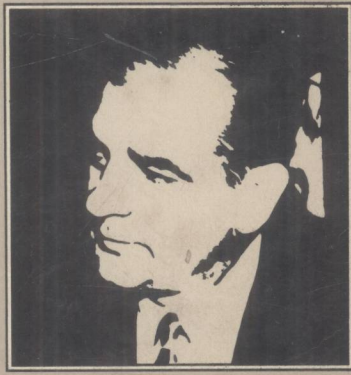


PRESS



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JOE McCARTHY AND THE PRESS

EDWIN R. BAYLEY



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Preface

Most of the reporters who covered American politics from 1950 through 1954, and especially those of us who were fortunate enough to work for papers opposed to Wisconsin's Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, regard the "McCarthy years" as the most dismal and the most exciting of our lives. As those years receded, however, I realized that my recollections were different from the recollections of many others and that my conception of the role of the press was not the prevailing one. That was the origin of my interest in the questions surrounding the press and Joe McCarthy. A sabbatical leave from the University of California, Berkeley, gave me the chance to look for answers to these questions.

It was being said that the press had "created" McCarthy, that McCarthy "used" the press, and even that the press in those days was "supine." Were these things true? Eliot Fremont-Smith, a New York literary critic writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 1974 about I. F. Stone, said that in the early McCarthy years "the majority of even ostensibly liberal journalists and journals, and nearly all that counted, suffered a prolonged attack of *laryngitis intimidatus*." Was that true? Did McCarthy take advantage of the press's adherence to the principle of objectivity—"straight" reporting—to spread his undiluted charges of Communists in government? Did the press "smear" McCarthy, as his supporters charged? Was the press's opposition to McCarthy, where it existed, effective? Did it help him or hurt him?

Other questions arose. In what ways did McCarthy's relations with the press differ from those of other politicians? What effect did dealing with the McCarthy phenomenon have upon press practices and principles? Did the press (or television) finally bring him down? Could another McCarthy emerge today? Underlying all these was a fundamental question that had to be answered before the others could be sensibly considered: What did the press actually do about McCarthy? No one knew. The final question was my own—a standard for judgment on the press's performance in the McCarthy era: Did the press inform its readers fairly and fully?

I began my research in the morgues of the *Milwaukee Journal* and the *New York Times*, where I read every story those papers had

published about McCarthy. At the Widener Library at Harvard, I tried to read everything that had been written about McCarthy in books, magazines, and academic journals. I had done this once before, in 1957, when I spent two weeks writing McCarthy's obituary—the "A-matter"—for the *Milwaukee Journal*. I found that a great deal had been written since then.

Next, I sought to interview as many of the reporters who had covered McCarthy as I could find, with special concentration on the Washington reporters for the wire services and the members of Washington bureau staffs. I had known many of these reporters for many years, which helped. As the story unfolded, I extended my interviews across the country. I interviewed more than 40 reporters in all, and corresponded with several others. Concurrently I studied newspapers in the microfilm rooms of the New York Public Library, the Boston Public Library, the Baltimore Public Library, Doe Library of the University of California, Berkeley, the Library of Congress, and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Other microfilms were obtained through the Inter-Library Loan service. I also studied papers and memoranda from several collections in the Library of Congress and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

For coverage during the first month after McCarthy's speech at Wheeling, West Virginia, on 9 February 1950, the period I considered most important for testing the national coverage of McCarthy, I read 129 newspapers ranging in daily circulation from 2,287,337 (*The New York Daily News*) to 1,902 (*The Willows Journal*, in California). My sample included morning, afternoon, and Sunday papers, papers from every major chain and from every region of the country. In a few states, I read every daily paper in the state, to be sure that no pattern of editorial handling of McCarthy news was overlooked. Some papers I chose because I knew their political allegiances, some because McCarthy had made significant speeches in their cities.

The sample included 40 papers from the East, 36 from the Midwest, 22 from the South, and 31 from the West. The combined circulation of the 56 morning papers was 11,474,057, more than 54 percent of the total morning circulation of newspapers in 1950. The combined circulation of the 73 afternoon papers in the study was 8,093,681, more than 25 percent of the total afternoon circulation. And the combined Sunday circulation was 23,300,475, more than 50 percent of the total Sunday circulation in the United States in 1950.

I counted the number and measured the length of news stories on McCarthy in each of these papers, and noted their placement. I recorded the number and length of syndicated and staff-produced columns. I recorded each headline and summarized each editorial and

editorial cartoon. I noted the source of each story—Associated Press, United Press, International News Service, Washington bureau, or staff. In order to see how coverage of McCarthy had changed when news coverage reached its peak, I studied 60 of these papers published on one day, 11 March 1954. To see what papers were doing with news of McCarthy after his censure, I checked 29 papers for a three-day period, 8–10 March 1956. Examining the coverage of McCarthy and Thomas E. Fairchild, his Democratic opponent in the 1952 election, I read the stories carried during the last week of the campaign by the 39 daily newspapers in Wisconsin and the three out-of-state papers with significant circulations in the state, and the stories that appeared in 27 Wisconsin weeklies during the last month of the campaign. (The reader will find a complete list of sources at the back of the book: newspapers read, persons interviewed, collections consulted, and books and periodicals used.)

The book that has come out of my research and reflection deals with four critical and revealing points of contact between McCarthy and the press (or in one case, television) and is roughly chronological. The first chapter takes a look at McCarthy's background and the times in which he rose to power, and suggests the effect on him of his early newspaper reading and of local newspapermen who were his friends and perhaps mentors. The chapter then reports and appraises the news coverage and editorial reaction that resulted from the fateful series of Lincoln Day dinner speeches that began at Wheeling. The second chapter continues the study of news coverage from Washington, as McCarthy exchanges accusations with President Truman and the Tydings subcommittee begins its investigation of McCarthy's charges. The work of news editors, editorial writers, columnists, and cartoonists is analyzed in relation to its effect on public opinion.

The third chapter is concerned with the problems and attitudes of the wire service reporters covering McCarthy in Washington, with McCarthy's techniques for manipulating the wire services, and with the long argument among newspaper editors and publishers about the propriety and efficacy of "straight" reporting in the case of McCarthy. In chapter 4, I take up the question of whether newspaper opposition to McCarthy had a discernible effect upon voting in the 1952 Wisconsin senatorial election, and a subsidiary question of whether the press's interpretation of McCarthy's victory in the primary contributed to his subsequent reelection. I analyze a major speech of McCarthy's to show why covering him was so difficult for reporters, and I provide new examples of McCarthy's success in dominating the headlines, even in opposition papers.

Chapter 5 is an examination of the relations between McCarthy

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and the newspapers and magazines which he characterized as "the left-wing press." Included also is a review of his relations with his most important newspaper ally, the *Chicago Tribune*, and of those between the *Tribune* and the anti-McCarthy newspapers. Chapter 6 traces McCarthy's early success in bullying the fledgling television networks and in using television to outmaneuver the Eisenhower administration as his actions led to an open split with that administration. It examines four critical television events that were turning points in his career and led to his eventual loss of public esteem and his censure by the Senate. In chapter 7, I summarize the answers to the questions with which I began, and make a final evaluation of the press's discharge of its responsibility to the public.

I wish to thank my colleagues who covered McCarthy and were so generous in responding to my requests for interviews; the invariably helpful librarians; John D. Pomfret, who arranged my long stay in the *New York Times* morgue; Hale Champion, who did the same for me at the Widener Library; Jack Gould, who advised me on the television chapter, and Nelson Polsby and Thomas C. Leonard of the University of California, who read the manuscript and offered many valuable suggestions. I am grateful to Mary Maraniss of the University of Wisconsin Press for her careful editing and valuable editorial advice.

Annual faculty research grants from the University of California, Berkeley, paid the costs of professional typing, telephone calls, and travel.

I relied constantly on the information in the admirable book on McCarthy and the Senate by Robert Griffith of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Thomas C. Reeves of the University of Wisconsin, Parkside, gave me useful information from his research for a forthcoming biography of McCarthy. I am especially grateful to Paul Ringler of Solana Beach, California, for his ideas and encouragement and for the use of his private collection of McCarthy historical material.

My special thanks go to my wife, Monica Worsley Bayley, who spent six tedious months reading microfilm and many California evenings reading copy on the manuscript after her day's work as an editor.

E. R. B.

Berkeley, California
July 1980

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1.

When It All Started

NEWSPAPER HEADLINES in February 1950 depicted a nation on the verge of hysteria. A banner headline on the front page of the *New York Journal-American* on February 12 said "Plan Wartime Roundup of 4,000 Reds," and another story quoted a Catholic priest telling an American Legion group that "Communists and their dupes" had taken over our foreign policy, that Secretary of State Dean Acheson was "befuddled and weak," and that United States radio networks had been infiltrated by Communists. Another *Journal-American* story that week charged that "some mysterious political power" was shielding 100 American scientists who were Russian spies, and the front page of the paper on February 19 was given over to a five-column doctored photograph, an imaginary air view of New York City after it had been hit by a Russian atomic bomb. The *New York Post* reported on February 10 that Lt. Gen. Leslie R. Groves, wartime head of the U.S. atom bomb project, had said that the late President Roosevelt was responsible for Klaus Fuchs's access to America's atomic secrets. Another *Post* story said that six New York public school teachers were suspected of being Communists, and another told of a reporter's infiltration of a Communist-front school: "Ten Long Nights at a Communist University." A *Post* headline later that week said, "Einstein Red Faker, Should Be Deported, Rep. Rankin Screams." The *Atlanta Constitution* reported on February 13 that George M. Craig, the national commander of the American Legion, speaking at Springfield, Missouri, on the same platform as Gov. Adlai Stevenson of Illinois, had stated, "There are those in our highest offices today who are enemies of our way of life." The *Constitution*

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reported a few days later that the Grand Exalted Ruler of the Elks had warned Elks in Atlanta that Communism was "hanging over the world like an evil shadow."

Fear of this "evil shadow" was nearing its peak in 1950 when Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, Republican of Wisconsin, began his career as the scourge of "Communists in government." The Soviet Union loomed as a powerful and implacable aggressor as it consolidated its hold on the nations of Eastern Europe, and the news in September of 1949 that it had successfully detonated an atomic bomb made nuclear war seem almost inevitable. The administration of President Harry S Truman, taking an increasingly hard line against Communist aggression, had succeeded in holding back the advance of Communism in Western Europe and in Greece and Turkey through the foreign aid program, but this somehow seemed less significant than the triumph of the Chinese Communists over the demoralized forces of Chiang Kai-Shek. "Spies" were being arrested on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and in England, scientist Klaus Fuchs, who had worked on the joint Anglo-American nuclear projects during World War II, confessed that he had passed atomic information to the Russians. In the United States, Alger Hiss, a diplomat, was found guilty of lying when he denied passing secret government documents to Whittaker Chambers, a former Communist agent, a conviction that further weakened confidence in the little-respected State Department.

To the Republicans, denied executive power since 1932, the disarray seemed to present a political opportunity. Since the Democrats were in office when all these unfortunate things occurred, they could be blamed for them, a contention which might have contained some merit, although it would have been possible for a neutral viewer to observe that there was no way short of war that the United States could have controlled or even influenced the actions of the Russians or the Chinese. But the Republicans, led by the party's dominant isolationist wing, sought not only to place blame but to convince the American people that the motivation of the Democrats was treasonous. Since 1936, Republicans had been saying that liberals were Socialists and Socialists were Communists, and since the liberals dominated the Democratic party, Democrats were Communists. The Republicans persisted in this line of attack until the election of Richard Nixon in 1968, and it had the effect of limiting Democratic options in the conduct of foreign policy. No Democratic administration, for example, would have dared to establish friendly relations with Communist China, no matter how logical such a step might have seemed; only a Republican could do that.

The principal means by which the Republicans, aided by some right-wing Democrats, sought to impeach the loyalty and the reputations of liberals was to link them in some way to "Communist fronts," organizations ostensibly under the control of Communists, whose members, if not Communists, were at least "dupes" of Communism. Lists of front organizations, as well as out-and-out Communist organizations, were issued periodically by the attorney general, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and several state legislative committees. In its 1951 report on subversive organizations, the House Committee (HUAC) defined a Communist front as "an organization or publication created or captured by the Communists to do the party's work in special fields. It is communism's greatest weapon in the country today."¹ The committee also quoted from the testimony of J. Edgar Hoover, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, before it on 26 March 1947: "For the most part, front organizations assumed the character of either a mass or membership organization or a paper organization. Both solicited and used names of prominent persons. Literally hundreds of groups and organizations have either been infiltrated or organized primarily to accomplish the purposes of promoting the interests of the Soviet Union in the United States, the promotion of Soviet war and peace aims, the exploitation of Negroes in the United States, work among foreign-language groups, and to secure a favorable viewpoint toward the Communists in domestic, political, social, and economic issues." Hoover listed 14 questions to ask in determining whether a group is a front, questions such as, Does it follow the Communist party line?² The California State Senate's Committee on Un-American Activities stated that fronts were "the chief business of the Communist Party in the United States, and the basic framework upon which has been created the entire Communist structure of sabotage, sedition, espionage and treachery against the American people and their government."³ The committee said that "a Communist front organization is characterized by the fact that a majority of its members are non-Communists. If this were not true, it should be quite obvious that the organization would be actually a Communist organization, and not a front in any sense." It added that membership in a front does not necessarily mean that a person is a Communist; it may mean that he is "a good-intentioned 'sucker' for Communist deceit and deception."⁴

Many of the organizations listed as fronts were ostensibly concerned with such causes as peace, racial equality, education, or welfare, and often held rallies devoted to those causes. Membership in a "front," attendance at a meeting, or the signing of petitions circulated by such

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an organization were the basis for many of the citations of individuals by HUAC, Senator McCarthy, and the private organizations which employed the lists for profit.

The Truman administration reacted to these pressures in two ways. The first was to take an increasingly hard line against the Russians, and it was not uncommon that the front pages of newspapers displayed a story about Acheson warning the Soviets that the United States would resist further aggression, and another about some Republican charging Acheson with being "soft on Communism." This opened the administration to another familiar Republican charge, that Democrats were "warmongers," and this charge seemed to have been effective after the United States intervened to halt the Communists in Korea; the Democrats lost badly in the congressional elections of 1950. It was in these years, too, that the foundations were being laid for intervention in Vietnam. Peter Edson, a Washington columnist writing in 1950 about Ho Chi Minh (who had emerged as the leader of Vietnam) commented that "the whole struggle against world Communism now seems centered about this little-known oriental revolutionist."⁵ (Murrey Marder of the *Washington Post*, writing in 1976, speculated that if the most knowledgeable experts on Asia had not been sacrificed by the government under pressure by McCarthy, active intervention by the United States in Viet Nam might have been avoided.⁶ I think it unlikely; the Democrats were pushed inexorably into that confrontation by the need to prove that they were not "soft on Communism," another legacy of McCarthy.)

The second way in which President Truman reacted to anti-Communist pressure was to issue an executive order, on 21 March 1947, setting up "loyalty boards" to screen employees of executive departments—purportedly to protect employees against unfounded accusations of disloyalty as well as to prevent the infiltration of the disloyal.⁷ Political commentators speculated that the action was intended to head off even more repressive legislation. As grounds for dismissal from the federal service, the order listed actions such as sabotage and treason, but it also listed another kind of evidence for loyalty boards to consider:

Membership in, affiliation with, or sympathetic association with, any foreign or domestic organization, association, movement, group or combination of persons, designated by the Attorney General as totalitarian, fascist, communist, or subversive, or as having adopted a policy of advocating or approving the commission of acts of force or violence to deny other persons their rights under the Constitution of the United States, or as seeking to alter the form of government of the United States by unconstitutional means.⁸

This was the legitimization of guilt by association, although Truman and his associates denied it.* For civil libertarians, the issuance of this order made Truman an oppressor of freedom of thought and speech. They argued that citizens should be held responsible for disloyal acts but should not be punished for political thought and speech, even pernicious thought and speech, and that association with a front group was an expression of political thought. Alan Barth, a *Washington Post* editorial writer and a leading spokesman for this position, blamed the Truman administration for creating a climate of opinion receptive to McCarthyism. He wrote:

It was a little thick to hear administration spokesmen denounce Senator McCarthy for imputing guilt by association when the loyalty boards, operating under a presidential order, had for two and a half years been condemning men on grounds of "sympathetic association" with organizations arbitrarily called "subversive" by the attorney general. No doubt Senator McCarthy deserved to be excoriated for calling as witnesses against reputable men discredited ex-Communists and professional informers; but the loyalty boards from the beginning used anonymous, unsworn testimony from just such sources.⁹

Many of the leading newspapers shared Barth's view, and it was difficult for them to defend Truman against McCarthy's attacks more than half-heartedly. A number of editorials said, in effect, that McCarthy was unfair in his attacks on the President but that Truman was pretty bad, too.

Joe McCarthy came five years late to this game, and many of the most celebrated excesses of "McCarthyism" had occurred before he entered the scene, but most of those earlier Red-baiters have been forgotten. What was it about McCarthy that enabled him to dominate the headlines, to incense the Democrats, to make McCarthyism a dictionary word, and to stamp the years from 1946 through 1954 "the

*Attorney General Tom Clark, in a letter enclosing the list of subversive organizations required by Truman's executive order and submitted to Seth W. Richardson, chairman, Loyalty Review Board, Civil Service Commission, 24 November 1947, wrote: "I wish to reiterate, as the President has pointed out, that it is entirely possible that many persons belonging to such organizations may be loyal to the United States; that membership in, affiliation with or sympathetic association with, any organization designated, is simply one piece of evidence which may or may not be helpful in arriving at a conclusion as to the action which is to be taken in a particular case. 'Guilt by association' has never been one of the principles of our American jurisprudence. We must be satisfied that reasonable grounds exist for concluding that an individual is disloyal. That must be the guide."

McCarthy decade"?* All of the answers to this question concern McCarthy's relations with the media. Roy Cohn, McCarthy's aide, acknowledged that the senator's primary goal was to influence public opinion through the press. "The basic problem, as seen by a small but informed group in and out of government, was the need to reach the public. Nobody, so far, had been able to make America listen," he wrote in his book *McCarthy*.¹⁰ Both Cohn and McCarthy, ignoring the majority of newspapers that supported or tolerated McCarthy, saw this job as one that had to be done over the opposition of the newspapers that opposed his actions, and McCarthy alone among the Red-baiters directed his attack against the press itself, calling it a major instrument of the Communist conspiracy. Nevertheless, he was able to generate the massive publicity that made him the center of anti-Communism because he understood the press, its practices and its values; he knew what made news. He liked the company of newspapermen and sought them out, and he never did understand why his attacks on newspapers, which he considered simply "political," should have affected his personal relationships with those whose papers he castigated.

The roots of his understanding of the press were planted in Wisconsin's Fox River Valley, where several newspapermen were significant early influences. One of these was the late John Riedl, managing editor and later general manager of the *Appleton Post-Crescent*, a newspaper which, with the jointly owned *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, furnished McCarthy's most important press support in Wisconsin. According to John Torinus, present editor of the *Post-Crescent*, Riedl was the one who persuaded McCarthy to enter national politics. The two had long talks about politics when McCarthy would stay at Riedl's house during his visits to Appleton from Washington. And according to Victor I. Minahan, Jr., publisher of the *Post-Crescent*, McCarthy spent a lot of time drinking with Riedl and went to church with him. "John was an old Republican," Minahan said when interviewed. "He had a lot of pals and cronies who were all Republicans and Roman Catholics, members of the same church. He liked smoke-filled rooms, and he liked to sponsor promising young guys entering politics. Joe was one of these."¹¹

Nathan M. Pusey, president of Lawrence College in Appleton in

*As I write this on 16 November 1980, a *New York Times* story from Warsaw, carried in the *Richmond/Berkeley Independent and Gazette*, compares the efforts of the Polish Communist government to control dissidents to the work of McCarthy, and an *Associated Press* story from Washington invokes the name of McCarthy to describe a demand by a group called the Heritage Foundation that the new, more conservative Congress revive the internal security committees to investigate and crack down on domestic radicals.