



## MODERN CONSERVATISM AND THE BURDEN OF JOE McCARTHY *by Thomas C. Reeves*

Many political experts have attempted to explain the rise of the right in recent years. At the close of World War II there was no unified, articulate conservative movement in the United States. Forty years later, Ronald Reagan was serving his second term in the White House, scores of conservative organizations were wealthy and growing, conservative publications flourished, and the GOP was making a serious bid to become the nation's most popular political party. By the mid-1980's, the Democratic coalition forged by Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Depression was clearly defunct. The left seemed increasingly out of touch with public opinion.

There is no simple explanation for the swift emergence of the right. In the most useful examination of the phenomenon, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, George H. Nash distinguished three components of the intellectual right: the "classical liberals" or "libertarians" like Hayek and Mises; the "new conservatives" like Weaver, Kirk, and Nisbet; and the militant anti-Communists who founded *National Review*. These categories are not necessarily exclusive; some conservatives could claim to belong to all three. But they are helpful ways to point to the diversity of the right in recent years.

Many of the militant anti-Communists were ex-radicals

and former Communists. Some were content to rail about Communist aggression overseas after the war. Most, however, also claimed that Communists, fellow travelers, and liberal dupes in government were responsible for Soviet victories. Two of their favorite words were "appeasement" and "treason." Among the most prominent anti-Communists were James Burnham, Frank Meyer, Whittaker Chambers, William F. Buckley Jr., L. Brent Bozell, William A. Rusher, Willmoore Kendall, John Chamberlain, and William S. Schlam. All of these men supported the postwar journals of the right: *Plain Talk*, *The Freeman*, *American Mercury*, and *Human Events*. They also backed 29-year-old William F. Buckley Jr. when he began publishing *National Review* in November 1955. This magazine, a weekly until 1958 and thereafter a biweekly, quickly became the principal forum for conservative intellectuals. Nash argues that "*National Review* was far more indispensable to the right than any single liberal journal was to the left. . . . If *National Review* (or something like it) had not been founded, there would probably have been no cohesive intellectual force on the right in the 1960's and 1970's."

Militant anti-Communists dominated the masthead and the pages of *National Review* from the start. Almost all of them had supported the rampages of Senator Joe McCarthy, and *National Review* continued to back him after his censure by the Senate. Nash concluded that "if McCarthyism helped shape the conservative intellectual movement, it also left that movement weakened and defensive; the ghost of McCarthy has remained a burden upon it."

By this, Nash meant that because McCarthy was censured and generally discredited, his supporters lost face. "In the turmoil of the Senator's downfall, the 'backlash' set the conservative cause back to the pre-McCarthy period." In an interview at the time, Buckley conceded that the entire McCarthy controversy had injured conservatism "a good deal."

There is some truth in this; McCarthy's censure in December 1954 was, in William Rusher's words, "a bone-crushing defeat" for the militantly anti-Communist conservatives. And the left would use every occasion for many years to link all conservatives with the controversial Sena-



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tor. On the whole, however, Nash's contention is misleading and betrays a basic misunderstanding of McCarthyism and its impact on public opinion. Nash equated the term almost exclusively with the Senator, a basic error.

In fact, McCarthyism was a word invented in early 1950 by the *Washington Post* cartoonist Herbert Block (Herblock). It labeled a ruthless technique employed frequently by conservatives (almost always Republicans) for several years before McCarthy became a national figure. This term caught on quickly, and one dictionary defined it as a political attitude "characterized chiefly by opposition to elements held to be subversive and by the use of tactics involving personal attacks on individuals by means of widely publicized indiscriminate allegations especially on the basis of unsubstantiated charges."

McCarthyism, then, was far more than McCarthy. Its practitioners included politicians, government bureaucrats, journalists, leaders of veterans and patriotic organizations, Chamber of Commerce executives, FBI officials, Hollywood blacklists, labor leaders, preachers and priests, book burners, and a broad assortment of others, along with the conservative intellectuals. Some were sincere, some were fanatical, many were cynical.

McCarthyism was not a mass movement, however, as some scholars have claimed. Polls taken in 1953 and 1954, at the height of McCarthy's notoriety, revealed very little public interest in domestic subversion. Samuel Stouffer's *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties* concluded that in the summer of 1954, "The number of people who said that they were worried either about the threat of Communists in the United States or about civil liberties was, even by the most generous interpretation of occasionally ambiguous responses, *less than 1 percent!*" A massive study by Michael Paul Rogin concluded that "perhaps the single most important characteristic of supporters of McCarthy in the national opinion polls was their party affiliation: Democrats opposed McCarthy, and Republicans supported him."

McCarthyism was more than politics, but it was essentially political. As Robert Griffith has contended, "it was primarily a product of the political system and its leaders." McCarthyism had many goals, but the winning of elections was supreme.

The heyday of McCarthyism was the period 1948 to 1957, and historians have dubbed the outburst the Second Red Scare. The "ism" did not disappear with McCarthy in 1957, however, and it was never repudiated by the Senator's intellectual champions. Indeed, it remains a common and powerful feature of right-wing thought to this day. Much of the right during the Reagan years is as firmly committed to McCarthyism as it was during the political campaigns of the 1940's and 1950's.

The roots of McCarthyism ran deep. Throughout the 1930's Republicans linked New Deal programs with Marx and Lenin. During the Presidential campaign of 1944, GOP Vice Presidential candidate John W. Bricker charged that the Democratic Party had become the "communistic party with Franklin D. Roosevelt at its front." Such charges became commonplace during the elections of 1946. In that year supporters of Richard Nixon's campaign for a California congressional seat charged the incumbent with harbor-

ing communist sympathies. Senator Harry Truman's GOP opponent called him "soft on Communism." That fall FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover assisted his friends on the right by warning the American Legion, "During the past five years, American Communists have made their deepest inroads upon our national life. . . . Their propaganda, skillfully designed and adroitly executed, has been projected into practically every phase of our national life." Republicans captured both houses of Congress.

In 1947 the House Committee on Un-American Activities held flamboyant hearings in Hollywood and elsewhere, claiming to see ties between liberals and Communists. The United States Chamber of Commerce released the third of three nationally distributed pamphlets condemning Communism and warning of serious internal subversion. President Truman's creation of a Federal employee loyalty program and his efforts to halt the advance of Communism overseas failed to mollify the right.

Domestic Communism was not a major issue during the Presidential election of 1948, if only because Thomas E. Dewey was predicted to defeat President Truman easily. Still, the Henry Wallace movement was a popular target. Congressman Nixon coauthored a bill that would have virtually outlawed the Communist Party. The House Committee on un-American Activities accelerated its Red hunt when Truman called the 80th Congress back into session in August. It provided a platform for former Communist spies Elizabeth Bentley and Whittaker Chambers, and the Alger Hiss case soon dominated the headlines.

When President Truman won a stunning upset victory, the right wing of the GOP fell into a rage. Deprived since Hoover of a candidate they felt comfortable with, and boiling mad about the fifth consecutive victory by Democrats, right-wingers vowed to intensify their charges of subversion and keep hammering away until they recaptured the White House. Political Scientist Earl Latham has put it this way:

The failure of the electorate to effect a change of government in 1948 with such opportunity as the political system might permit for the release of antiwelfarist ambitions, under conditions of some political responsibility for the outcome (which inevitably would have tempered and moderated policy), produced a political compression that exploded in McCarthyism.

What followed is now a familiar story. In 1949, a year of extraordinary domestic and international tensions, 15 states passed antsubversive laws. The House Committee on Un-American Activities kept Hiss and Department of Justice employee Judith Coplon in the headlines and asked more than 100 schools and colleges to submit textbooks for a check on Communist content. Alfred Kohlberg and the China Lobby contended that State Department subversives were responsible for the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek. The *New York Times* reported that "spy stories" occupied 32 percent of the combined front pages of the New York daily newspapers during a single week in June. The American Civil Liberties Union entitled its annual report "In the Shadow of Fear."

Joe McCarthy belatedly entered the fray in February

1950 with a reckless speech in Wheeling, West Virginia. Immediately members of the militantly anti-Communist right rushed to his assistance, realizing that his charges could not be substantiated. McCarthy quickly became the leader of the pack because of his daring, his passion for publicity, and his rapidly developed zeal for rooting out what he actually believed were subversive elements in all walks of American life.

The Reds-in-government issue, intensified by the Korean War, dominated the 1950 Congressional elections. Democrats lost 28 seats in the House and five in the Senate. Republicans gleefully embraced McCarthy and his "ism." Columnist Marquis Childs observed, "In every contest where it was a major factor, McCarthyism won."

The Republican Party Platform in 1952 contained many examples of McCarthyism, setting the tone for GOP campaigns throughout the country. The preamble charged that Administration Democrats had "shielded traitors to the Nation in high places." McCarthy gave a major address before the Republican National Convention. Candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower publicly showed respect for the Wisconsin Senator and his tactics, agreeing to delete a friendly reference to General George Marshall, a McCarthy target, in a Milwaukee speech and making several charges of his own about Communist infiltration in the nation's schools, media, labor unions, "and—most terrifyingly—into our government itself."

The Eisenhower Administration did little to thwart McCarthy during its first year. In early 1954, however, it had become clear that the Senator, now assisted by hyper-aggressive Roy Cohn, was out of control. When McCarthy began attacking the Army as a source of subversion, the Administration cautiously and subtly aided actions that led to the famous Army-McCarthy hearings. On December 2, 1954, the Senate voted 67 to 22 to "condemn" McCarthy for contempt and abuse of two Senate committees. The 22-man minority was almost solidly from the right wing of the GOP.

Throughout the early 1950's the intellectual right, by and large, backed McCarthy, his tactics, and his charges. In late 1953, *The Freeman* editorialized:

The struggle against McCarthyism is . . . identical in sociological content with "the struggle against fascism" of the 1930's. What the Communists aim at is a 1950's-style Popular Front, a recreation of the League against War and McCarthyism, preferably operating under the label "the Democratic Party."

*The Freeman's* Forrest Davis was the principal author of McCarthy's book *America's Retreat From Victory: The Story of George Catlett Marshall*.

*National Review*, which appeared shortly after McCarthy's censure, continued to applaud the Senator and the "ism." (Publisher William F. Buckley Jr. and editor L. Brent Bozell knew the Senator personally and had assisted him.) This policy would be permanent.

In 1956 the magazine ran a lengthy piece on an unsuccessful effort by liberals to infiltrate McCarthy's office staff. Editorials sympathized with the almost-silent Senator. When McCarthy died in 1957, *National Review* published

passionate eulogies. William S. Schlam's "Across McCarthy's Grave" declared:

A McCarthyite is a person who is instructed, either by organic innocence or by true sophistication, to fight for his life and his verities—those "simple" verities which only organic innocence or true sophistication can fathom.

"We mean it," Schlam wrote. "We are McCarthyites." L. Brent Bozell lauded the late Senator's intellect, "vivid moral sense," and "incapacity for gloom." Sam M. Jones said of meeting the Senator for the first time, "I found a man of intense sincerity, a patriot whose courage was to prove superb under an ordeal the like of which no one else has suffered in our country in decades." James Burnham blamed liberals for destroying a great anti-Communist. Frank S. Meyer called McCarthy a prophet.

As the Eisenhower Era gave way to the Kennedy and Johnson years, prominent members of the intellectual right continued, often in a wholly irresponsible way, to link liberalism with Communism—a tactic at the very heart of McCarthyism. Frank S. Meyer, for example, declared that McCarthyism contained several undeniable verities:

- 1) that contemporary Liberalism is in agreement with Communism on the most essential point—the necessity and desirability of socialism;
- 2) that it regards all inherited value— theological, philosophical, political—as without intrinsic virtue or authority;
- 3) that, therefore, no irreconcilable differences exist between it and Communism—only differences as to methods and means; and
- 4) that, in view of these characteristics of their ideology, the Liberals are unfit for the leadership of a free society, and intrinsically incapable of offering serious opposition to the Communist offensive.

In *Up From Liberalism* William F. Buckley Jr. asked, "What can one do to kindle in the Liberal bosom a spirit of antagonism toward the Communists equal in intensity to that which moved the Liberals to fight against Senator McCarthy?" In James Burnham's *Suicide of the West*, published in 1964, we read that the West's dilemma in the struggle against Communism is that "the left is infected with it, and the right cannot understand it."

Liberalism is infected with communism in the quite precise sense that communism and liberalism share most of their basic axioms and principles, and many of their values and sentiments. . . . The liberal's arm cannot strike with consistent firmness against communism, either domestically or internationally, because the liberal dimly feels that in doing so he would be somehow wounding himself.

Many similar examples of McCarthyite rhetoric may be found from the 1960's, especially from the Goldwater campaign of 1964, in which the right played a prominent role. Lyndon Johnson's overwhelming victory at the polls did nothing to cool right-wing passions. When Harold

"Kim" Philby was discovered to be a Soviet spy in 1967, *National Review* proclaimed that Joe McCarthy "has been proved right." The following year, William F. Buckley Jr. declared that "the continuing blindness" of liberals toward Communism was a "deep psychological problem" producing paralysis. (As recently as March 21, 1986, on the *Today* show, Buckley linked Philby's discovery with McCarthy's activities. Roy Cohn has used the same tactic to justify the Senator's tactics. In fact, McCarthy failed to uncover a single subversive.)

What George Nash called "a momentous intellectual realignment" was underway in the early 1970's. A distinguished group of thinkers with liberal backgrounds found themselves pushed to the right by chaos at home and war abroad. *National Review* began publishing Nathan Glazer, Sidney Hook, Lewis Feuer, and Seymour Martin Lipset. Conservative groups and publications began to flourish, and President Nixon was friendly. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 ("It was quite a feeling," William Rusher said later) and his reelection in 1984 convinced many that the future belonged to the right. In late 1985 the President told a group of cheering conservatives: "I can assure you: *National Review* is to the offices of the West Wing of the White House what *People* magazine is to your dentist's waiting room."

And yet, for all of its prosperity and promise, many intellectuals of the right continued to praise McCarthy and practice McCarthyism. In the 30th anniversary issue of *National Review*, the centerpiece, a lengthy article by Joseph Sobran, defended McCarthyism and contended that "liberal anti-Communism" was "something like a contradiction in terms":

Liberalism has turned into a component of a larger and looser version of the Popular Front. . . . Liberal moral outrage against "corrupt and repressive" regimes ceases when Soviet objectives are achieved. . . . It is a foolish mistake to suppose that the liberals are all working for Moscow. But once you grasp that they are working *with* Moscow, everything falls into place. The sin of liberalism is its refusal to acknowledge that the entire Communist project is monstrous.

*The American Spectator* has published similar declarations on a regular basis.

Another influential journal, *Chronicles*, praised McCarthy in June 1985 as a man of courage and wit and described McCarthyism as "one of those populist outbreaks that always alarm the intellectual classes." The editor continued, "It may be an irrelevant fact that the Senator was right, that American institutions were riddled with subversion and rot."

The historical record does not corroborate such a claim. Scholars have documented the story in detail and are virtually unanimous in their condemnation of McCarthy and his methodology. Not a single major American history textbook on the college level takes even a neutral position on the Second Red Scare.

In early 1986, the Reagan Administration openly practiced McCarthyism for the first time. (Given its heritage and ideological bent, one is impressed by its restraint.) On

February 18, Central Intelligence Agency Director William J. Casey passed out copies, at a White House briefing for members of Congress, of a classified report contending that the Sandinista government of Nicaragua was engaged in a "disinformation campaign" to influence Congress and the American news media. The White House announced plans (later dropped) to make the document public in its struggle to obtain \$100 million in aid for the anti-Sandinista contras.

Republican Senator David F. Durenberger, chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, said in a statement, "The Administration clearly intends to use that document, an alleged plan by the Sandinistas, to lobby Congress, to portray every Senator and Congressman who votes against lethal aid as a stooge of Communism." Several critics, notably liberal *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis, contended that the Administration was practicing McCarthyism. (It was soon learned, however, that the Sandinistas had been paying a New York public affairs firm \$25,000 a month over the past 30 months to get its message across to the United States. The controversial CIA document was based in part on this fact.)

White House communications director Patrick J. Buchanan then wrote a piece for the *Washington Post* contending that the vote on contra aid would determine whether the Democratic Party "will reveal whether it stands with Ronald Reagan and the resistance—or Daniel Ortega and the Communists." "Two decades ago," Buchanan charged, "the Democratic Party began its withdrawal from the great western coalition to contain Communist expansion, which it once led."

Amid a storm of protest, the President quickly made it clear that he backed Buchanan. Moreover, he contended publicly that Congress must choose between supporting the Administration or the Communists.

It's what the choice comes down to, whether it is knowingly or not. And I've had enough experience with Communist subversion back in my former profession to know that a great many people are deceived, and not aware that what they're doing is inimical to the interests of the United States.

Democratic Congressman Michael D. Barnes, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Western Hemisphere affairs, charged that the President and his advisers were committing "the moral equivalent of McCarthyism," and added: "Frankly, I don't believe we have heard such offensive nonsense from our political leaders since the 1950's." Several others in Congress expressed similar views.

Perhaps the right cannot easily abandon its past. Still, its leaders need to learn that their recent popularity cannot be attributed in any measurable degree to their embrace or use of McCarthyism. Smear tactics were never very popular; indeed, McCarthyism, we now know, was never an effective political tool—not even in 1950 or 1952.

If the right is to appeal to the educated and moderate and forge a lasting political majority, it would do well to reevaluate its venerable affection for the Second Red Scare. The time has surely come to jettison McCarthy and his "ism" and forget about one of the blackest episodes in American history.

# THE EVIL THAT MEN DON'T DO: JOE McCARTHY AND THE AMERICAN RIGHT

by Samuel T. Francis

His is probably the most hated name in American history. Other villains—Benedict Arnold, Aaron Burr, Alger Hiss, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg—today evoke merely the esoteric passions of the antiquarian or the interminable controversies of partisans. Only Joe McCarthy has given his name to an enduring term of political abuse, and in American politics today there is literally no one who would publicly defend him. When he died, eminent public men could find no good to say of him. Vandals in Appleton, Wisconsin, have repeatedly desecrated his grave, and nearly 30 years after his death his ghost continues to haunt us, called up only by his old enemies to frighten us of what we once became, to warn us of what we might become again.

It is not immediately clear why so much hatred should endure so long, especially when it is recalled that the Senator was never accused or convicted of any crime, never betrayed his country, caused no wars, perpetrated no atrocities, and after 1946 never even lost an election. The reason usually given for the hatred of McCarthy is that he did and said so many evil things. That he has a reputation for doing and saying evil cannot be denied. We are told that McCarthy made reckless accusations of treason, and that he often or always failed to substantiate his charges. He made vitriolic attacks on his opponents and publicly challenged

their good faith and integrity. He interfered with the workings of the State Department and the Army. He sent his aides on a junket to Europe, where they made fools of themselves and embarrassed the United States. He ruined the careers of many—hundreds, thousands—of innocent people. He encouraged mass hysteria, played on fear and resentment, and harmed the cause of responsible anti-Communism. He violated the rules of the Senate as well as the standards of common decency. He physically attacked Drew Pearson. He lost his temper, bullied witnesses, talked dirty, and drank too much. He insulted such devoted public servants and stalwart patriots as Dean Acheson, Adlai Stevenson, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and George Marshall. He tried to link Stevenson with Alger Hiss, and he made attorney Joseph Welch cry on national television. Perhaps worst of all, when journalists or other senators called McCarthy a liar, a crook, an extremist, a homosexual, or a fraud, he paid them back in the same coin with his distinctive gift for invective. Joe McCarthy said and did all these things and more, and the evil that inheres in them lives after him and recoils upon us to this day in the hatred that attaches to his cursed name.

Once in a while, however, someone who marches to the tune of a different drummer points out that Joe McCarthy did not do some of the evil things that were done in and around his era. He did not, for example, make solemn commitments to anti-Communist allies of the United States, as Franklin Roosevelt did to Chiang Kai-shek, and then violate those commitments at the first opportunity. He did not, like General Eisenhower, initiate "Operation Keelhaul," in which untold numbers of anti-Communist Russians were delivered to the Soviets at the point of American bayonets in the aftermath of World War II. He did not make agreements with Joseph Stalin that consigned an entire subcontinent to Communism and then characterize the Yalta agreements as an act of prudent statecraft.

He did not send American troops to Korea, and later to Vietnam, and then deny them the full support of American military power while their death tolls mounted. He did not allow the Hungarians who revolted against Communist domination to be shot or rounded up by Soviet tanks and Mongolian troops. He did not sponsor an invasion of Communist Cuba, withdraw promised air support at the last minute, and leave the invaders to be slaughtered by Castro's armies. He did not countenance the overthrow and murder of President Diem and his brother, plunge an anti-Communist ally into chaos from which it never recovered, and later sign a peace treaty that ensured Communist control of South Vietnam and make excuses



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