

## IN THESE TIMES OPINION

# Tailgunner Joe: political torpedo for power elite

By Norman Markowitz

Joe McCarthy rose and fell against a background of newspaper headlines and television cameras. Twenty years after his death, the National Broadcasting Co., one of many institutions that honored him and his ism, has presented a three-hour epic of his life. The film, "Tailgunner Joe,"—aired Sunday, Feb. 6, as NBC's "Big Event"—buries the real McCarthy and his historical context, but does much to discredit lunatics, alcoholics, and mediocrities.

At the beginning of "Tailgunner Joe," McCarthy is described as the man who "almost tore America apart." Near the end of his life he is portrayed as a drunken lunatic hiding in the broom closet of a hospital drunk tank as men in white coats come to lead him off.

As if to clinch this message of aberrant evil feeding upon a society of sheep, the young woman researcher who wanders through the film, a la Citizen Kane, seeking McCarthy's story through flashbacks and interviews, provides at the conclusion a definition of her subject and his ism: McCarthy was finally a man with no goals, no shame, no guilt and no achievements. He should have been fought by the President (Ike by inference). He "more or less created a national climate of fear, but he himself caught no Communists, uncovered no traitors, found no subversives. Not one.... People like McCarthy are born every 30 seconds, and that is the horror."

### ►Politics left out.

If McCarthy had "caught" any real Communists, the viewers would never know it, for neither the Communist movement, the New Deal, the political right, nor any politics relevant to the U.S. in the 1940s and '50s is treated in "Tailgunner Joe." Indeed, from the film no one would know that the "horror" of "McCarthyism" in the U.S. goes well beyond the relatively short career of Sen. Joseph McCarthy.

McCarthyism in its popular usage, or political repression directed against the working class and its supporters among the intellectuals, has its roots in the struggle between workers and capitalists, a struggle that produced Pinkerton Agency terrorism and criminal anarchist laws in the pre-World War I period; investigating committees, deportations, and 100 percent Americanism (with the radicals portrayed as the agents of a Moscow-controlled conspiracy) during the first Red Scare in 1919-20; and repressive laws, political show trials, and blacklisting against those who were labelled Communists, fellow travelers, sympathizers, anti-anti-Communists, etc., after World War II.

The story of McCarthyism, treated seriously, would implicate big businessmen, police chiefs, generals, scholars, government functionaries—the whole structure of corporate power in the United States. It cannot be understood as the machinations of a malevolent madman fomenting political hysteria for fame and profit.

"Tailgunner Joe" tells McCarthy's private story in an historical vacuum. For three hours, those who stayed awake observed a wooden and somewhat menacing McCarthy (Peter Boyle) lie, cheat, and drink his way to national fame. McCarthy's background is carefully presented,

but the cold war context and the roles of other important domestic political figures are hardly touched. Through interviews with the Senator's acquaintances and victims, we learn that in a world of cynicism and corruption McCarthy plumbed new depths by appealing, with the aid of a prostituted media, to a philistine public opinion ready to swallow anything McCarthy said—until his final showdown with Joseph Welch before the Army-McCarthy hearings. All of this is banal, reminiscent of the cold war liber-

al pundits of the 1950s who looked to Great Britain for civility and who blamed McCarthy on the absence of a responsible, decent American elite civil service and a responsible, decent, elite people.

### ►Only a few hints.

By avoiding the larger political context, the epic fails to show the ritualistic cold war liberal attacks on Communists as the leftwing twins of McCarthy. There are occasional hints of rich, corrupt forces that support McCarthy, and one surprising reference to Harry Truman as the man who launched the loyalty boards and made the Attorney General's list a best-seller. But "Tailgunner Joe" basically follows the cliché view of McCarthy, most closely associated with Richard Rovere, by portraying him both as an exotic monster and as an unscrupulous demagogue who played on the frustrations of boobs and the alienated masses. One of McCarthy's GI buddies actually sums this up in the film: "What a guy. Every GI's dream is to screw the system. Boy, he could really do it."

Of course, McCarthy wasn't screwing the system, but rather like a freelance hit man for the crime syndicate, doing some of its dirtiest work and consolidating some of its worst tendencies. In "Tailgunner

Joe" there is no hint of a system, however, just a political gargoyle run amok, an insane man from an insane time that one can feel faintly guilty about and then forget. Even the final lines of the film, as the researcher is asked, "what you're saying is, it could happen again?" and she replies, "hasn't it?" (a probable reference to Nixon, an easy target attacked with impunity through the film), betrays its general cynicism and lack of resolution.

Those who have forgotten, or never knew, the sordid personal history of Joe McCarthy may be led by the film to question politicians who use red-baiting as a device to attack the left and to cover up their own venality. But for those who wanted some historical understanding, "Tailgunner Joe" offers little beyond an exercise in inept and boring escapism, a chronicle of a political torpedo who (to turn one of his own phrases around) represented the tip of an iceberg of organized corporate power, anti-working class reaction, and cold war conflict.

Norman Markowitz is associate professor of history at Rutgers University. He is the author of a book on Henry A. Wallace and is writing a history of anti-communism in America, 1946-1972.

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## IN THESE TIMES

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# Letters

## Got his fingers crossed

Editor:

I have been active in Local 2, United Federation of Postal Clerks, and was on the labor council. I read *In These Times* regularly and believe it to be one of the greatest accomplishments by people calling themselves socialists in this country. It is a breathtaking accomplishment; the reportage is deep, informative, free of rhetoric and doubletalk; it is in fact a model of what a socialist newspaper should be, and could lay the foundations for the emergence of a mature and responsible American left (I've got my fingers crossed!)

I am a member of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. I enjoyed reading your comments on DSOC's electoral activities, and the letter by Jack Clark. I thought your comments had merit. You're right—it's time to start running good socialist candidates for state legislatures.

—Lawrence Swaim  
San Francisco

## We could make great music together!

Editor:

I read the article by Steve Chapple, "Where have all the folk songs gone?" (*ITT*, Jan. 26) with some disappointment. It is sad that most left-wing publications (with the exception of *Sing Out*) discuss music only in terms of records and professional performers.

It is easy to discuss the national music industry as a ghastly example of American capitalism. But most of the left press has ignored a major cultural development of recent years—the amazing increase in the number of people who are making their own music. The best of the commercial music industry is simply a reflection or an attempt to absorb something from this mass music making.

Millions upon millions of people have at least learned how to play a guitar in the last 20 years (including me). There is an amoeba-like proliferation of local bands that many people are more interested in than they are in record and radio music. And these local groups usually make their own music. Not to mention even more countless jam sessions.

Music has become one of the main ways that millions of people on the road who meet in chance groups are able to get to know each other quickly and coordinate future activities. One interesting development—large numbers of young white Americans have become able to sing in harmony spontaneously, as black Americans have always done. Until recently whites seldom sang in harmony without the authoritarian leadership of a choir director.

This musical ability to coordinate activity as a team has implications for the rest of society.

Without the folk music records "stars," I think traditional folk music is more active now than it has been in many years. Here in Oklahoma, traditional fiddle players are drawing crowds in many localities and teaching younger people their vast repertoire of tunes.

As for songs with political comment, they are being made up all over the place, forgotten and replaced by new political songs all the time—never coming near the record business.

I think socialists should pay more attention to helping music-making develop among the people and less to whatever fads the capitalist music industry are into.

Best wishes for *In These Times*—it's a good paper.

—Jodey Bateman  
Norman, Okla.

## Off your knees, Dave.

Editor:

I object to the doublethink in David Milton's story on China (*ITT*, Jan. 19). Milton describes the Chinese revolution as a "revolution from below." But in the same paragraph, he writes that "the Chinese rank and file, thanks to Mao, are now more sophisticated than many Western observers are willing to grant."

Which way is it? Did the revolution come from below or was it handed down by Mao? Should we say thanks to the masses or thanks to Mao?

This particular Western observer is willing to grant that Maoism is plenty sophisticated—so sophisticated that it claims there is no contradiction between a dictator like Mao and a socialist society. But no thanks, it's too sophisticated for me. David Milton should get up off his knees.

—Ben Schumacher  
New York City

## A perfect antidote

Editor:

Want to express my delight with your new paper. Living out here in the boonies may have exaggerated my estimate, but I don't think so, since I've been reading popular and "alternative" publications as a magazine, newspaper addict for some years now. Your newspaper is a perfect antidote to the likes of *Time*, *Newsweek* and the "daily trash," and you seem to be getting better and better.

I'm struck by your marriage of form and content, readability and substance, etc. It looks like you and *Seven Days* are going places and I'm really happy to be watching. Have a great 1977 and beyond!

—Gene Tuck  
Port Angeles, Wash.

## A clinic in Siberia?

Editor:

Salvador Luria ended his column on cigarettes (*ITT*, Jan. 12) by raising what he called "socialist questions." He asked "Do people who contract

smoking-related diseases have the right to receive public health services?"

Maybe a clinic in Siberia!

The implications of Luria's question are ominous and the shadow of Big Brother emerges. After all, when there's smoke, there's fire.

—Chaim Salutsky  
New York

## Oops!

Editor:

I want to congratulate you on *In These Times* and on your lack of sterile sectarianism.

You are doing a great service by providing coverage of the positions of the AFL-CIO on international trade and international corporations, especially in Dan Marshall's piece, "Multinationals: labor, business clash" (*ITT*, Jan. 5).

Marshall's story would have been even better if he had utilized the Port Chester conference to give us a briefing on the positions of various labor groups on MNCs and trade instead of just quoting a few spokesmen from the AFL-CIO. It is important that the positions of the AFL-CIO on investment and trade are at odds with most of world labor.

Another aspect of Marshall's story is more disturbing. "Chip" Levinson of the International Chemical and General Workers' Federation was called an "International Labor Organization (ILO) representative in Geneva, Switzerland." Does Levinson know that Marshall has transferred him from being Secretary-General of one of the most active and imaginative labor organizations to a representative of the officially-supported ILO? As a life-long teamster, I am aware of Levinson's work because our union belongs to the ICF. He has spoken to our conventions and sometimes has provided the only interesting speech there. Please do not label him as a rep of the stodgy and bureaucratic ILO—which Levinson rarely bothers to attend or work with.

Niels Dybdahl  
Hollywood, Calif.

## And double oops!!

Editor:

David Moberg, in his article on the Supreme Court's Arlington Heights ruling (*ITT*, Jan. 26), quadrupled the black population of that Chicago suburb. A special census taken in July 1976 showed a total minority population of 848 out of 71,012 residents. Of those, an estimated 200 are black.

There was no breakdown of the minority population in that census, but a 1972 special census showed that there were only 124 blacks out of 474 minority persons in a population of 69,204.

Arlington Heights' black population, then, is less than one-half of one percent.

Moberg might have noted that in addition to making it more difficult to prove racial discrimination, which is unconstitutional, the Supreme Court again said that discrimination against someone because they are poor is O.K. Blacks might have some rights, but the poor have none.

—Jerry De Muth  
Chicago

## Jerry Rubin vindicated

We have received letter from several readers calling attention to an apparent misquotation in a review (*ITT*, Dec. 22) of the book *White Coat, Clenched Fist: The Political Education of an American Physician* by Dr. Fitzhugh Mullan, to wit—

"One only needs to see Abbie Hoffman hawking wallpaper on television..."

We checked the text and found the quotation to be correct. But our informants say the ad in question featured Jerry Rubin, not Abbie Hoffman. We wrote Dr. Mullan asking for clarification or correction. His answer follows:

"It's even worse than that! The Abbie Hoffman (actually Jerry Rubin) ad I mentioned was for "Up Against the Wall Paper." It appeared on "Saturday Night Live" and was a put-on ad.

It was the first time I had ever watched the show and I missed the joke—so the whole point is screwed up.

Your reader in California was the first to challenge me, though I'm sure others have caught the mistakes. I shuddered when you quoted them. I'm sorry, Abbie...."

—Fitzhugh Mullan  
Washington, D.C.

## For all his flourish...

Editor:

Marvin Mandell's letter to the editor (*ITT*, Feb. 9) suggests that he misread my column of Jan. 26.

In writing the column, I was not seeking to put forth my own views on all of the reasons for the lack of a popular socialist movement in this country, but rather to criticize two prevalent left views.

Moreover, if Mandell were familiar with NAM, he would know that one of our founding principles (which continues to be at the core of our politics) is the insistence on the necessity for a socialist organization and movement here to exist independent of any socialist country, to chart its own course to socialism, and to openly criticize the limitations of existing socialist countries. (This same approach seems to be reflected in *ITT* editorials.)

I do, however, strongly disagree with Mandell's characterization of all socialist countries as "totalitarian monstrosities." Such a view reflects a lack of understanding of the particular history, development and material limitations of the different socialist countries and of their positive accomplishments.

Finally, for all his rhetorical flourish, Mandell avoids dealing with the hard question of why socialist movements have been able to develop in almost every advanced capitalist country in Europe—even with their democratic traditions—and not here. No single explanation yet developed sufficiently explains our own history. Mandell's point has validity, but it too is insufficient. The task of answering that question is still before us.

—Roberta Lynch  
Chicago



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