

Re-Examining Joseph McCarthy

He may not be who we thought he was

By Margot Schulzke

From the Rutgers' University Eagleton Institute of Politics, listed in the Eagleton Digital Archive, under the heading of "McCarthyism and the 'Red Scare'":

"In February 1950, Joseph McCarthy, a first-term Republican senator from Wisconsin, gained national prominence when, in a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, he held up a piece of paper that he claimed was a list of 205 known communists then employed in the State Department. McCarthy never produced documentation for a single one of his charges, but for the next four years he exploited an issue that worried many as the Cold War provoked fear of nuclear confrontation."¹

The above is a typical capsule history of Senator Joseph McCarthy's assault on Communist infiltration of the United States Government during the 40s and 50s. That's what we always "knew" about Joe McCarthy. But M. Stanton Evans, a contributing editor at *Human Events*, a contributor at *National Review* and for many years director of the National Journalism Center,² offers thoughtful readers another take on the Senator from Wisconsin, arguably the most controversial figure of the 1950s. Given the almost-universally negative view of McCarthy that quickly became entrenched, many, if not most, readers will raise a dubious eyebrow to anything that disturbs their long-held views.

So what could anyone possibly say that would redeem Joseph McCarthy from the dung heap of history? Evans spent six years gathering evidence from Soviet archives relative to the activities of the GRU and KGB released since 1990 in the post-Soviet era, the Venona decrypts³, formerly classified FBI counterintelligence archives, and other primary sources, in concert with the memoirs of former intelligence officers. In 663 carefully documented pages, his stunning new book, *Blacklisted by History*, appears to establish both the truth of what McCarthy said and, most surprising to this writer, the propriety of his methods.

Evans shows McCarthy in his initial address before the full Senate repeatedly refusing to provide the names of those suspected, saying, "If we should label one man a Communist when he was not a Communist, I think it would be too bad."⁴ Despite repeated and peremptory demands for names from Democrats Millard Tydings, Garland Withers, Scott Lucas, and Brien McMahon, McCarthy refused again and again to label anyone in an open Senate session. Replying to a question from McMahon, who had arrived late, McCarthy stated, "[Senator Tydings] demanded that I present the names and indict them before the country, without giving them a chance to be heard. I said, 'No, I will not do that unless the Senate demands it...'"⁵

¹ <http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu>

² He has also served as editor of the *Indianapolis News*, a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* Syndicate, and a commentator for CBS and *Voice of America*. He is the author of seven books, including *The Theme is Freedom*. He was the founder and director of the National Journalism Center from 1977 to 2002.

³ The Venona papers are secret messages between Moscow and its U.S. agents, intercepted and decoded by the U. S. Army, long in possession of the United States government but made accessible to the public only in 1995. Thousands of these messages were intercepted and the decrypts shared with the FBI.

⁴ Tydings Hearings, p 268, as quoted by M. Stanton Evans, *Blacklisted by History*, p 202, Crown Forum, 2007

⁵ Tydings Hearings, p 698, as quoted by Evans.

And so it did. Republican Senators Bourke Hickenlooper of Iowa and Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts concurred that “the Senator from Wisconsin was required, or requested, to come before the committee in public hearings with klieg lights, television and all the rest of such an emotional occasion, there to bring out his cases, name the names and produce facts.”⁶

The hearings were held, after a fashion, and reports were published. Repeatedly, denials of the charges by alleged Communists or sympathizers were taken at face value, with no pretense at further investigation, and McCarthy’s charges were treated as “baseless slanders.”

When the committee report was published, Lodge and Hickenlooper were incensed—along with other Republicans both conservative and moderate (Taft, Mundt, Ives, and Smith), to find 35 vital pages of the transcript removed. Although the two named were both on the subcommittee making the report, they were given no opportunity to review it before it was published. Those pages included, among other highly significant items, a chart indicating the number and placement of Communists and fellow travelers in the State Department in 1946,⁷ and lists of witnesses who the two had recommended be called to testify, but who were not.

The report used a variety of scathing language to describe McCarthy: terms such as “hoax”, “nefarious”, “vile”, “fraud”, and “despicable” were characteristic.⁸ If McCarthy did not merit such epithets, what other possible motive could have existed to attack him? We don’t have far to look. Today’s Washington observers can, all too readily, recognize the motive of political advantage in a coming election. Public concern over the infiltration of our institutions was gaining ground and was believed a threat to Democratic control. The following urgent plea from Senator Tydings to President Truman, as quoted by Evans, is recorded in Tydings’ papers:

I strongly recommend for your own welfare, for the welfare of the country and lastly for the welfare of the Democratic party that the present Communist inquiry not be allowed to worsen, but that you will take bold, forthright and courageous action which I presume to say will do as much as anything I can think of to give you and your administration and party a tremendous advantage in the coming election.⁹ (Emphasis added)

While Evans does not suggest that Truman acted directly on Tydings’ plea, in the days and weeks immediately following, White House staffers “scrambled to position the president as a vigorous, no-nonsense foe of Communism at home as well as overseas.”¹⁰

And so we learn the Senate investigation of Communists in our State Department and elsewhere was swept under the rug, and the Democrat-controlled Senate turned its attention to a more important issue, that of destroying Joseph McCarthy. They did not like the message, so they crucified the messenger. How often have we seen that happen in the years since?

Evans’ blockbuster book appears to vindicate a man long vilified and deprived of credit due. In the account’s broader applications, the author also gives readers a more comprehensive view of the ongoing battle between freedom and serfdom, courage versus cowardice, and conservatism and what, in today’s lexicon, passes for liberalism.

⁶ Ibid, p. 2519, 2521, as quoted by Evans

⁷ Evans, p 239

⁸ Evans, p. 237

⁹ Evans, p 221. Tydings papers, Series V, Box 2.

¹⁰ Ibid, footnote.

Readers may or may not find *Blacklisted by History* convincing, although it is thoroughly documented and carefully indexed. If debates did not exist over what one accepts as proof, court systems would not be necessary. Yet apart from whatever conclusions one draws about Joseph McCarthy, this is a broad and fascinating saga with huge impact on American history. It is well worth the read.