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The Most Gifted And Successful Demagogue This Country Has Ever Known

By RICHARD H. ROVERE



JOSEPH R. MCCARTHY—"He offered nothing. He had no program. He exploited only fears."

SENATOR JOE McCARTHY (R., Wis.) died 10 years ago, on May 2, 1957, of causes never fully explained, though evidently connected with an ailment of the liver. While not the work of his own hand or that of any other man, his death has been called suicide by some, murder by others. Those who say suicide maintain that he allowed and even encouraged life to slip away, that he deliberately chose not to do what his doctors insisted that he do in order to live. Those who say murder mostly agree with the late George Sokolsky, who wrote: "He was hounded to death by those who could not forget and would not forgive." There is probably a bit of truth in both contentions.

He was 48 when he died. However, his career as perhaps the most gifted and successful demagogue this country has ever known had come to an end two and a half years earlier, when, on Dec. 2, 1954, the Senate voted, 67 to 22, to censure him for various offenses committed against the presumed dignity of the institution and the self-esteem of its members. And that vote took place less than five years after he had broken out of obscurity by waving before

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an audience in Wheeling, W. Va., a piece of paper that he said was a "list" of Communists "working and making policy" in the State Department and "known to the Secretary of State" to be conscious agents of the Soviet Union. Before that day—Feb. 9, 1950—he was unknown outside Washington and Wisconsin and not very well known in either the capital or the state whose voters had absent-mindedly sent him to the Senate and were, he had reason to believe, getting ready to retire him in 1952. But a few months after the Wheeling speech he was known throughout the country and around the world, and he was a great power in American politics. He was probably the first American ever to be feared and actively hated on every continent. What he stood for—or was thought to stand for—seemed so ominous to Europeans that Winston Churchill felt constrained to work an anti-McCarthy passage into Elizabeth II's Coronation speech, and *The Times* of London observed 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."

At home, he was greatly feared and greatly admired. From the President on down, no prudent member of the Truman Administration in its last two years, or of the Eisenhower Administration in its first two, took any important decision without calculating the likely response of Joe

McCarthy. After a bitter wrangle with McCarthy over the Senate's confirmation of Charles E. Bohlen, today our Ambassador to France, as Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Robert A. Taft, the leader of the Republican majority in the Senate, told President Eisenhower that he would not again do battle in behalf of anyone McCarthy opposed.

During the months in which the first Republican Administration in 20 years was setting itself up in business, McCarthy held a veto power over appointments.

Many of his colleagues in the Senate convinced themselves that he could determine the outcome of elections. On this the evidence was inconclusive; the chances are that his powers were somewhat overrated.

It was nevertheless a fact that in the elections of 1950 some Senators who had been critical of McCarthy lost their seats, and for the next four years there was scarcely any senatorial criticism of him. Few spoke well of him, but fewer still spoke ill of him—until at last the day came when the President of the United States decided that McCarthy threatened the morale of the United States Army and gave the first signal for resistance.

Whatever his impact on elections, he enjoyed, throughout this period, an astonishing and alarming amount of approbation in the country at large. Although his personal following—those who were pleased to think

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He created an ism and an era



ADVERSARY—A historic moment: McCarthy and Boston attorney Joseph Welch, the Army's counsel, during the Army-McCarthy hearings in June, 1954.



ASSOCIATE—Roy M. Cohn, left, with McCarthy during the hearings. "For 35 days—187 hours—McCarthy played the heavy on network television in . . . a marathon of accusation and counter-accusation"

The Most Gifted Demagogue (Cont.)

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of themselves as "McCarthyites," those who, like William F. Buckley Jr., could hold that "McCarthyism . . . is a movement around which men of good will and stern morality can close ranks"—was never large enough to seem menacing, it was found by the Gallup Poll early in 1954 that 50 per cent of Americans held a "favorable opinion" of him, while only 29 per cent held an "unfavorable opinion." By early 1954, it should be noted, he had accused the Administrations of both Truman and Eisenhower of "treason." And he had said of General of the Army George Catlett Marshall, who up to that moment had seemed the least assailable American of his time, that he was "a man steeped in falsehood . . . who has recourse to the lie whenever it suits his convenience," that he was part of "a conspiracy so infamous, so immense and an infamy so black as to dwarf any previous venture in the history of man," and that he "would sell his grandmother for any advantage." Millions loved it and cried for more.

IN "Orestes," Euripides says of the demagogue that he is "a man of loose tongue, intemperate, trusting in tumult, leading the populace to mischief with empty words." McCarthy was all of this. But he differed from the classic model in some striking and important ways. Throughout history, the demagogue's empty words have conveyed empty promises. What demagogues promise and cannot deliver is a future more desirable than the present. The range is from amelioration at one end of the scale to glory at the other. Some offer both and a bit of everything in between. Hitler promised the Germans an improvement in their individual lives and high adventure and conquest as citizens of his Reich. In this country, Huey Long promised to "share the wealth"—when there was little wealth to share—and thereby to make "every man a king."

Demagogy almost always involves the exploitation of desires for at least a somewhat better life and of dreams of downright grandeur. But McCarthy promised no one anything. The only dreams he exploited were bad ones, nightmares. He never sought to rouse his particular rabble by telling them how wretched their present lives were and what hope there was for the future if only they would follow him to his appointed destination. He offered nothing. He had no destination. He was not going anywhere. He had no program of any kind.

He exploited only fears. All demagogues, of course, do this—it is inseparable from their exploitation of hopes. Like most 20th century demagogues (except, of course, such as Stalin and Mao Tse-tung and Castro) McCarthy seized on the fear of Communism. But he did not do it in the usual way. He never dealt with Communism as revolution, as a threat to American society. He did not share

the concerns of the House Committee on Un-American Activities over subversion, over the undermining of American institutions. He once half-heartedly undertook an investigation of the press and called it off when the first witness, James Wechsler, of The New York Post, proved impossible to browbeat. And he stopped another investigation—this time of Communism in education—because the first witness scheduled to testify had to stay home to nurse a bad cold.

Another time, one of his aides kicked up a row with a magazine article which argued that the country's Protestant churches were in grave danger because of the Bolshevik penetration of the clergy. This offended a good many people, including President Eisenhower, McCarthy, who was often extravagantly loyal in support of those who had thrown in their lot with him, made only the feeblest effort to defend this staff member. The Protestant President said he was sure that American clergymen were as incorruptible as ever, and the Catholic Senator held his tongue and let the man be cashiered.

MCCARTHY'S interests lay elsewhere. They lay, to be specific, in foreign policy. From the day he stood up in Wheeling until the day he was put down in the Senate, he had nothing to say except that Communists were, as he had charged in Wheeling, "making policy" in those agencies of government that were primarily responsible for our undertakings abroad—the Departments of State and Defense, the United States Information Service, the Central Intelligence Agency. Here, of course, was pay dirt. The cold war was three years

660: General Marshall, who until then had seemed the least assailable American of his time, McCarthy said that he 'would sell his grandmother for any advantage.' Millions loved it.99

old. Four months after Wheeling, our troops were locked in battle with a Communist army in Korea. In New York Federal Court, a former State Department officer had recently been convicted of perjury for having denied involvement in a conspiracy to provide the Soviet Union with state secrets. Before long, there were to be convictions of persons charged with having provided the Russians with scientific intelligence about our atomic installations. This was a very edgy country before McCarthy came along

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to make it edgier still. If he was going to have but a single string to his demagogic bow, he had chosen the best one.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the fact of the single string is central to any examination of McCarthy's failures as well as his successes, his weakness as well as his strength in the practice of demagoguery. For purposes of examination, I will assume that the end sought by any demagogue—or any politician, for that matter—is power, by which is meant the ability to control people or events or both. In McCarthy's case, I am not sure that this was ever true. If he had personal ambitions of any kind—to be President of the United States, for example—he never did anything to advance them. His friend and lawyer, Edward Bennett Williams, always insisted that he sought not power but glory. I doubt this too. I think that he wanted little more than to be able to stand back and look upon the mischief and tumult and confusion that were his own handiwork, that he was really a rebel without a cause. But he operated within the framework of power, and he used the instruments of power, or at least some of them. His collapse after the Senate censure of 1954 was, I think, a consequence of his failure to exploit hopes and dreams as well as fears and suspicions.

McCarthy was a leader who had a following but not a movement. Not until shortly before the censure vote did he or any of his followers ever attempt to build an organization of any sort, and the one they did set up—a Committee of Ten Million Americans Mobilizing for Justice—had as its only purpose the presentation to the Senate of a petition protesting what was by then the inevitable resolution of censure. (On the day of the vote, it was delivered to the Capitol in a Brink's armored truck; it was said to have 1,000,816 signatures.) In point of fact, there was nothing else to base a movement on. It would have been impossible to organize around the single proposition that agents of a foreign power should not be making American policy and that they should, as McCarthy kept saying, be "ferreted out." Ferreting of-



"I have here in my hand—"

that sort is a job for Government itself, for the President, for the F.B.I. There is no way for the mass to participate in such a purge.

Had he really wished to build a movement, he might have tied anti-Communism to other issues of a more traditional sort. He could, for instance, have argued that the Communist conspiracy to infiltrate the Government threatened the livelihood of every non-Communist civil servant. He could have made himself the letter-carrier's friend, the Government clerk's protector. There was a good deal of McCarthyism in some parts of the labor movement; he might have sought allies in the trade unions. Since he had no ideological commitments, he could have moved in almost any direction. Though many people today think of him as having been a rightist, an early Bircher, he was in fact nothing of the sort; on domestic issues he voted with the liberals as often as with the conservatives. Had

he chosen to do so, he could easily have cooked up some kind of scheme that would have nourished the hopes and the egos of those who accepted his leadership.

If he had done anything of this sort, he would, I feel sure, have survived the Senate's censure and made great capital of it. It is not characteristic of demagogues to collapse when they are rebuffed by the Establishment. All that McCarthy had lost, really, was the chairmanship of the Committee on Government Operations. That had been an important source of his power for two of the years in which he had been a great force in American politics. But he had ascended the heights two years before attaining that chairmanship, when he was just one Senator in 96 and at that a member of the minority party and very low in seniority. Had he ever built a real movement, he could have fired the energies of its members with this new grievance and have threatened his fellow Senators as he had done when he had no powers except those of his loose tongue. Instead he went into retirement and talked about moving to Arizona and ending his days with a country law practice and a small ranch.

IN his failure to trade on hopes as well as on fears lay his weakness as a demagogue. But the fatal weakness enables us to take the measure of his remarkable gifts. For it must be remembered that he was by no means the first American who had tried to build a large reputation on anti-Communism. The Russian Revolution was in its infancy when politicians in this and other countries began to see the possibilities in Red-hunting. Hamilton Fish, a former Congressman from New York, had a go at it in the early twenties. The House Committee on

Un-American Activities had its greatest days under the leadership of Martin Dies in the late thirties and early forties. McCarthy never had the field himself. Yet he played it as no one ever did. With his one-stringed bow he became a national and an international figure. He gave his name to an "ism" which even today is often solemnly discussed and analyzed as Marxism-Leninism or Maoism.

Over the years, many students of McCarthy and McCarthyism have taken the view that in and of himself the man was a phenomenon of no particular significance, that he was an inevitable product of the times, that he merely played a role that someone or other was bound to play in those years when the cold war was at its iciest on the European front and a shooting war was in progress on the Asian front. In a famous television review of McCarthy's career, the late Edward R. Murrow said: "Cassius was right: 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves.'"

Beyond any doubt he was a product of the times. What man is not? But I persist in the belief that he helped to make the times what they were, that without his singular presence they would have been different. He was an innovator. Perhaps his largest contribution to demagoguery was what I, writing about him in *The New Yorker* not long after his Wheeling speech, called the technique of the Multiple Untruth. Hitler had instructed the world in the uses of the Big Lie. The Big Lie can be put across in a closed society, but in an open society, with a free press and legislative investigations of the kind that not even McCarthy could completely compromise or corrupt, it is difficult to sustain. McCarthy discovered the value of numbers. Had he said in Wheeling or at any point during his career that there was one Communist or two or even five or six, in this or that agency, his bluff could quite easily have been called. But he used large figures and kept changing them. After his Wheeling

speech, of which no transcript was ever found, there was some dispute over the number of Communists he had said were on his "list"—it turned out not to be a list but a copy of an old letter from a former Secretary of State to a Congressman—but the highest figure he used was 205, the lowest 57. These were numbers with built-in safety. Showing him to be wrong about three or four of them proved little—what of the other 200 or so, what of the remaining 50-odd?

No one could ever say that he was altogether wrong, or even mostly wrong. Within what appeared to be the Multiple Untruth there might have been—there probably were—some bits and pieces of truth. The Multiple Untruth places an unbearable burden of disproof on the challenger. The work of refutation is always inconclusive, confusing, and—most important of all perhaps—boring to the public. A profusion of names and accusations is exciting. It can be grasped in a single news-

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If McCarthy had organized a real movement, he could have survived Senate censure

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paper story. But a hundred newspaper stories, a hundred counteraccusations are simply tiresome, soporific and unconvincing.

IN his promulgation of the Multiple Untruth, McCarthy used, to great and at times quite amusing effect, many of the trappings of scholarship, of research. The bulging briefcase was his symbol. He was rarely seen without one. Inside were photostats, transcripts, clippings, copies of other people's correspondence, and assorted "documents." I met him for the first time a year or so before his rise to fame, and he was trying to persuade me of the soundness of the stand he was taking on a matter that had nothing to do with Communism. In his office, he produced for my enlightenment great stacks of papers. No enlightenment ever came. As I examined the papers he handed me, I grew more and more confused. I could not see their relevance; as he talked, I began to lose the thread of his argument. There was, of course, no thread to find, but it took me hours to discover this. I thought at first that I must be at fault and missing his points. It did not occur to me that a man would surround himself with so much paper, with so many photostats, with trays of index cards unless it all meant something. It took me hours to learn that I had been had—that he was passing off as "research" a mere mess of paper that he or someone else had stacked up so that its sheer existence, its bulk, looked impressive. In time, he was to con half the country as, for a time that day, he had conned me.

There was, to my mind, a kind of genius in this. He saw in total irresponsibility and the hocus-pocus of "documentation" possibilities that no one before him had seen, or at any rate put to such effective use. In the long run, the technique may turn out to be his most enduring and his most lamentable contribution to American life. He developed a style of discourse, or pseudo discourse, that others are using today and with a degree of success approaching his. The American public has in recent years been offered as serious political commentary several books—on Presi-

dent Kennedy for example and on President Johnson, and most notably, on the Warren Commission and Kennedy's assassination—that exemplify as well as any McCarthy speech the uses of the Multiple Untruth and spurious research tricked up to look like the real thing. It may be argued that this is simply yellow journalism between covers and carrying the endorsement of respected publishers. But the old yellow journalism never used footnotes or bibliographies or any other parts of the apparatus of scholarship. The first book of this sort that I know of is "McCarthyism: The Fight for America," by Senator

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Joe McCarthy, a preposterous apologia with more than three footnotes per page citing sources which are mostly nonsources.

THERE was more to his individual style than his technique for misleading by means of the Multiple Untruth. He deliberately created about his own person an atmosphere of violence, of ugliness, of threat. He shrewdly saw that while Americans like to think of themselves as being imbued with a sense of fair play, there exists among us also a sneaking admiration for the "dirty player," the athlete who gets rough in the clinches and scrimmage, who will put the knee to the groin if that is what it takes to win the fight or the game. He never bothered to deny that he had let Robert T. Stevens, Eisenhower's Secretary of the Army, know that he would "kick his brains out" if Stevens failed to get in line. He once said to a crowd in Wisconsin, "If you will get me a slippery-elm club and put me aboard Adlai Stevenson's campaign train, I will use it on some of his advisers and perhaps make a good American of him."

"Nice guys finish last," Leo Durocher had said. Many politicians acted on this doctrine long before Durocher's terse formulation of it. But

no one ever went so far as McCarthy in letting the public know that he did not consider himself a nice guy, in cultivating the image of himself as the dirty player. Many people are persuaded that this was what finally led to his downfall. For 35 days, or a total of 187 hours, in the late spring of 1954, he played the heavy on network television in what came to be known as the "Army-McCarthy hearings"—a marathon of accusation and counteraccusation on the question, which was more often than not lost sight of, of whether McCarthy and one of his aides, Roy Cohn, had been blackmailing the Army in order to force favors for Pvt. David Schine, a former aide and a friend of Cohn's who, despite all kinds of flouting by members of McCarthy's staff, had been caught up in the draft. He glowered through all his hours on camera. He was abusive, threatening, defiant, disorderly. He denounced the President, the Army, the State Department, and at one

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time or another every one of the Senators who were sitting in judgment upon him.

The generally accepted view ever since has been that this astonishing performance was his undoing. It was estimated the audience before which he played was seldom smaller than 20 million and that just about every American, except for a few hermits and expatriates, caught the act at one time or another. The great majority were repelled by it. But before it can be said that this was what finished him it must be acknowledged that McCarthy wasn't running for office and that few demagogues ever worry much about being liked. Fear can serve them as well as favor. There has never been any evidence to suggest that his behavior at the Army-McCarthy hearings lost him any of his real followers. Most of them sat before their television sets and were thrilled as he shouted and screamed and denounced constituted authority. Had he had any real desire to rally them after his 1954 defeats, had he had any organization or any plan for an organization, he could have continued as a power in American politics. He might have lost his Senate seat in 1958. But that was four years off and, besides, what demagogue needs a Senate seat? Thrown out of Argentina and subsequently a refugee from his place of refuge, Juan Perón has continued, from abroad, to inflame followers in his own and half a dozen other countries.

McCarthy took it lying down. He felt he had lost out in the Army-McCarthy hearings. He tried to fight off censure instead of welcoming it and fighting back. Why? It was partly, as I have said, because he had never organized his followers and had

never given them anything which might have led them to organize themselves. But this in itself demands explanation. Why had he failed to offer more? The answer, in my opinion, is that he himself never believed in anything. He was the purest of cynics, and pure cynics are a very rare breed. McCarthy never seemed to believe in himself or in anything he had said. He knew that Communists were not in charge of American foreign policy. He knew that they weren't running the United States Army. He knew that he had spent five years looking for Communists in the Government and that—although some must certainly have been there, since Communists had turned up in practically every other major Government in the world—he hadn't come up with even one.

His basic weakness, and it is one for which the Republic may be properly grateful, was a lack of seriousness. His only discernible end was mischief. When he had exhausted the possibilities for mischief in any given investigation, he lost interest. He announced that there were Communists "with a razor poised over the jugular vein" in radar laboratories and defense plants. This got big headlines for a while, but when the type grew smaller he moved on to

something else, with the razor still poised, the vein still vulnerable. He said that the "worst situation" of all existed in the Central Intelligence Agency, where by his count there were more than "100 Communists." The Eisenhower Administration was at that time giving him a free hand almost everywhere. But as he advanced upon the C.I.A., the Administration grew nervous. To head McCarthy off, the President appoint-

ed a commission under General Mark Clark to look into the C.I.A. The Clark investigation turned up nothing. McCarthy, seeing that the situation might get a bit sticky if he pushed for his own investigation, did nothing. "I guess I'll skip it," he said, letting the "worst situation" prevail and the 100 Communists remain. Knowing what we now know, it is easy to see why the Administration was so eager to keep him out of the C.I.A. Ironically, he might have saved a lot of people a lot of embarrassment if he had bulled his way in and

found out what kind of deals the C.I.A. was making with non-Governmental organizations. It was just about then, in 1953, that the first of those arrangements were being made.

HOW much further could he have gone if he had been really serious about it? We Americans have very little experience on which to base any judgment. There were demagogues before McCarthy but they

were regional figures for the most part or religious sectarians. In a brilliant essay on demagogy in "The American Democrat," James Fenimore Cooper spoke of the demagogue as if he were by definition a spokesman for some regional interest against the common good—as for example, "the town demagogue" and "the county demagogue." McCarthy was our first national demagogue. He was the first, and thus far the only one, to find a national audience and to seize upon a truly national issue, foreign policy. He surfaced in

a period when national and international issues were becoming the dominant ones in American politics and when advances in communications were making it possible for a man to reach a national audience in a relatively short period of time.

He could certainly, I think, have stayed around longer and made more trouble than he did. Five years is a very short time in which to see the beginning and the ending of a gifted politician's career. My general feeling has always been that while he could have stayed on and kept on stirring up confusion, he had already done about all the damage he could do to the system itself. For the system at last turned against him, as it simply had to. Eisenhower had very much wanted to avoid a showdown, but after only a year this proved impossible. McCarthy, a chronic oppositionist, had to turn against his own party and his own Administration, and once he did the Administration had to fight back. It did not cover itself with glory in its resistance, but it did resist. The Senate, too, feared a confrontation, but the day came when he gave it no choice. Some historians say that American institutions showed up rather badly in meeting the challenge he offered. Some assuredly did. The mass media often trucked to him. The big wheels in Hollywood and on Madison Avenue were scared stiff of him. Manufacturers fearing boycotts from his supporters were careful to give no cause for offense.

For the most part, though, the institutions that allowed themselves to be bullied by him had never been noted for stiffness of spine. Many of them were in the pandering business and survived by seeking to satisfy every taste and give no customer cause for resentment. But other institutions came off quite well. Even while he stormed on Capitol Hill and trampled on the rights of witnesses, the Supreme Court was strengthening individual rights and arming his victims for their own resistance. Most of those newspapers and magazines that were anything more than extensions of the mass entertainment industry exposed and opposed him at every turn. In the academic and intellectual communities, it would have taken more courage to defend him than to attack him. The churches in the main threw their weight against him, and so, with certain exceptions, did the trade unions. None of this, of course, was much consolation to those in the Government whose careers he had ruined or those outside the Government whose reputations

he had sought to blacken. But the best of American institutions held firm, and the threat was at last turned back.

It would be harder to turn back an equally gifted and more determined man in a more desperate time. Since his day no one of comparable talents has appeared. But a more desperate time may one day be upon us and offer similar opportunities for demagoguery, and there will be demagogues, perhaps even more gifted, who will try to seize them. ■