

**THE NIGHTMARE DECADE:
The Life and Times of
Senator Joe McCarthy**

by Fred J. Cook

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Reviewed by Fred Darwin

■ People tend to assign themselves to one generation or another on the basis of which war they remember personally. And in recent years a further distinction has been added: which McCarthy they recall—Joe or Gene.

Roughly half the people alive today were born after World War II. The twenty-five million newly eligible voters in next year's Presidential race will be too young to remember anything of the Korean conflict. To them "The War" is Vietnam; and Gene is their McCarthy. They seem only vaguely aware of the existence of Joe and the decade of the Fifties which he almost single-handedly turned into a nightmare that still haunts this nation and affects its policies.

The danger of "this particular generation gap" lies in Santayana's choice of either remembering the past or being condemned to repeat it. Fred J. Cook, who preceded the current spate of rev-

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elations of the military-industrial complex by many years with his book *The Warfare State*, undertakes in *The Nightmare Decade* to provide for the new generation of young Americans the means of taking Santayana's less painful alternative, and to "put in perspective McCarthyism and the decade of the 1950s that it so greatly influenced."

The task, he says, acquired "a new and ominous relevance" on the night of November 13, 1969, when Vice President Agnew delivered the first of his attacks on the communications media for daring to criticize an address by the President. Subsequent reaction convinced the author that "Vice President Agnew, intentionally or not, had the old McCarthy legions baying. They had never gone away. They had subsided for a time because they had lost their leader, but now they were rallying to a new voice."

A major difference between McCarthy and Agnew so far is that the Vice President has aimed most of his fire at the press while McCarthy used the press to bulldoze practically everyone else. The underlying theme of Agnew's tirades is of course frighteningly reminiscent of McCarthy: the equating of dissent with disloyalty and liberalism with communism. But the Vice President's victims have been largely generic: "Radic-libs," the Eastern establishment press, students, intellectuals, black leaders, antiwar demonstrators. Prosecution of individuals has been left

to the Justice Department. McCarthy's inquisition was a one-man show. He was a thorough Torquemada, operating his own rack—breaking individual heretics on it completely before banishing them to limbo.

In his choice of victims lay one of the many paradoxes of McCarthy's reign of terror. There were communists around in positions of some influence, particularly among the labor leaders of his home state in the early days before they were ejected in rank-and-file revolts. Indeed, it was these same communists who provided the margin of victory for McCarthy's senatorial nomination. His only comment then was: "Communists have the same right to vote as anyone else, don't they?"

But when the Wisconsin whirlwind undertook to purge the Reds from high places in Washington, and particularly from the State Department—as Cook recounts in case after case—he invariably selected people with the most impeccable anticommunist credentials. Each failure to prove communism led to wilder, more sensational accusations aimed at higher levels.

The wonder of the story is not that such a man could exist. Con men, demagogues, and crackpots have thrived on the American scene before and since, both in and out of politics. What made McCarthy unique was the almost total lack of challenge from those who should—and, as in the case of Hitler, could—have stopped him early in the game. With few exceptions, "respectable" Republicans abandoned their responsibilities, leaving the stage to the ultra-Right. And, says Mr. Cook, "The Democratic-liberal establishment, which should have provided a rallying point, virtually disintegrated before the first onslaught and sought to camouflage itself by riding to hounds with the foe."

The few who dared oppose him were marked for revenge. "Time and again, Senators who had the fortitude to stand up to McCarthy went down to defeat . . . it seems to many that to oppose McCarthy was to court political annihilation."

His legacy remains with us. Before the mass lunacy of the Nightmare Decade, says the author, the State Department "possessed a Far Eastern elite corps that was the envy of many foreign chancelleries. It was composed of career men who knew Asia probably better than any other single group in the West. . . ."

The knowledge of men like [Owen] Lattimore should have been considered invaluable. It was all to become suspect; it was all to be sacrificed. The men who possessed it were to be exiled to private life, and in the vacuum of knowledge so created, America was to fumble like a blindfolded giant, applying the rigid policies of a militaristic anticommunism to alien cultures where the problems were political, economic and nationalistic in nature; we were to act from ignorance, self-delusion, and fanaticism; and in this repression of reality we were to progress inevitably into the costly folly of Vietnam.

Mr. Cook combines abundant detail—thoroughly documented—with an engrossing narrative. *Nightmare Decade* reads like an adventure tale, though it is an all too accurate account of a nation's misadventure. And of a time when tyranny raged and heroes were scarce.

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