

The big noise of the Silent Fifties

Book notes 4/27/77

THE NIGHTMARE DECADE: The Life and Times of Senator Joe McCarthy. By Fred J. Cook. Illustrated. Random House. 626 pp. \$10

By Jon R. Waltz

The other day a student, disturbed by published reports that I had been "monitored" by the Army's 113th Military Intelligence Unit because I freely admit to knowing and associating (separately) with the likes of William Kunstler, Julius J. Hoffman, Otto Kerner, and the Reverend Jesse Jackson, asked me whether things were as bad when I was his age. I had been in college and law school during the peak years of the dismal era that we now call the period of McCarthyism, after the dark monster that roamed through it unchecked.

I told my student, who is watching a new interlude of anti-intellectualism, that things were worse in my day because then, for some reason, people young and old were not so brave or so tough as they are now. For a long time they failed to stand up to the late Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, Republican of Wisconsin.

I am not just talking about President Dwight D. Eisenhower. He could have crushed McCarthy like a bug, but had already elevated inactivity to a principle of government. I have no standing to criticize others for letting McCarthy go snuffing and grunting about the hand in search of "pinkos" and "card-carrying Communies." When the Silent Fifties are derided I cringe, remembering that the most daring thing I did was to cut classes at Yale to watch the Army-McCarthy hearings on a rented television set.

Now Fred Cook has forced me to relive the nightmare decade of McCarthyism. Some of us, now in our forties, may be inclined to say that Cook is telling us too much about a time that we recall too well, but Cook did not write his book for us. He wrote it for a new generation of Americans, who are concerned about recurring reliance on the criminal conspiracy concept as a prop for administration policies, about our wiretapping, press-releasing FBI with its ancient, erratic director,

Jon R. Waltz is a professor of law at Northwestern University School of Law.

about an Army that spies on its own people, and about computerized citizen data storage, but who cannot recall the harm done this nation and its spirit by one reckless politician from a state that before him had produced two La Follettes.

Fred Cook is an old-line liberal; he has been around long enough to have earned the right to dedicate his current book—he has written more than twenty, including two especially prophetic ones: *The Warfare State* and *The FBI Nobody Knows*—to one of liberalism's deans, Carey McWilliams, editor of *The Nation*. It is not surprising, therefore, that Cook's righteous hatred of Joseph McCarthy burns and glitters on every page of *The Nightmare Decade*. And yet Cook, being a good journalist, tells the truth about his subject.

Joe McCarthy was a not improbable politician; he was, in a way, destined for politics, since he was a failure at everything else. Cook carefully catalogs McCarthy's pre-Senate history, savoring its sequential



McCarthy with his counsel, Roy Cohn, during the Army-McCarthy hearings

disasters: chicken farmer (McCarthy's flock expired on him), grocery manager (the store did not prosper), engineering student (he dropped out), boxer (dirty), lawyer (unsuccessful), judge (corrupt), and World War II hero (a lie).

Having switched from an overcrowded Democratic Party (McCarthy had been president of Wisconsin's Young Democrats), Republican McCarthy flooded his state with publicity about "Tail Gunner Joe" (he had been a rear-echelon intelligence officer who, when told to fight or resign, resigned) and his war wounds (he fell off a ladder during an Equator-crossing celebration). Embracing anyone who would support him—"Communists have the same right to vote as anyone," said the future Communist-fighter—McCarthy won election to the U.S. Senate. There he found his issue. Just as Law-and-Order and Anti-Youth were to serve some politicians in the Seventies, the Communist Menace served McCarthy in the Fifties. The rest is history, which Cook recounts in devastating detail. It is high drama, for McCarthy was that relatively rare phenomenon, the completely amoral man. No act of cruelty was too profitless to consume his energies (he ruined the life of an actress who specialized in making baby noises on radio; she had given some money to a "Commie front"); no falsehood was too transparent.

Finally McCarthy, unrelentingly arrogant despite the collapse of one set of charges after another, was confronted with the inevitable showdown. The Army-McCarthy hearing, which provided McCarthyism's final chapter and this book's, was a supreme morality play in which virtue, represented by Joseph N. Welch, an Establishment lawyer from Boston, triumphed—softly, gently, totally. There was nothing left for Joe McCarthy to do but drink himself to death.

Fred Cook thinks that we are entering another period of McCarthyism. "The portents are ominous," he says as he compares old Joe's "pinko" with Spiro T. Agnew's "Radio-Lib." But Cook is too pessimistic. We may hope that the nightmare decade, a period of collective cowardice, ushered enough of us into a more courageous epoch. And, thanks to Fred Cook's book, Americans who did not witness the McCarthy days will now know that, at the last, good won out over evil.