

The Myth of McCarthyism

by Thomas Reeves

In 1995, the federal government revealed the existence of the Venona Project, a top secret operation from the 1940s devoted to the interception and decoding of Soviet spy messages. Four years later, a magnificent piece of scholarship appeared on the topic, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*, by historians John Haynes and Harvey Klehr. This study analyzed some 3,000 decoded telegrams between Soviet spies in the United States along with materials from newly opened American and Russian archives. The book's conclusion was a bombshell that roused intense debate on both the Right and Left, for the new evidence pointed to the existence of Communist spies throughout the Roosevelt and Truman Administrations.

Among those listed by Haynes and Klehr as having covert relationships with Soviet intelligence agencies were: Lauchlin B. Currie, senior administrative assistant to President Roosevelt; Harold Glasser, a Treasury Department economist; David and Ruth Greenglass, who were related to the Rosenbergs; Theodore Alvin Hall, a physicist working on the Manhattan Project; Maurice Halperin, a State Department expert on Latin America; Alger Hiss, the famed American diplomat whose case polarized a generation of political observers; Julius and Joseph Bella, who worked for the Office of Strategic Services; Philip Keeney, another employee of the Office of Strategic Services; Duncan Chapin Lee, highly placed officer in the Office of Strategic Services; William Perl, a top aeronautical scientist and member of the Rosenberg network; Victor Perlo, Treasury Department economist; Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed in 1953 for being Soviet spies; Nathan Gregory Silvermaster, an economist who held several government posts; Morton Sobell, an engineer and member of the Rosenberg ring; and Harry Dexter White, assistant secretary of the Treasury and later director of the International Monetary Fund.

The Far Left reacted by claiming that the documents were trumped up, and merely based on FBI assumptions and manipulations. The Far Right claimed vindication for Joe McCarthy, asserting that the "Myth of McCarthyism" was invented by the Left to shield Soviet designs in the Cold War. Both extremes are wrong. I would expect some leftists to turn up with a conspiracy theory of some sort; it reflects their general detachment from reality. But all conservatives should know better than to be defending the ugliest episode in GOP history.

To begin with, Senator Joe McCarthy was not an effective anti-Communist. In fact, one could argue, as Cold War liberals once did, that he set back the cause of authentic anti-Communism for a generation due to his wild and bizarre behavior and his reckless use of evidence. I would invite readers to read his history carefully, noting especially the timing of his charges and the evidence on which

they were based. Start with the allegations against Dean Acheson and George Marshall.

With all obligatory humility, I would recommend my book *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy, a Biography*, published in 1982 with a revised edition appearing in 1997. There you will learn that McCarthy was not a serious student of anything, lacked any intellectual or moral sophistication, and was an alcoholic by the time he reached his maximum fame. True, some of his charges, while not original, were on target. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, Richard Nixon, and an assortment of right-wing journalists slipped him information from time to time, and thus it was natural that the Senator would come up with some correct information. But most of McCarthy's activities had very little to do with actual Reds in high places and much to do with the politics of the period and Joe's own peculiar personality.

McCarthyism, of course, was far more than McCarthy. The Second Red Scare, which had roots going all the way back to the 1930s, broke out in earnest after the stunning upset victory of Harry S. Truman in 1948. Out of power since Hoover and in a rage over the incumbent's narrow win, Republicans vowed to bring down Democrats at all cost. This angry mood resulted in a reckless strategy to link all Democrats with Communists and pro-Communists. The tactic seemed to work, and Joe McCarthy caught on in early 1950, soon attracting much of the attention with bizarre claims that few politicians dared to match. But McCarthyism was a movement of much of the Right in this country - in the media, in churches, in the entertainment industry, in academia, in veterans organizations, and above all in the political arena.

Reexamine the campaigns, local and national, between 1948 and 1956 and see the demagoguery at work all across the country. Investigate the nasty blacklisting racket that existed in Hollywood. Read a Hearst newspaper or the *Chicago Tribune* for a year two in the early 1950s to get a taste of the hysteria cynical newspaper moguls tried to whip up to increase sales and help Republicans win political office. See how Adlai Stevenson was treated in his bids for the presidency.

The panic began to subside after Republican Dwight Eisenhower won the presidential race of 1952. But Joe McCarthy, who helped many Republicans win office in 1950 and 1952 - including Eisenhower - didn't know how to stop the smears and disappear from the headlines. He continued his imaginary war against his own party, going as far to attack the Army and the CIA. This led to the televised Army-McCarthy hearings that brought him down. No one was afraid of McCarthy any more, and much of the strength of the Red Scare began to evaporate. Eisenhower's reelection sealed its fate, and McCarthy's suicide by drink was its gravestone.

McCarthyism, in short, was an immoral, irresponsible, and often cynical tactic to link Democrats with Joe Stalin. It was designed to win votes. And it was successful. For awhile. So let us not pretend that Joe McCarthy was a hero, that the Second Red Scare didn't happen, and that efforts to seek out Reds in high places was wrong only because it underestimated the reality of their actual presence.

Oh yes, what was the exact impact of the newly documented Reds on policy in Washington? It is exceedingly difficult to link the Venona evidence with any policy decisions made by top level officials during the 1930s and 1940s. Yes, there was espionage, but were Reds in high places, as was claimed, setting U.S. policy to bring down the free world? Were Democrats throughout the nation consciously doing the work of the Communists? In fact, the Truman Administration prosecuted Alger Hiss and largely eliminated any other loyalty-security risks in the federal government. Indeed, the Left has long been critical of Truman for engaging in what it calls a witch hunt. The Administration's successful efforts to stop the spread of Communism in the West should be well known to all.

Let us read serious and objective scholarship about Communism and America, if only to marvel at the total intellectual subservience of some on the Left to Soviet authority and wonder at their hatred of the United States. Be sure not to miss *The Soviet World of American Communism* (Yale, 1998), by Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson. On the response of the Right to the Venona revelations, see www.rinfret.com/venona.html and Ann Coulter's book, *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* (Crown Forum, 2003). To Coulter, Presidents Truman, Kennedy, and Johnson were all soft on Communism. On the response of the Left, see Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, "Professors of Denial: Ignoring the truth about American Communists," in the March 21, 2005 issue of *The Weekly Standard*.