

McCarthy: Not the Moral Leper We Thought?

Last week our guest on a Roku TV interview show that I co-manage was Diana West, a longtime *Washington Times* editor and the author of a provocative book "[The Death of the Grownup](#)." Our interview turned quickly in what, for my cohost, was an unexpected direction with Diana's bold defense of "[Blacklisted by History](#)," M. Stanton Evans' exoneration of Joseph McCarthy.

Evans' work, first published in 2007, sent a shock wave through the conservative movement, which since the 1980s treated McCarthy as a moral leper who defamed innocent victims. Evans' book was so contrary to popular opinion that *National Review* commissioned historian Ron Radosh to write what the editors knew would be a negative review of a longtime, esteemed contributor, Stan Evans. When Diana West came to [Evans' defense](#), as someone who thought he had written [a convincing work](#), [David Horowitz](#) and other pillars of the present conservative movement went after her as well. (For the sake of balance, I am referencing [Radosh's rebuttal](#) of West's statements on *Frontpage*.)

During this dispute I applauded Evans' arguments that most of McCarthy's targets were indeed fair game. There had been Communist subversion of the American government during and after World War II, and the Truman administration could have acknowledged the true extent of this threat more openly. Irving Kristol, who was hardly on the right at the time, [correctly observed](#) that while we knew what McCarthy's defenders thought about Communism, we didn't know the same about his liberal critics.

One might justifiably object to McCarthy's free-swinging style, alcoholic excesses, and to the fact that he sometimes went after people only marginally involved in aiding the

Communist enemy. But as Evans demonstrates, most of his accusations were hardly pulled out of thin air; and this included McCarthy's claims about Communists working in security positions in the military.

Equally noteworthy, the post-War conservative movement built around William F. Buckley and *National Review* in the 1950s, featured fervent McCarthyites. These included former Communists who later turned toward the anti-Communist right, such as Frank Meyer, James Burnham, and Willi Schlamm.

For most of these erstwhile Communists Buckley's crusade against godless, subversive Communism was a holy struggle. When in 1952 Buckley, together with his brother-in-law, L. Brent Bozell, brought out their vindication of their favorite anti-Communist senator, "[McCarthy and His Enemies](#)," their book reception attracted libertarians Frank Chodorov and Max Eastman, as well as more traditionalist conservatives and anti-Communist Catholic Democrats. Diana West and her now deceased friend, M. Stanton Evans, were affirming a founding position of the post-War conservative movement when they defended McCarthy. Like most of what that movement had once believed, the conservative establishment has emphatically repudiated the McCarthyite sentiments of its founders.

My own experience of this phenomenon as a young child did not involve having a far leftist uncle. I had none, and my mother's brother assured me in 1952 that McCarthy was defending "Americans, whether they were Episcopalians or Jews." At that time I knew about Jews and Catholics but had no idea what an "Episcopalian" was. No matter! The senator from Wisconsin was for all good Americans, and later there was a picture of him in *Life* magazine kneeling in a church during his wedding ceremony. He was obviously for marriage, nor did he mind palling around with Episcopalians and his Jewish lawyer Roy Cohn.

Much later I became a *National Review* subscriber, before that

magazine underwent noticeable ideological change. The editors then still seemed to think that those who were really on the right had a place in their hearts for the swashbuckling, anti-Communist from Wisconsin. Little did I know, until I read George H. Nash's "[The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945](#)," that prominent conservative men of letters, including T.S. Eliot and Allen Tate, had attacked McCarthy and McCarthyism. Although these figures could not be reasonably accused of pro-Communist sympathies, they were annoyed by the anti-Communist hysteria that they associated with the Buckleyites.

Whatever McCarthy's flaws – [and he certainly had them](#) – one of the features of his era was the appearance on the left of an infuriating double standard. This is still on display.

The House Un-American Activity Committee had [been around since 1938](#), but very few "liberals" protested when it targeted those who were charged with "fascist sympathies." This exemplified the selective outrage that could be seen when those intellectuals and artists, who happily fanned hatred of internal enemies before and during America's involvement in World War II, suddenly changed their tune when the foe became Communist totalitarians. The Communist Party USA went from defending the incarceration of Japanese Americans in detention camps [during the "antifascist" struggle](#) to caterwauling about the suspension of civil liberties when they came under investigation. (To its credit the ACLU did protest this outrageous treatment of American citizens.)

I still carry around unpleasant memories of academic colleagues who went around frenetically apologizing for murderous Communist regimes, while protesting their commitment to "civil liberties." McCarthy may have been a defective instrument for bringing this about, but his defenders (although they were not the only ones) did expose the left's staggering moral hypocrisy. For this we owe them a debt of gratitude.

NOTE TO READERS: The summary of this article incorrectly stated that Joseph McCarthy was head of the House Un-American Activities Committee. He was a member of the Senate.

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