

## McCarthy Was Wrong

Senator Joseph McCarthy has long been an embarrassment to the far right specifically and GOP generally. Because he serves as proof of the far right's very weak commitment to democratic principles (as they were perfectly willing to abandon them completely in order to garner power) and of a failure of courage on the part of the GOP (which was willing to turn a blind eye to his obvious corruptions as long as he was winning votes), he has long served as something they would just as soon didn't exist. More recently, he has come to be even more of a problem, as he demonstrates what happens when you engage in the legal, political, and rhetorical maneuvers to which GOP political figures (especially Ashcroft), right-wing movements (like the ironically named Accuracy in Academia), and hate-mongering pundits (like Limbaugh, Coulter, and Horowitz) are committed. They are witch hunts, and they depend upon demagoguery and hate-mongering, and that is what McCarthy did, and it was a disaster.

There are several ways that one can treat a figure like McCarthy--one might, for instance, learn from him that it is a logical contradiction with horrific consequences to think that one can protect democracy by subverting democratic principles like due process and free speech. If, however, like Ashcroft, Bush, Coulter, et al, one is engaged in exactly that practice, then one is determined not to learn that lesson. The answer is to re-write history, and that is what the right is currently trying to do by claiming that McCarthy has been proven right.

This argument depends upon characterizing McCarthy's rhetoric and his critics' in two very specific ways. First, one has to transmogrify McCarthy's assertions and policies into something strikingly different from what they were. Second, one has to reduce all criticism of McCarthy to an assertion made by a fringe part of a fringe part of what is mis-named "the left." That is, this argument runs, McCarthy was right because there really were communists. What this ignores is that McCarthy asserted much, much more than just that there were communists, that he was wrong in how he identified communists, what he thought should be done about them, and his basic strategies for dealing with Soviet spies. It also ignores that, except for Stalinist stooges, his critics granted that there were communists. What they did not grant was that he was correctly identifying them, that his methods for fighting communism were helpful, nor that the situation merited abrogating basic constitutional principles.

And **that** is the point that defenders of McCarthy are trying to slide over. It is not simply that McCarthy said there were communist spies--which there were, but whom he did not name--but that he wanted to conflate two completely different categories of people: people who were engaged in something illegal (treason) and people who were engaged in something constitutionally protected (dissent).

For McCarthy (and Ashcroft, which is why the far right is trying to whitewash McCarthy) dissent was treason. And McCarthy wanted dissent to be punished by having people thrown in jail, denied an opportunity to have a livelihood, and generally silenced.

And the consequence was what is technically known as a "witch hunt." It is illegal, unconstitutional, and as damaging to democracy as anything the Soviet Union was trying to do.

There are several points in this that keep getting lost--there were spies, and McCarthy didn't identify them. Instead, he harassed and punished people who were engaged in legal and constitutional and often very patriotic activities. Dissent is not treason.

Various members of the wacko right are managing to get a ridiculous amount of play on this particular broken record because they have succeeded in getting the larger discourse to accept a false dilemma. Binary oppositions rarely accurately describe the world. They can *seem* to if one can manage to pull off a slight of hand in the definitions--if one can get one of the terms narrowly defined, and the other turned into the "everything else" category, then the binary opposition can *seem* accurate.

So, for instance, Stalinist rhetoric used to operate by narrowly limiting "politically correct" doctrine to what Stalin (or, later, Stalinists) had most recently announced was correct; everything else was fascist. Thus, Adlai Stevenson, Adolph Hitler, LBJ, the ACLU, and members of the John Birch Society were all labelled fascist. (And I can say from experience that it was impossible to get Stalinist stooges to acknowledge that there was any difference--they would say that it all amounted to the same thing anyway.) This meant that Stalinists could tar LBJ with the Hitler brush, or discredit liberals by what genuine fascists had said.

The right has managed to do this more recently with the liberal/conservative binary opposition. "Conservative" is narrowly defined as supporting the GOP platform; everything else is "liberal." Thus, Adlai Stevenson, LBJ, Clinton, the ACLU, and Stalinist stooges are suddenly all in the same category--liberal. So, just like the Stalinist stooges (or, in regard to some, just as they did when they were Stalinist stooges) they can tar the ACLU with the Stalinist brush.

And that is exactly what is being done in regard to McCarthy. There have been people who have claimed that there were no communist spies operating in the United States in McCarthy's era--particularly people writing in the Soviet-funded organ of the Communist Party USA, most recently called *The Daily Worker* (but which went through several names in the fifties). Although well-funded, they were a fringe movement among American socialists, which was itself a fringe movement of the left. To characterize liberals, let alone the left (a distinction to be clarified below), by Stalinists is the equivalent of characterizing today's right by white supremacist or posse comitatus groups. They do exist, and they are on the right, and they have probably about the same number of members as Stalinist groups ever had.

Just to emphasize: if it is accurate to tar "liberals" with the Stalinist brush, then "conservatives" can be tarred with the posse comitatus brush.

Public discourse would be better were pundits to do neither, and instead to try to be even moderately accurate. And an accurate taxonomy of political views in the US would not be a binary opposition, but something more like the following:

**democratic socialists** These are people who believe in governmental control of the economic system through democratic processes. In other words, democracy is more important than business. Like liberals, they support a government provided safety net (of quality education, health care) and equal protection before the law (in other words, they believe that the law should be the same for the rich and poor), but they are generally critical of "liberals" for being too deferential to business, and too afraid of conflict. They usually reject the term "liberal" and call themselves "leftist."

**Marxist/Leninists** Like democratic socialists, they believe in political control of the economic system; unlike democratic socialists, they do not believe that it has to be democratic. Basically, they believe in following the political system set out in *The Communist Manifesto*. Although generally lumped in with Stalinists, many were extremely critical of the Soviet Union (sometimes because they were "Maoists"--people who supported Chinese, rather than Soviet, communism--and sometimes because they were opposed to both Soviet and Chinese communism).

**new deal liberals** These people tend to be supportive of a modified welfare state and equality before the law (so are, in that sense, "liberal") and of an interventionist foreign policy (so are, in that sense, "conservative"). This is the one group of people likely to self-identify as "liberal."

**Stalinists** One hardly ever finds this kind of person anymore, but they used to be more common. They were supportive of the Soviet Union, sometimes to degrees that struck me as amazing. Because the main point of their philosophy was support of the Soviet Union, their political philosophy and agenda could undergo major revisions (most famously in regard to Nazism, but also in regard to China, biology, environmentalism, and all sorts of other things).

**economic conservatives/social liberals** These are people who want low taxes, minimal governmental control of business (and hence are often identified as "conservative") but are also opposed to governmental interference with individual rights (and hence are often labelled "liberal"). They generally support a more isolationist rather than interventionist foreign policy.

**capitalist expansionists** These are people who believe the main function of government is to promote capitalism through policies that will facilitate short-term maximizing of profit. Putting business before democracy, they have little concern with issues of civil

rights (and that is what distinguishes them from economic conservatives/social liberals), and are in favor of an interventionist foreign policy insofar as it aids American businesses.

**plutocrats** These are people who believe that the rich are better than the rest of the people and should therefore have access to more power, and so forth. In other words, they reject two basic premises of democracy--the one person/one vote notion, and the idea of equality before the law. They believe that government policies should be oriented toward protecting the rich and promoting their interests.

**members of posse comitatus** I have to confess to a real inability to grasp the political philosophy behind this kind of person, insofar as it seems entirely negative. That is, these groups seem to be defined not in terms of what they believe, but in terms of what they oppose. It is obscure to me whether they hate government, or just government as it is constructed everywhere.

**theocrats** These people believe that government should be run by religious people on a religious basis--that is, that the government should force adherence to a certain religious code.

**single issue voters** This is a surprisingly large category of people, but made up of people who would gleefully kill each other if you guaranteed them no witnesses. They are people who are so passionate about a single issue that they vote purely on the basis of how candidates stand on that issue or how policies will affect that issue (e.g., abortion, gun control, environmental protection). Often, they do not vote at all unless that issue is somehow influenced by the vote.

**The "I Got Mine" Voter** This is another category of voter that is very hard to categorize. These are people who vote purely on the basis of how they perceive their short-term narrow self-interest. So, largely depending upon how the issue is presented to them, they can vote green one election and brown the next, libertarian on one candidate and theocratic on the next.

One could easily criticize these categories as inadequate, but that would just be supporting my main point that any binary opposition won't accurately capture them. (The binary oppositions always really amount to: mine versus all others.)

Of these, two groups self-identify as communist--the Stalinists and the Marxists. McCarthyism depended upon not only refusing to acknowledge the distinction between those two (despite the fact that the second category was not necessarily an ally of the Soviets), but collapsing all other criticisms of capitalism as it was practiced in the United States as communist. And, he assumed that open advocacy of communism amounted to treason.

This is logically flawed in so many ways that it is almost breathtakingly stupid. The people genuinely engaged in treason rarely openly advocated communism (to which one

can only say, no duh). And, as above, dissent is not treason.

McCarthy (and his current defenders) try to claim that dissent is treason if it advocates overthrowing democracy. That is, not just the people who were spying for the Soviet Union, but also the people who openly advocated (or insinuated) the end of democracy were engaged in treason. Because advocates of communism promoted a governmental system that denied due process and restricted freedom of speech, they were engaged in treason. But, McCarthy himself advocated the suspension of due process and restriction of free speech (as does Ashcroft). The major criticism of McCarthy, and the one that the far right wants you to forget, is that this was treason on McCarthy's part. You do not help democracy by ending it--whether you are a communist, or anti-communist, a terrorist, or the Attorney General.