

Ignominious Defeat: The Rise and Fall Surrounding the Army-McCarthy Hearings

By Jason Gottlieb

Columnist Hank Greenspun, less than six months prior to the legendary Army-McCarthy hearings, proposed, “The big question today is whether Senator [Joseph] McCarthy...should be entrusted with the...job of conducting investigations which may be the very basis of survival for our democratic institutions.”¹ Ironically, the answer to this question came from the most unlikely source: the Senator himself. His evasive and embarrassing actions prior to and throughout the aforementioned proceedings may have brought about an abrupt decline in immediate media attention to anti-Communist allegations, but they did little more to relieve the Cold War fear of the country’s populace. In fact, as Seymour Martin Lipset and Earl Raab point out, the subsequent retreat by McCarthy from national affairs (due in part to the consequent actions of his peers in the Senate) stripped Americans of the “banner around which...[they] could marshal...their generalized uneasiness”² . Although the McCarthy-Army hearings are indisputably significant in quieting the anti-Communist attacks by Senator Joseph McCarthy, the nationally televised spectacle more accurately represents the culmination of a growing frustration with the politician’s unfounded accusations and ceaseless bullying tactics.

The origins of McCarthyism – those who approved of the Senator’s persistent charges, that is – undoubtedly stem from the fears and anxieties of a postwar society in which the ideology of “Communist aggression”³ lingered, not just “McCarthy’s personal demagogic talents”⁴ . Support for anti-Communist finger pointing, describes Richard Rovere, was a “new organ generated by a free but troubled society to meet a new condition of existence.”⁵ Looking for a place to project their apprehension, some of the American public embraced anti-Communism and, more specifically, McCarthyism to reinforce their confidence in the men responsible for making the United States government function. William F. Buckley, Jr. and L. Brent Bozell explain that McCarthy “followed a pattern...He [went] after government officials.”⁶ Perhaps “uncovering” the Communists within our political system soothed the trepidations of American society by making it seem as though the enemies were painless to detect and simple to discharge. Whether McCarthy successfully showed that his target had Communist ties or not, Buckley and Bozell continue, he generally “[called] for an investigation of the [target’s]...Department.”⁷ A more thorough examination comforted Americans further by affirming that Senator McCarthy and his subcommittee would scrutinize every nuance of America’s intricate political network - even if it meant exposing lowly government employees, high powered officials and, eventually, the upholders of national stability: the armed forces.

While backing of McCarthy grew from fear, so did the Senator’s own involvement with anti-Communism. The difference, however, lies in the basis of this fear, some scholars assert. Although his supporters’ panic manifested in the discomfort of Cold War America,

McCarthy “could not take re-election for granted”, argues Richard Rovere – for, he was a member of “that do-nothing, good-for-nothing Eightieth Congress” that President Harry Truman had criticized so harshly on his path to the presidency [8](#); Senator McCarthy feared losing his job and, consequently, his hand in American politics. An article written by Greenspun and reprinted a mere twenty days prior to the Army-McCarthy hearings charged, “in [Senator McCarthy’s] campaign against Communism...he continually consorted with, and was elected...with the help of, the Communists whose cause he then espoused. The fact...is...he is motivated by opportunism.”[9](#) After adopting the platform of anti-Communism, McCarthy realized election victory and, for the moment, rescued his political career.

The fact that McCarthy continued his attacks after the election, though, raises questions about his solely political motive for launching an anti-Communist campaign and allowing it to escalate to an assault of the United States Army. A scribbled note, signed only “An American”, suggests that he had higher political aspirations in mind. “[McCarthy] is trying to reach our president’s job so he can boast of [having] been the...President of the United States,” the letter declares[10](#) . By tainting every facet of the government with Communist affiliation, McCarthy could prove himself the savior of democracy and worthy of a higher post. Other Americans attributed his persistence to a secret involvement in the Communist party. In a widely distributed pamphlet accusing McCarthy of just this, Cyrus Bass dubs the Senator “the apostle of Communism” and elaborates that he “spread confusion on the homefront” and created “panic in our diplomatic corps”. Continuing, Bass predicts, “When the American people learn the truth about Joe McCarthy...they will...demand his immediate impeachment and imprisonment.”[11](#)

Nevertheless, these allegations were often unsound and difficult to prove, much like McCarthy’s own accusations. Accordingly, McCarthy supporters were able to counter with claims equally discrediting (if not more so), such as “The schemes of the Communists...to destroy Senator McCarthy and stop his fight against Communism [have] descended to a new low.”[12](#) In another example, a warning directed at the Senator one month before the Army-McCarthy hearings were to commence exclaims, “I find it impossible to let myself stand by while you arrogantly and self-centeredly tear apart the principles of democracy...which America [have] treasured for so long.”[13](#) Unfortunately, this eloquent challenge to Senator McCarthy was lost in the rambling mess of a death threat in which it was contained.

In fact, inadequate opposition to McCarthy’s antics – from some of the most powerful people in the nation – is exactly what allowed them to carry on. Perfectly identifying the reluctance of citizens and politicians to openly oppose the anti-Communist proceedings in his Las Vegas Sun article, Greenspun puts into plain words, “Many...people whose lives are rooted in justice and equity hesitate to speak out against McCarthy for fear of being branded as Communists.”[14](#) Among these people are both presidents that endured the McCarthy era, Harry S. Truman and Dwight David Eisenhower. Truman, well before the McCarthy subcommittee started to investigate the Army in great depth, set the precedent for executive weakness against McCarthy’s governmental criticisms. Upon receipt of a telegram from McCarthy proclaiming, “The state department

harbors a nest of Communists...who are helping to shape our foreign policy,”¹⁵ Truman wrote an aggressive and pitiless response. “Your telegram is not only not true and an insolent approach...but it shows conclusively that you are not even fit to have a hand in the operation of the government of the United States,” he scolded.¹⁶ Truman never sent the memorandum. His successor, Dwight David Eisenhower, did little to improve the image of the presidency in standing up to McCarthy and the American public often criticized him, too, for taking a passive role in the hearings (much like Truman). Furthermore, “The fear of McCarthy [had] even shaken Eisenhower’s cabinet officers. The official policy [was] to not even resist his direct attacks,” Greenspun noted in yet another segment of his highly publicized “Where I Stand” series.¹⁷

McCarthy’s decision to investigate the Army of the United States was neither random nor surprising; as many as two years before the Army-McCarthy hearings, exchanges between the two parties had already begun. In 1952, the Army “charged that McCarthy had used his position to get preferential treatment for his aide [subcommittee chief consultant David Schine],” Lipset and Raab mention.¹⁸ Schine, drafted by the Army, had turned to McCarthy to help him avoid military service; he hoped that Senator’s clout might garner him a job in the Central Intelligence Agency or another less threatening branch of service. McCarthy did not address this particular matter directly and, instead, retorted that “the Army was just trying to impede an investigation.”¹⁹ This incident did not mark the end of preliminary exchanges between the United States Army and Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Correspondent and columnist of “The Washington Merry-Go-Round”, Drew Pearson (once a subject of attack by McCarthy), references the next major sparring between McCarthy and the Army in his correspondence with Attorney General Herbert Brownell. “The Army publicly stated, Sept. 11, 1953, that McCarthy violated the Espionage Act when he published a 75-page restricted army intelligence report on Siberia,” he remarks.²⁰ This action by the Army, in essence, publicly accused Senator Joseph McCarthy of being a spy and, thus, gave him greater incentive to intensify his already underway investigation of key figures in control of the United States military. Then, at the “Chicken Dinner” on February 24, 1954, Secretary of the Army Robert T. Stevens backed down and, as Lawrence N. Strout expresses, “agreed to cooperate with McCarthy’s investigations while McCarthy seemingly agreed to nothing.”²¹ Secretary Stevens’ concession portrayed the Army as vulnerable and easily manipulated, much like the other departments that McCarthy had scrutinized in the past.

Most importantly, in a televised confrontation foreshadowing the decisive events of the Army-McCarthy hearings, Senator Joseph McCarthy first lost his temper in front of America. Although the hearings were slightly more than a month away, McCarthy was examining General Ralph Zwicker of the United States Army – a decorated war hero. General Zwicker failed to divulge the name(s) of those responsible for the promotion of an Army dentist, Major Irving Peress. Major Peress had refused to fill out forms that inquired about his affiliation with groups labeled as “subversive”. Infuriated with Peress’ promotion and frustrated with Zwicker’s failure to deliver, Senator Joseph McCarthy spouted personal attacks at the General, deeming him “unfit to wear the uniform” and

announcing that he “does not have the brains of a five-year-old.”²² Subsequently, the appearance of this outburst on Edward R. Murrow’s extensively popular “See It Now” series indicates that, as Thomas Rosteck interprets, McCarthy’s television disgraces “had their direct origin some...months before [the Army-McCarthy hearings] even began.”²³

The Army-McCarthy hearings officially commenced on April 22, 1954. At any given time during the proceedings, as many as 20,000,000 Americans watched as Senator Joseph McCarthy humiliated himself on national television. The Senator, noticeably under the influence of alcohol and routinely slurring his speech, had periodic outbursts and interrogated witnesses with outrageous claims.²⁴ Moreover, McCarthy’s own mortifying appearance on the witness stand showed him as an untruthful, evasive man. In fact, during an exchange with special counsel to the Army, Joseph Welch – though McCarthy was under oath – he offered no more than responses such as “I don’t know”, “I don’t remember”, “I don’t recall”, “I wouldn’t know” and “It might” to Welch’s inquiries (all of these were uttered in a matter of a few short minutes).²⁵

At the momentous zenith of the hearings, Senator McCarthy rose to his feet while subcommittee member Roy Cohn was on the stand and charged that a lawyer on Welch’s staff had Communist ties. Next, Welch calmly explained that the man did not have such connections and was not even a member of the legal team. At that moment, the attorney for the United States Army, Joseph N. Welch, flawlessly articulated the most significant words of the 187-hour hearings: “Sir, at long last, have you left no sense of decency?”²⁶ At this moment, Welch did what no one before him had the courage to do – he stood up to a man who had controlled and manipulated some of the most powerful people in the country, from the simple government employee to the President of the United States. However, McCarthy, through his actions preceding and throughout the Army-McCarthy hearings, left himself vulnerable; Welch was merely the man who outwardly demonstrated the aggravation that many Americans – who were too afraid to speak up – had felt somewhere along McCarthy’s path to self-destruction.

Despite the shameful Army-McCarthy proceedings described above, little was changed regarding public opinion about anti-Communism. On June 28, 1954, Newsweek published “Army-McCarthy: Clouded Verdict”, which assessed the impact of the hearings. “The conclusion”, the article proposed, is that “the extreme pro-McCarthy people and the extreme anti-McCarthy people [aren’t] convinced of anything.”²⁷ The frightening notion of “strategic threat perception”²⁸ still terrorized the world and the Cold War endured the downfall of Senator Joseph McCarthy; anti-Communism and the Red Scare flourished as the Senator who brought these ideas to the forefront of American media faded into the background of political involvement. Edward R. Murrow justified the continuance of the Cold War after McCarthy’s exit by saying, “He did not create the situation of fear, he merely exploited it – and quite successfully.”²⁹ In the process of attacking the Army, McCarthy had lost the support of the Republicans who were, as Lipset and Raab conclude, “now quite ready to abandon him as sure as [they] had elevated him.” The Senator was alone in a fight that had once seemed unstoppable in spite of unfounded claims and unsubstantiated accusations. His peers in the Senate resolved, “[McCarthy] acted contrary to Senatorial ethics and tended to bring the Senate into dishonor...and to impair its dignity;

and such conduct is hereby condemned.”[30](#) Even Newsweek conceded, “there [is] a growing feeling that McCarthy...[will not] be as much of an asset as he was.”[31](#)

On October 27, 1953, Hank Greenspun made one final wish in summation of his criticism of McCarthy: “May the next anniversary of my...column see the retirement of McCarthy from public life to an ignominious end.”[32](#) Not ironically (in hindsight of McCarthy’s merciless path to self-eradication), his desire was fulfilled; the Army-McCarthy hearings brought about a humiliating close to the era of McCarthyism, but did little to console a nation living in fear of a war it was powerless to fight.

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