

Murray Rothbard on Sen. Joseph P. McCarthy

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In an address to the John Randolph Club in 1992, Murray Rothbard asked,

[W]ho was the most hated, the most smeared man in American politics in this century, more hated and reviled than even David Duke, even though he was not a Nazi or Ku Kluxer? He was not a libertarian, he was not *even* a conservative, but in fact was a moderate Republican. And yet, he was so universally reviled that his very name became a generic dictionary synonym for evil. [emphasis in original]¹

Rothbard was referring to none other than Joseph R. McCarthy, the reviled Senator from Wisconsin who was censured in 1954 following his four year crusade against Communists in the American government and military. Rothbard went on to give an analysis of McCarthy that will be addressed later in this article. From his early days as an ardent McCarthyite through his alliance with the New Left in the 1960s to the paleoconservatives in the 1990s, Rothbard had a very unique analysis on McCarthy and McCarthyism.

Obviously, it should be noted that so-called McCarthyism predated Joseph McCarthy. Frank Chodorov, a veteran isolationist and one of the Rothbard's greatest early influences tackled the issue of rooting out Communists out of government, two years before the Senator's famous speech in Wheeling, WV. Chodorov noted that when investigating suspected loyalty and security risks, the Congressional investigators do not ask the suspects

Do you believe in Power? Do you adhere to the idea that the individual exists only for the glory of the State? Ought not the TVA be extended over the whole country so that by merely pulling the switch the State can control all production? Are you against taxes, or would you raise them until they absorbed the entire output of the country, not a mere one-third? Are you opposed to the principle of conscription? Do you favor more "social gains" under the aegis of an enlarged bureaucracy? Or, would you advocate dismantling of the public trough at which these bureaucrats feed? In short, do you deny power?

Such questions might prove embarrassing, to the investigators. The answers might bring out a similarity between their ideas and the purposes and those of the suspected. They too worship Power. Under the circumstances, they limit themselves to one question: Are you a member of the Communist Party? And this turns out to mean, have you aligned yourself to the Moscow branch of the church?

While Chodorov had no doubt that there were Communists in government, he felt that that the HUAC investigations did not get to the root of the problem,

A long as the jobs are available there will be Communists, either by infiltration or by incubation the emoluments and pomp which go with the political job will convert the

¹ Murray Rothbard, "A Strategy for The Right" *Rothbard-Rockwell-Report* vol III no 3 (March 1992) 9

meekest bureaucrat to the religion of Power. Hence, if Congress would destroy this creed, it must undo all the “social gains” which have been imposed on us in the past fifteen years. It must abolish the bureaus. If that were done, the devotees of Power would be reduced to soapbox oratory.²

While Chodorov was a maverick even among most isolationists, he was not the only one to make such a point. Clarence Manion, one of the most influential conservative leaders as the head of the Manion Forum and For America, was an unabashed McCarthy supporter, but still recognized that Communist infiltration in government would be a non-issue were power properly decentralized.³ In a radio address he gave a hypothetical situation where the Communist infiltrators went to Washington and tried to take control of the land and police, and rig the elections. This would be impossible because those powers were held not by the Federal Government, but in 48 separate state jurisdictions. This led Manion to proclaim, “States’ rights is your best defense against Communism!”⁴

While Chodorov was a reluctant supporter of McCarthy, Rothbard was an enthusiastic one.⁵ Though he supported McCarthy, even in his youth, he made sure to distinguish “between ‘compulsory’ red-baiting, using the power of The State to repress Communists and leftists, which I deplored, and ‘voluntary’ red-baiting by private organizations and groups, which I supported.”⁶ The compulsory red-baiting included the Smith Act prosecutions, the McCarran Act, and the investigations by HUAC. Voluntary red-baiting included outlets like *Red Channels* and *Plain Talk* that gave exposes on alleged communists and communist sympathizers. Rothbard felt that because almost everyone who McCarthy went after worked for the federal government or the military, they were fair game, and hence his red-baiting was voluntary.

In 1954, he wrote a speech in support of McCarthy aid Roy Cohn that was delivered by George Reisman. While many of the most prominent McCarthyites like Colonel Archibald Roosevelt, George Sokolsky, Alfred Kohlberg, Bill Buckley, and

² Frank Chodorov, “The Spy Hunt,” *Analysis* (September 1948)

³ The Manion Forum was a newsletter and radio broadcast by Manion. For America was an organization founded by Manion that sponsored speeches, particularly to groups of businessmen.

⁴ Clarence Manion, *The Constitution is your Business* appendix to Frank Holman, *The Story of the Bricker Amendment: The First Phase*. (NY: Center for Constitutional Government, 1954) p. 168.

⁵ Rothbard would later say that he and his fellow libertarian McCarthyites should have followed Chodorov more carefully in: Murray Rothbard. *The Betrayal of the American Right*. (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute. The Papers of Murray N. Rothbard, 1971) p.81

⁶ *Ibid* p. 82

Rabbi Benjamin Schultz were all in attendance; it was Rothbard's speech that garnered the most attention. In response to the allegation that there was something wrong with McCarthy and Cohn's method, Rothbard wrote that the only thing they did wrong was to be "too kind, too courteous, too considerate, too decent to realize the full extent of the viciousness of and venom of the Left Smear Bund that is dedicated to drive out every effective anti-Communist from public life."

Rothbard continued that the reason why the New Dealers were so worried about Communist treason was that the New Dealers and Communists were simply different brands of socialists and while they may have their "mild quarrels at times," they are still "blood brothers."

The dinner was given on July 28, shortly after Cohn's dismissal and just as McCarthy's support had begun to crumble. Nonetheless, Rothbard ended with his patented long-term optimism.

Well, maybe the Commies have won this round, but this great meeting tonight is evidence that they shall not win the final battle! Roy and Joe deserve the highest awards that America has to offer, and this meeting is a token payment. As the *Chicago Tribune* aptly put it, the case of Roy Cohn is the American Dreyfus Case! As Dreyfus was redeemed, so shall Roy Cohn when the American people have taken back their government from the criminal alliance of Communists, Socialists, and New Dealers, and Eisenhower-Dewey Republicans that is running Ameirca.⁷

In addition to receiving wide press coverage, it was immortalized in Peter Viereck's famous essay, "The Revolt Against the Elites." The essay was published in Daniel Bell's compilation *The New American Right*.⁸ After summarizing the speech and quoting its concluding sentence, Viereck wrote,

This outburst of direct democracy comes straight from the leftist rhetoric of the old Populists and Progressives, a rhetoric forever urging the People to take back "their" government from the conspiring Powers That Be.⁹

Viereck was trying to show that the consensus, vital-center liberals were the real conservatives, while the right wingers were in fact radicals, and Rothbard would certainly agree with that analysis.

In 1954, he submitted a piece to a Christian libertarian magazine called *Faith and Freedom* entitled "In Defense of Demagogues" that they declined to publish. Although

⁷ George Reisman's Speech at the Roy Cohn Dinner, July 28, 1954. (Auburn, AL: The Ludwig von Mises Institute, The Papers of Murray N. Rothbard.)

⁸ Republished as *The Radical Right*.

⁹ Daniel Bell (ed.), *The Radical Right*. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964 [1955]) 166-167.

he did not mention McCarthy by name, he was most likely thinking of the Senator who was commonly being labeled a demagogue at the time. Rothbard noted that conservatives are generally hostile to demagogues, because they are *ipso facto* ideological non-conformists. If one was simply trying to preserve the *status quo*, they would not have to resort to demagogic means. Conservatives generally are distrustful of demagogues because they historically have been the quasi-socialist populists and progressives that Viereck alludes to. However, socialists only resorted to such means in the past, because they were not in power, but now “the old passionate arguments of the soap box have become the tired clichés of the cocktail party and the classroom. Any demagogy, any disruption of the apple cart, would almost certainly come from the individualist direction.” Furthermore, because demagogues tend to bring such passion, it will force all the people to actually think about their positions or else take the statist conclusions to their inevitable conclusions.¹⁰

After McCarthy’s censure, Rothbard wrote a piece for Faith and Freedom that did get published that applied his defense of demagogues to the Senator. Fear that McCarthy would expose their Communist connections was not their main concern, rather it was that his populism and his ability to rally the people against the intellectuals and elites. Rothbard points to the criticisms of the Ten Million Americans Mobilized for Justice¹¹ and McCarthy’s alleged “headline hunting” as demonstrating that the American left has “a deep seated fear of the American people.” Rothbard continued that “this fear comes paradoxically from a group that only yesterday extolled ‘the people to the skies.’”

Before the New Deal, the socialists were outsiders from the establishment, trying to get in, so they “found it necessary to be ‘radical,’ to stir up the ‘masses,’ to engage in blunt language and sharp controversy.” However, now that the Left was in power, then they have no reason to appeal to radicalism or the masses, and they simply would like to silence all controversy and “keep the political life on a quiet and gentlemanly basis.” The role of Left wing intellectuals is, in part, to keep this consensus.

¹⁰ Murray Rothbard, “In Defense of Demagogues,” *The Papers of Murray N. Rothbard* (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1954) <<http://www.lewrockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard/18.html>>

¹¹ Ten Million Americans Mobilized for Justice was a group founded on November 14, 1954 with the intention of getting ten million signatures of people opposed to censoring McCarthy. Although it did not reach its goal, it impressively got a over 2 million signatures in less than a month.

However, Americans traditionally distrusted intellectuals, so charismatic, anti-establishment populists can occasionally interrupt this consensus. McCarthy fit this role perfectly. Rothbard still felt that in the long run, the only way to ensure liberty would be to convert the intellectuals, but “in the short run, the conservatives must fight to short circuit the intellectuals and reach the people directly. Joe McCarthy has shown signs of being able to do this.”¹²

By the early 1960s Rothbard became disenchanted with red-baiting. In 1963 or '64 Rothbard drafted an article for *Dissent* magazine's negative review of Daniel Bell's compilation, *The Radical Right*, which included Viereck's "Revolt Against the Elites." While Rothbard does not directly address McCarthy who was old news by this point, he was clearly referring more to the people like Dan Smoot and the Birchers who followed in McCarthy's footsteps. Rothbard had become disillusioned with domestic anti-Communism. In the piece he describes the evolution of "red-baiters" and how they usually go full circle from quasi-libertarians to "amateur detectives."

The evolution of the red-baiter began by simply opposing the Communist conspiracy in all its manifestations, foreign and domestic, along with slogans of "no war without victory" and "no appeasement" and strong support of the Congressional investigations of domestic subversives. However the red-baiters eventually opposed the New Deal and socialism, because they eventually find out "that New Dealism is but a 'halfway house' to Communism. There were Communists in the State Department, but few in the American Legion." So while the red-baiter would support the free-market out of anti-Communism, he was not particularly concerned with economics. Eventually, the red baiter "even if highly intelligent" will lose interest in all political issues and become "an amateur detective, or front-hunter."

Did Professor X propound a new theory the other day? No need to study it, or even refute it. The important thing is that Professor X ten years ago joined the American Committee for Spanish Children, which was praised by the *Daily Worker*, etc. Now, front hunting may be a fascinating activity, and in some cases even important—but I submit that concentration on it dulls the mind and sweeps *issues* under the rug.¹³

¹² Aubrey Herbert [Murray Rothbard], "Along Pennsylvania Avenue," *Faith and Freedom* (February 1955) 14-15

¹³ Murray Rothbard, "The Intellectuals and the 'Radical Right' (Auburn, AL: The Ludwig von Mises Institute, The Papers of Murray N. Rothbard) 5-7.

By the late 1960s Rothbard's view on McCarthy had become completely negative. By this point, he had abandoned the Right (or more appropriately, the Right had abandoned him) and saw himself as part of the New Left. In 1968 he wrote his famous "Confessions of a Right-Wing Liberal" for *Ramparts*. His piece was in part trying to explain why the right abandoned non-intervention for an all out war against Communism, and he concluded:

The main catalyst for transforming the mass base of the right wing from an isolationist and quasi-libertarian movement to an anti-communist was probably "McCarthyism."...

McCarthy not only shifted the focus of the right to communist hunting, however. His crusade also brought into the right wing a new mass base. Before McCarthy, the rank-and-file of the right wing was the small town, isolationist middle west. McCarthyism brought into the movement a mass of urban Catholics from the Eastern seaboard, people whose outlook on individual liberty was, if anything, negative.

Rothbard then argued that this mass base paved the way for William F. Buckley and National Review to infiltrate the American Right and reshape it as a group dedicated to the destruction of the Soviet Union.¹⁴

In 1971, Murray Rothbard wrote a manuscript entitled *The Betrayal of the American Right* that was never published.¹⁵ There he tried to explain why he was such an enthusiastic supporter of McCarthy and analyze the effect of "McCarthyism" on the American Right. Many of his points were broached in his earlier articles on the subject, and many were later revisited in his famous speech to the John Randolph Club more than twenty years later.

One of the reasons was that the victims of McCarthyism were not people who Rothbard was very sympathetic to, and McCarthy's enemies painted him in a light that would make a libertarian ecstatic.

day in and day out, such Establishment organs as the *New York Times* kept telling us that McCarthy was "tearing down the morale of the executive branch"; what more could a libertarian hope for? And "tearing down the morale of the Army" to boot! What balm for an anti-militarist!¹⁶

The second reason was the populism he discussed earlier in the *Faith and Freedom* article.

¹⁴ "Confessions of a Right-Wing Liberal." *Ramparts*, June 15, 1968, pp. 49-50.

¹⁵ Murray Rothbard. *The Betrayal of the American Right*. (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute. The Papers of Murray N. Rothbard, 1971)

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 82

the '50s was an era when liberalism—now accurately termed “corporate liberalism”—had triumphed, and seemed to be permanently in the saddle. Having now gained the seats of power, the liberals had given up their radical veneer of the '30s and were now settling down to the cozy enjoyment of their power and perquisites. It was a comfortable alliance of Wall Street, Big Business, Big Government, Big Unions, and liberal Ivy League intellectuals; it seemed to me that while in the long run this unholy alliance could only be overthrown by educating a new generation of intellectuals, that in the short run the only hope to dislodge this new ruling elite was a populist short-circuit. In sum, that there was a vital need to appeal directly to the masses, emotionally, even demagogically, *over the heads* of the Establishment: of the Ivy League, the mass media, the liberal intellectuals, of the Republican-Democrat political party structure.

Furthermore, Rothbard felt that he and other libertarians had misread the political spectrum of having the Communists at the far left, liberals on the left, conservatives on the right, and libertarians on the far right. From that libertarians concluded,

first, that conservatives, no matter how divergent, were our “natural” allies, and second, that there was little real difference between liberals and Communists. Why not then fuzz the truth a bit and use the anti-Communist bludgeon to hit at the liberals, especially since the liberals had become entrenched in power and were running the country? There was a temptation that few of us could resist¹⁷

Part of the reason why Rothbard and other isolationists supported McCarthy so fervently, was in reaction to the hypocrisy of the anti-McCarthy leftists who did much worse to their ideological enemies than he did. While there is much griping about alleged anti-communist hysteria and the lives that were ruined during the McCarthy era, little is made out of the equally, if not more, ruinous smears made against the Old Isolationists before, during, and after the Second World War.

John T. Flynn opened his pamphlet *The Smear Terror*, “Would you believe that there are in this country several outfits that specialize in the destruction of reputations?” He was not talking about *Plain Talk* or *Red Channels*, but the actions of the Anti-Nazi League and The Friends of Democracy who slandered opponents to American entry in World War II as Nazis and traitors. The most notorious case was John Ray Carlson’s now discredited 1943 book *Undercover*, where he claimed to have ‘infiltrated’ the American First Committee and found it seething with Nazis and anti-Semites. Flynn would go on to be one of Joe McCarthy’s most fervent supporters.¹⁸

In 1951, revisionist historian Harry Elmer Barnes wrote a pamphlet, *The Chickens of the Interventionist Liberals Have Come Home to Roost: The Bitter Fruits of Globaloney*. Barnes’ pamphlet had two main points. The first was that the liberals who

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 80

¹⁸ John T. Flynn. *The Smear Terror*. (NY: John T. Flynn, 1947)

were complaining about McCarthy created the Red Scare atmosphere themselves because, “had we not entered the second World War, the Cold War, and the Korean War, the trends and events which the liberals now protest against with such vehemence would have been unthinkable. They are all the logical and inevitable fruits of the great ostensible crusade for the Four Freedoms and the like.” Furthermore, the same liberals who were deploring McCarthy, Jenner, and other “witch-hunters” vehemently smeared rightists when convenient. He notes the prosecutor of the infamous Mass Seditious Trial of 1944-1945 was supported by *The Nation*, *New Republic*, *PM*, *Washington Post* and other outlets that were currently decrying McCarthyism, and in fact the chief prosecutor of the Trial, O. John Rogge had been vigorously defending communists and even had the temerity to write a book *Our Vanishing Civil Liberties*.¹⁹ To many members of the Old Right, the liberals were simply reaping what they sowed, and they had absolutely no right to complain about their treatment.

Rothbard’s hatred of consensus liberalism is what led not only to his support of McCarthyism, but also his later sympathy for the New Left. The publication of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *The Vital Center* in 1948 cemented the notion that there were really no political alternatives to corporate liberalism. That McCarthy was essentially destroying that consensus was a major reason for Rothbard’s support of him.

Rothbard, nonetheless, still saw McCarthy’s impact on the American Right as negative. The first reason, as previously stated was the change in their ethnic base. The other reason related more to the relationship between domestic and foreign anti-Communism. Rothbard believed that if you accepted that there was a Communist conspiracy in the American government, then it would logically end up leading you to go after their Soviet paymasters in Moscow as well.

Furthermore, McCarthy cemented the anti-Communism as the *raison d’être* of the American Right. Rothbard noted that McCarthy was far from being a libertarian or even a conservative on domestic issues. His anti-Communism alone made him the hero of the Right. According to Rothbard, while McCarthy movement failed “in the short run, The McCarthy movement has done its work of shifting the entire focus of the Right from

¹⁹ Harry Elmer Barnes, *Barnes Against Blackout*, (Costa Mesa, CA: Institute for Historical Review, 1991) p. 143-186.

libertarian, anti-statist, and isolationist concerns to a focus and concentration upon the alleged Communist ‘menace.’”²⁰ Rothbard believed that the short term failure of McCarthyism was due to the lack of any organizational infrastructure with journalists and intellectuals. Worse yet, the hole created by McCarthy’s censure was quickly filled up by William F. Buckley and *National Review*.

In 1994, Murray Rothbard reviewed Sam Francis’ *Beautiful Losers*. While Francis was an ardent Cold Warrior and disciple of James Burnham, his analysis of McCarthy was remarkably similar to Rothbard’s. In the review, Rothbard adds that “Francis doesn’t detail the shameful way in which McCarthy’s supporters, the Buckleys and the Schlamms, dropped him like a hot potato as soon as they saw the dimensions of his defeat.”²¹ Buckley’s second book, co-written with L. Brent Bozell, was *McCarthy and His Enemies*. Unlike Rothbard, who always said he supported McCarthy’s means, but did not entirely support his goals, Buckley and Bozell explicitly “censure” McCarthy whenever they find him “guilty of recklessness or exaggeration.”²² In this sense, Buckley was only able to take-over the McCarthy base by abandoning the Senator before the ship sank.

In 1992, Rothbard gave the keynote address at the John Randolph Club, to discuss the prospects for the new paleoconservative/libertarian alliance and Pat Buchanan’s presidential campaign. In the speech he gave a thorough analysis of McCarthy touching on many of the points he discussed in earlier articles on McCarthy. He also analyzed the response from the consensus liberals in *The New American Right* as well as Richard Hofstadter’s *The Paranoid Style of American Politics* and Daniel Bell’s *The End of Ideology*. Rothbard believed that this was all an attempt by the liberals to smear all opponents to the *status quo* as being “paranoid” or suffering from “status anxiety” and other psychological problems, rather than actually addressing their issues, while further entrenching consensus liberalism as the *status quo*.²³

²⁰ Murray Rothbard. *The Betrayal of the American Right*. (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute. The Papers of Murray N. Rothbard, 1971) p. 84

²¹ Murray Rothbard, “The Franciscan Way” *Rothbard-Rockwell-Report* vol V no 1 (July 1994) 22

²² William F. Buckley Jr. and L. Brent Bozell, *McCarthy and His Enemies: The Record and its Meaning*. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954) p. x

²³ Murray Rothbard, “A Strategy for The Right” *Rothbard-Rockwell-Report* vol III no 3 (March 1992) p. 9-

On a superficial level it appears that Rothbard's current ideological friends and enemies affected his somewhat shifting views on McCarthy. In the 1950s, the Communists and consensus liberals, who Rothbard hated, hated McCarthy, and the Old Right, who Rothbard supported, supported him. During the 1960s, Rothbard began to fear the New Right and made alliances with the New Left who hated McCarthy. Then in the twilight of his life, he made alliances with paleoconservatives, many of whom supported McCarthy and he appeared more sympathetic to him.

While this may have had some influence on his tone, Rothbard's analysis stayed remarkably consistent. Rothbard always believed that McCarthy was important for his ability to appeal directly to the masses by skipping the hostile media and intellectuals; and that his appeal to populism was necessary. However, Rothbard felt that McCarthy's goal for his populism—rooting out Communists from the government—was too narrow, and in some ways counterproductive for a right wing movement. Rothbard hoped for someone who used McCarthy's means but for libertarian goals, something he saw to a certain extent in Pat Buchanan's 1992 primary challenge to President George H.W. Bush. Rothbard was able to apply this theory of libertarian populism regardless of whether he was aligned with the Black Panthers or the Southern league.