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Book Review: McCarthy, by Roy Cohn

McCARTHY. ROY COHN. The New American Library. pp. 292. (\$7.50)

McCarthy is a mistitled book. The reader is presented not so much with a biography of McCarthy as with an apology for Roy Cohn by Roy Cohn. As the book progresses McCarthy becomes peripheral to the central events surrounding Cohn's life in the early 1950's. Cohn was and still is the subject of much abuse and polemic. This book is manifestly an attempt to justify his role as chief counsel for the McCarthy Committee investigating Communist activities in the United States; it is an attempt to show that the Committee performed patriotic and courageous services on behalf of the United States and that Cohn was acting in the best American tradition of unselfish duty to country. Cohn's purpose, if one at all emerges from the rather disjointed prose of the book, is to show that he and all other American patriots, while they may be villified in the early stages of their activities, will ultimately be exonerated by history and posterity. Cohn, a bit too impatient to wait for posterity, decided to

initiate his own process of beatification. While he claims to be presenting an objective re-assessment, it seems more apparent that he is re-living and revelling in the heady days of his youth. The book is interesting reading if for no other purpose than the study it presents of the methodology Cohn utilizes in his process of self-justification. Without any exaggeration, I think it may be safely said that Cohn is comically naive not only in overestimating his literary ability but in underestimating the intellectual climate of this present decade.

Having conceded that McCarthy's activities are only a backdrop to the exploits and experiences of author Cohn, nevertheless the book does not emerge as a disappointment simply because the central focus has shifted. We are presented with an amazing picture of a conceited, pretentious young man, who, at best, struck others as being obnoxious and intolerable. Cohn is too rigid to accept with equanimity his unpopularity and his discomfort is slightly amusing. Cohn's acceptance by McCarthy only reinforces the image we have of the author; McCarthy had a penchant for attracting the zealots and bigots of his day. Cohn's position of responsibility in the McCarthy machine dramatically underscores the process whereby Cohn lost his last opportunity to attain the salvation of essential humanity through the peculiar process of displaying at least a few redeeming human qualities. Cohn is humourless, priggish, obsessed and above all boring. In one chapter he describes his mission to Europe to purge American overseas libraries of communist-oriented literature. What emerges is the caricature of a young, fresh-faced individual embarking on what, in retrospect, seems to be a highly amusing burlesque. Cohn, however, viewed his activities as being closely akin to a holy mission. He is a self-admitted defender of the faith; only he fails to perceive the irony of his position.

It is essential to understand that this book should be read because inadvertently it throws light on the personalities involved in the events of the early fifties. The events themselves are now difficult to comprehend, in fact, even difficult to believe. If a realistic perspective is maintained, nothing untoward about spying *per se* is revealed. Espionage and all its paraphernalia is necessarily an adjunct of nationalism. Cohn's shock and horror at discovering the existence of such things leads one to the conclusion that he either led an extremely sheltered life or that he is merely putting us on. A third conclusion to which I subscribe, is that Cohn is just less perceptive than one might imagine.

The theory behind the McCarthy investigations was that espionage and communist activities in the United States were widespread and cancerous. Klaus Fuchs, the Rosenbergs and others were allowed to thrive only because Communists had infiltrated into the vital organs of the government and even into the Army. They and all their sympathizers therefore had to be exposed and their efficacy destroyed by the resulting publicity or by legal prosecution if necessary. The investigations came to be termed "witch-hunts" because of the irreparable harm done to many innocent individuals who may have naively

associated with leftist organizations during the depression decade of the 1930's. McCarthy, Cohn and cohorts exhibited the restricted intellectual Weltanschauung which characterizes all inquisitors. They were unable to distinguish between romantic involvement with a new and idealistic social philosophy on the one hand and political machinations on behalf of Soviet imperialism on the other. For Cohn there were no gradations or degrees of communism; socialists, leftists, radicals and liberals all fell into the catchall term—communism. In the simple but effective conceptualization put forth by Cohn you were either Communist or American. With this type of built-in self-revelation, Cohn knew at all times the job he had to do and the best manner in which the job could be done. If incidentally some of America's best writers, actors and other personalities received crushing blows to their careers, this was the price one had to pay for freedom. It is not irrelevant to ask today whether this is not the price one usually pays for tyranny.

American society and politics in the last few decades have proven to be an ungodly mixture of idealism and crassness, high ideals and base motives. The Americans have not been content to allow their own peculiar brand of democracy to endure unaided the knocks and blows that might come its way. To protect and shield the spirit of 1776 numerous congressional bodies have been set up with peculiar sounding names such as the "Un-American Activities Committee." These bodies have as one of their functions the primary task of defining the aims and goals of the American social ethic. That they have been eminently unsuited for the task is beside the point. That they have perverted the American ideal is the essential tragedy of modern American life. The only bright note or feature that exists in the midst of all these dolorous committees is that American society has certain inherent controlling processes. The fear and alarm that motivated a small segment of the country to spawn the McCarthy phenomenon, motivated a larger, more rational majority to ultimately destroy the creation. The climax of the period was the Army-McCarthy hearing. After this disgraceful episode it was generally conceded that McCarthy and McCarthyism were a threat to the country. The Senate censure vote of 1954 abruptly ended McCarthy's career and until his death in 1957 he remained a broken and despised figure. Cohn, with his characteristic myopia, attributes the censure to a *plot* on the part of "liberal" Republicans to destroy the political career of McCarthy. Cohn contends that McCarthy enjoyed the support of a large group of Americans and his popularity might have led to his attaining hegemony in the Republican party during the election year of 1956. This theory is well-inspired but completely groundless. By 1954 McCarthy was an isolated political figure. Only Cohn refused to scurry off the sinking ship.

Whatever McCarthy's personal ambitions, the philosophy he stood for was inimical to the freedom of thought and expression which is an essential part of the fabric of American life. However much McCarthy may have been sincerely motivated by his alarm at the

inroads being made on national security, the process he started outgrew the bounds of sanity and introduced a plethora of maladies in which guilt by association, innuendo and suggestion became the accepted standard of judicial arbitration. This was unhealthy and dangerous and the more enlightened portion of American society diagnosed the sickness and treated, temporarily at least, one of the more outstanding symptoms.

We cannot, however, condemn Cohn and McCarthy out of hand as bigots. They were peculiar products of a period in American history when the high hopes of Potsdam were dissipated, when an Iron Curtain had descended across Europe and when the possibility of a Communist takeover of much of Western Europe was a real and imminent threat. Such events, then as now, could not be looked on dispassionately, with a certain amount of aloofness and detachment. Peaceful co-existence was a term unknown to the vocabulary of the time. The Cold War in the early 1950's was a tangible experience whereas today it operates on a more subliminal and therefore restrained level. The McCarthy and Cohn partnership can always be explained—it can always be rationalized; but it can never be condoned.

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