

# RISE OF THE NEW McCARTHYISM:

How Right Wing Extremists Try to Paralyze Government Through Ideological Smears and Baseless Attacks

December 2009

## Introduction

On December 2, 1954, the U.S. Senate voted to censure Sen. Joseph McCarthy, bringing to an end four years of political intimidation and character assassination so ferocious that McCarthy's name is still synonymous with a particularly destructive form of demagoguery.

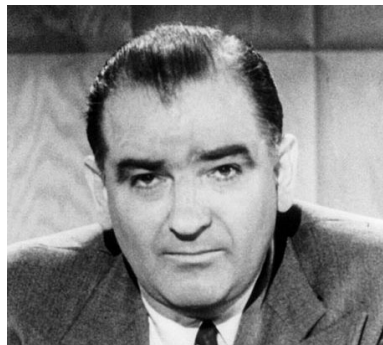
McCarthy's campaign against supposedly widespread communist infiltration of the U.S. government brought down sitting Senators and intimidated even President Eisenhower (who loathed McCarthy) and his advisors. McCarthy's campaign was boosted by conservative think tanks, media figures, and clergy, and abetted for years by the unwillingness of most of his colleagues to stand up against his false charges and clear abuses of power.

McCarthy launched his campaign with a speech on February 9, 1950, in West Virginia, claiming to have a list of 205 people in the State Department known to be members of the Communist Party. He made similar claims, with shifting numbers, many times. McCarthy's charges were inflammatory and false, and often sufficiently vague to resist any fact-checking. But his bluster and manipulation of the era's fear of global communism allowed him to build power while destroying lives and careers.

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McCarthy was eventually undone by his overreaching attacks on the U.S. Army; the televised Army-McCarthy hearings in 1954 finally exposed him to a wide audience as a malicious



and irresponsible bully. A crucial moment in his reversal of fortune took place when the Army's chief counsel Joseph Welch, responding to attacks on a young lawyer, put McCarthy in his place, saying, "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?"

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destroyed by enemies from within. Republican Members of Congress and other GOP officials have not shown Welch's concern for decency; instead they frequently act as an "amen chorus" to the far right's demagogues or stay silent, hoping to reap political gain from the attacks on President Obama, administration officials and nominees, congressional democrats, and even military leaders.

Journalist Haynes Johnson, author of *The Age of Anxiety: McCarthyism to Terrorism*, writes:

The shame of the Senate, especially the shame of its leaders and moderates on both sides of the aisle, was expressed by historian Robert Griffith when he wrote that McCarthy's victories were made possible "only by the unwillingness of moderates to take a stand that might expose them to obloquy." Perhaps, Griffith added, "this was

the key to McCarthy's continued power – not the ranting of demagogues, but the fear and irresolution of honorable men.”

Among McCarthy's targets was President Harry Truman, whom he called a “dangerous liberal,” and the Democratic Party, of which he said during the 1952 campaign:

The Democratic label is now the property of men who have been unwilling to recognize evil or who bent to whispered pleas from the lips of traitors....

In fact, McCarthy was fond of referring to the “Democrat Party” – using the term as a slur. The refusal to use the correct term “Democratic Party” was so associated with McCarthy that it went out of style for decades, but the rhetorical tactic has been resurrected and embraced by the Karl Rove-Newt Gingrich-Frank Luntz Republican Party of today.

### McCarthy tactics then and now

From 1953 to 1955, McCarthy held 117 hearings and even more closed-door interrogations, witch hunts for subversives that thrived on guilt by association: someone had worked for a union, dates a communist, been in a book club that read a book by Marx. Author Johnson writes that reviewing the transcripts of those sessions made it clear that McCarthy, in addition to guilt by association and character assassination, was engaged in an “obsessive hunt for homosexuals,” hounded writers, artists, and composers, attacked the reputations of military leaders.

Today's McCarthyism has many faces and voices, including the household names of right-wing cable television, a plethora of radio hosts, Religious Right leaders, right-wing organizations and the bogus “grassroots” campaigns they generate – and Members of Congress and other Republican Party officials. Together they engage in character



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### Dangerous eastern elites subverting the national interest

McCarthy inflamed fears that the nation was being destroyed by enemies from within:

The reason we find ourselves in a position of impotency is not because the enemy has sent men to invade our shores, but rather because of the traitorous actions of those who had all the benefits that the wealthiest nation on earth has had to offer – the finest homes, the finest college educations, and the finest jobs in Government (and the private sector) we can give.

Sound familiar? The attack on sinister Ivy League-educated elites is one of the essential rhetorical tools of far-right pundits and Republican politicians like Sarah Palin. The most surreal example was Ivy-educated, investment banker, millionaire, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney railing against “eastern elites” at the 2008 Republican National Convention.

Republican smear campaigns often make use of this “elites vs. real Americans” theme. Here's Curt Levey of the Committee for Justice, speaking to senators about then-Judge Sonia Sotomayor's nomination to the Supreme Court:

Remember the values of the regular folks who sent you to Washington. Don't vote for a Supreme Court nominee whose values are closer to those of the intellectual elite than to those of your constituents.

That's a staple of right-wing rhetoric today. Sen. Inhofe criticized President Obama's speech in the Middle East by saying “I just don't know whose side he's on.” Earlier this year, Sen. Mitch McConnell slammed President Obama's plans to close Guantanamo, saying that it was “to make us popular in Europe.” And Religious Right godfather James Dobson said at this year's Council for National Policy gathering, “our president seems to believe in peace through appeasement”

and compared him to Neville Chamberlain. “We’re in greater danger right now than at any time since the civil war,” said Dobson.

These characterizations have extended to a number of Obama administration executive and judicial branch nominees. For example, Dawn Johnsen, a widely respected legal scholar whose nomination to the Office of Legal Counsel has been held up for almost a year in spite of bipartisan support from the legal community and her home state senators, has infuriated right-wing pundits and politicians for her outspoken criticism of Bush administration efforts to legally justify torture. For taking a strong rule-of-law stance, she has been pilloried as an enemy of America’s national security. National Review’s Andrew McCarthy, for example, calls her a “radical’s radical.”

Another target is Judge Edward Chen, who has been nominated to a seat on the Northern District of California. The right-wing *Washington Times* editorial page opened its

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hatchet job on Chen with the sentence, “Another day, another Obama nominee who doesn’t appear to love America.” For its ‘evidence,’ the editorial cites comments Chen made in the wake of the 9-11 attacks worrying about potential recriminations for Muslim Americans.

**Communism, Socialism, “Obamunism”**

McCarthy frightened many Americans with charges that the government was infested with communist sympathizers. His current-day acolytes have made charges long considered beyond the pale of political discourse – comparisons of President Obama and other administration officials with tyrannical figures like Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, and Chairman Mao – so frequently that they are losing their shock value. Former and likely future presidential candidate Mike Huckabee is among many who have called Obama a

socialist, and said of the Obama budget, “Lenin and Stalin would love this stuff.”

The same is true of charges that the Obama administration and congressional democratic leaders are communists, socialists, and/or fascists bent on destroying capitalism and the market economy and imposing a socialist dictatorship in America. Rep. Paul Broun of Georgia has compared Obama to Hitler, called Obama and Democratic congressional leaders a “socialistic elite” and warned that they’re planning to create a pretext to declaring martial law. Rep. Spencer Bachus (R-AL) warned of 17 socialists in Congress. Rep. Michele Bachmann has called the health care reform bill “the crown jewel of socialism.” The Traditional Values Coalition has warned that “Obamunism must be stopped.”

Van Jones, founder of Color of Change and a leading advocate of using “green” technologies to bring jobs to de-industrialized American cities, resigned from his position as a White House advisor after a fierce campaign against him by right-wing pundits who denounced him as a communist. Jones’ resignation was like blood in the water to Glenn Beck and others who have launched a series of smear campaigns against Obama administration officials and nominees.

Among the most recent targets is presidential advisor Valerie Jarrett, a longtime associate of the president’s. A group calling itself Americans for Limited Government has launched a campaign against her, claiming that her role is “to enforce Barack Obama’s will inside and outside the Obama White House” and saying:

A radical leftist with a ruthless agenda, she is the Obama advisor most responsible both for originating and orchestrating his most egregious attempts to impose a socialist regime upon the American people.

Former Senator Rick Santorum has accused the Obama administration and its allies of being so committed to imposing socialism in America that they are scheming to destroy churches and families:

Santorum said that the left’s policies, especially those policies aggressively set forward by the Obama administration, target the family and Christian churches for “destruction,” because these institutions provide local social networks and support for individuals that take away the need for total dependence on central government.

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To eliminate these social networks means the triumph of socialism, and that means attacking marriage and Christian churches.

“There will be an assault on the institution of marriage,” Santorum promised his audience. “Why? Because the left knows that they can’t really have government come in and take control of everything unless they destroy the family. Unless you destroy the family and destroy the Church they cannot ultimately be successful in getting socialism to be accepted in this country and that’s what their objective is.”

### Guilt by Association

McCarthy was a master of guilt by association, smearing individuals as enemies of the country based on any association however indirect or tenuous, with a suspect organization, newspaper or other publication, labor union, or individual.



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Criticism of McCarthy’s tactics was itself evidence: his targets included not only communists, pro-communists, and former communists, but also “anti-anti-communists.”

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After right-wing activists engineered a public humiliation of the group ACORN, right-wing leaders have tried to use any relationship with the organization’s decades of organizing on behalf of poor people as a disqualification for public service. Attacks on widely respected judicial nominee David Hamilton treated his one-month job as a canvasser for ACORN thirty years ago when he was 22 years old as if it had constituted a major portion of his career. Upstate New York Republican Deidre Scozzafava, whose candidacy in a special congressional

election was derailed by a revolt led by national right-wing leaders, was criticized by *Human Events* this way:

State Assemblywoman Deirdre “Dede” Scozzafava, the New York House candidate has been re-elected several times on the ballot line of the Empire State’s far-left Working Families Party, one of whose co-founders is ACORN.

And this fall, four Republican Members of Congress launched a witch hunt against Muslim interns on Capitol Hill, warning that they may be “spies.” The interns-as-spies media scare and the role of Republican members of Congress in fanning it drew a strong rebuke from Democratic Reps. Michael Honda (D-CA), Barbara Lee (D-CA), and Nydia Velazquez (D-NY), chairs of the Asian Pacific American Caucus, the Black Caucus, and the Hispanic Caucus, respectively.

### An “obsessive hunt for homosexuals”

McCarthy and his subcommittee’s investigator Roy Cohn did not only target people for destruction based on alleged communist sympathies; they also hunted for homosexuals in government service. In a striking parallel, right-wing leaders, dismayed and outraged by growing public support for legal equality for LGBT Americans, have used public debates over marriage equality to attack gay people as enemies of faith, family, and freedom, and they are engaged in ongoing smear campaigns against openly gay Obama administration officials and nominees.

Kevin Jennings, Assistant Deputy Secretary of the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools, is an openly gay man who has long been an advocate for making public schools safe spaces for all students, including gay students. That’s been enough to make him the target of a sustained smear campaign from the right, complete with bogus guilt-by-association charges.

Sean Hannity and others have attacked Jennings for saying in a speech that he was inspired by Harry Hay, who is widely considered to be among the founders of the gay-rights movement and was not, as Jennings’ critics have implied, a member of NAMBLA. Equating gay-rights advocates with pedophiles is an extremely unsavory and long-discredited right-wing tactic that has made a recent comeback on the McCarthyite right. Among the many charges against Jennings is that he encouraged a gay teenager who confided in him to be careful if he were to become sexually active. Anti-gay Rep. Steve King released a letter signed by 53 other Republican members alleging that Jennings had “ignored the sex abuse of a child” as a teacher, long after the allegations had been debunked and a week after Fox News had acknowledged that the “child” in the case was a teenager of legal age.

Chai Feldblum, a legal scholar who has been nominated to serve as a commissioner on the Equal Employment

Opportunity Commission, is facing an onslaught from the far right. Typical is this broadside from National Organization for Marriage Chairman Robert George:

Feldblum intends to use her position of influence as EEOC commissioner to force private institutions to follow her radical vision of society, through the enforcement of aggressive and intrusive employment non-discrimination laws.

### Attacks on military leaders

McCarthy attacked Gen. George Marshall, Truman's Secretary of Defense, for being engaged in a "great conspiracy, a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man. A conspiracy of infamy



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so black that, when it is finally exposed, its principles shall be forever deserving of the maledictions of all honest men."

What is the objective of the great conspiracy? I think it is clear from what has occurred and is now occurring: to diminish the United States in world affairs, to weaken us militarily, to confuse our spirit with talk of surrender in the Far East and to impair our will to resist evil.

Earlier this year, journalist Greg Sargent, reviewing attacks by GOP leaders on Obama administration national security policies, such as the closing of the detention facility in Guantanamo, that are supported by a number of former Republican national security officials and military officials concluded:

It's a clear sign that Obama's national security positions (for good or for ill) are squarely in the mainstream of the D.C. Defense establishment. And it shows that the GOP's need to attack those positions has forced Republican officials outside that mainstream, isolating them further and putting them at odds with its onetime

allies in that establishment.

Pennsylvania Rep. Daryl Metcalfe recently demonstrated that he has perfected the new McCarthyism by blasting veterans who disagree with his opposition to climate change legislation as traitors:

**"As a veteran, I believe that any veteran lending their name, to promote the leftist propaganda of global warming and climate change, in an effort to control more of the wealth created in our economy, through cap and tax type policies, all in the name of national security, is a traitor to the oath he or she took to defend the Constitution of our great nation!"** Mr. Metcalfe's email reads. **"Remember Benedict Arnold before giving credibility to a veteran who uses their service as a means to promote a leftist agenda. Drill Baby Drill!!!"**

### Where it all leads

Haynes Johnson reports Harry Truman speaking against "lies and slander" by "scaremongers and hatemongers" and saying:

Character assassination is their stock in trade. Guilt by association is their motto. They have created such a wave of fear and uncertainty that their attacks upon our liberties go almost unchallenged. Many people are growing frightened – and frightened people panic.

It is clear that right-wing operatives, including the well-heeled forces behind "grassroots" uprisings against health care reform, are all about sowing fear – fear about the Obama administration, fear about his "socialist" agenda, fear about the supposed march from liberty to tyranny.

GOP officials are, when not actively participating in the fearmongering, welcoming it as a means, they hope, of returning to power in 2010 and 2012. They are seemingly unconcerned about the destructive consequences of their fearmongering and the panic, potentially violent, it may encourage. ■

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## FIGHTING THE NEW McCARTHYISM: WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Help us spread the word by sharing this report with your online friends and colleagues.
- Write your elected representatives and urge them to speak out against the new right-wing McCarthyism.
- Follow Right Wing Watch through RSS or on Facebook. Watch for examples of McCarthyism from political leaders and call them out on talk radio, in letters to the editor of your newspaper, and directly to them.
- Praise media and political figures who stand up against McCarthyite smears against President Obama, administration officials, and nominees.
- Write a letter to your local newspaper or call in to an appropriate talk radio program to stand up for fairness, honesty and civil discourse in our political system.
- Tell us about the actions you've taken.



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Our vision is a vibrantly diverse democratic society in which everyone is treated equally under the law, given the freedom and opportunity to pursue their dreams, and encouraged to participate in our nation's civic and political life. Our America respects diversity, nurtures creativity and combats hatred and bigotry.

We believe a society that reflects these constitutional principles and progressive values is worth fighting for, and we take seriously our responsibility to cultivate new generations of leaders and activists who will sustain these values for the life of this nation.

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