Red! Scare!

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a review of

Red Scare: Blacklists, McCarthyism, and the Making of Modern America by Clay Risen. Scribner, 2025

Labels helpfully group phenomena together, but sometimes they also unhelpfully conflate. McCarthyism "the baseless smearing of one's opponents with charges of Communist sympathies or merely insufficient anti-Communist antipathies"—ought not be reduced to the foibles of the bombastic, frequently drunk, 1950s U.S. Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, waving lists of supposed communists.

As Clay Risen writes in his new book *Red Scare*,

"In history [McCarthy] has gone down as a monster, so extreme in his willingness to tell Big Lie after Big Lie that he has become synonymous with the Red Scare itself. He is at the same time remembered as an aberration, a wild man, a singular cause of America's temporary national hysteria. But while he was certainly the best-known of the red-baiters, he was in fact a symptom of the era, but not its cause... His significance lay in his unique ability to braid the two strands of the Red Scare—the culture war and the politics of Cold War security—into a single cord."

McCarthyism was not just the Senator and his imagined conspiracies of Reds. It was also blacklists, loyalty oaths, boycotts by the American Legion, the Smith Act, HUAC, book burnings, and the executions of convicted atomic spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Likewise, the "Reds" of whom the country was so frightened in the late 40s and early 50s, were not all members of the Communist Party, but librarians who resisted censorship, teachers wary of patriotic indoctrination, humanitarians aiding refugees, anarchists with no love for the Soviet Union, pacifists, homosexuals, and jurists who believed in the rights of the accused.

Risen tells us, "More than five million federal employees were investigated for potential ties to 'subversive' organizations. Two thousand seven hundred were fired. More than twelve thousand quietly resigned... The Department of Justice kept adding to its list of subversive groups, eventually numbering in the hundreds, which soon found its way into the private sector."

Risen's splendidly detailed account traces the long arc of this country's post-World War II political panic, situating it in its numerous intersecting contexts: careers made and destroyed, bureaucratic rivalries, inter- and intra-party politics, and international affairs. The Cold War, he reminds us, was not at first a period, but a series of events which over time became mutually defining: the communist military victory in China, the conflict in Korea, the Soviets testing an atom bomb. Each of these took on additional significance because of the others, and together they helped to create a general atmosphere of paranoia.

Risen does well at capturing the tension and uncertainty of the McCarthy era, but there is unfortunately little attention given to its parallels with or direct connections to other periods, soon before or following after.

A similar paroxysm of nationalist suspicion, loyalty tests, and red-hunting accompanied the United States' entrance into World War I, severely repressing the IWW and culminating in a wave of targeted

imprisonment and deportations called the Palmer Raids. This earlier Red Scare established J. Edgar Hoover as the country's premier secret policeman and led to his promotion to director of the FBI, a position he held until his death in 1972.

Hoover thus personally connects the Palmer raids, the McCarthy blacklists, and the FBI's 1960s COINTELPRO activities, which employed everything from rumor-mongering to assassinations to undermine radical organizations (especially the Black Panther Party). Richard Nixon, being Vice President in the McCarthy period and President from 1969–74, likewise connects McCarthyism to COINTELPRO, as well as to broader efforts to repress the anti-Vietnam war movement, to say nothing of the anti-communist animus fueling the war itself.

Ronald Reagan, at the time President of the Screen Actors Guild and an important collaborator in the purge of the Hollywood left, would later as Governor of California become obsessed with university radicals, and as President make anti-communism the centerpiece of his foreign policy. Roy Cohn, McCarthy's main henchman, would come to act as mentor to a young Donald Trump, unfortunately helping bring the mid-century practices of libel, blacklists, and censorship into the present.

Risen, a reporter and editor at The New York Times, offers elegantly concise portraits of individual people who affected, or were affected by the Red Scare. He includes the familiar villains: the aforementioned Nixon, Cohn, and McCarthy himself; and the standard heroes: broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow, who gave the public its first sustained opportunity to actually see McCarthy bloviate and bully witnesses, and attorney Joseph Welch, who famously demanded of the Senator, "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?" Risen also explores the ambivalence of figures like President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Earl Warren.

Warren's story is particularly fascinating, beginning as the police-state governor of California, advocate of the wartime roundup of Japanese Americans, and ending as the civil libertarian Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.

In Risen's telling, the heroes are, if anything, under-celebrated, on the perhaps misguided notion that decency and courage do not require publicists, and the villains receive a more sympathetic treatment than one might expect. Part of this, again, is supplied by context. Risen reminds us that there was a lot to be afraid of in those years, not least "another global conflagration"— this time with atomic weapons.

More moving are the numerous stories of people who were unwittingly caught up in events much larger than themselves. Some of these were Communists, sympathizers, or fellow travelers; many more were ordinary Americans with mainstream views who had once bothered to sign a petition, or who simply declined to inform against their friends or coworkers. Some were famous— detective novelist Dashiell Hammett, actor and comedienne Lucille Ball, and the talented actor, singer and athlete, Paul Robeson, but many more were civil servants, union members, or teachers. Some comported themselves with integrity and dignity, and generally paid a steep price. Others behaved disgracefully, betraying their own convictions and denouncing their colleagues or friends—and they paid a different price.

The actor Sterling Hayden, for instance, confessed to a youthful dalliance with Communism and named two associates—both of whom had already been exposed. This level of cooperation was minimal by the standards of the time, but Hayden never recovered his self-respect. He later told his psychiatrist that he could not get past "the contempt that I have had for myself since the day I did that thing."

That is, perhaps, the lesson to be gleaned from the whole depressing period: that when events overtake us, we cannot always salvage our careers, our reputations, or even our freedom; sometimes the most we can hope for is to preserve our integrity.

Kristian Williams is the author of *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America; Gang Politics: Revolution, Repression, and Crime*; and *Policing the Progressive City: Portland, Oregon, from Settlement to Uprising* (all from AK Press).

Sidebar

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Suture Zone seeks visual art that engage with your environment: the actions of DHS/ICE, corrupt political figures, oppression, discrimination, unlawful arrests, rights infringements, or the plight of those affected by capitalism, labor, and land struggles.

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Fifth Estate #418, Summer 2026

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