McCarthy Versus Acheson
Opportunism Versus Integrity
Linda Bolt

“My Dear President Truman,” wrote Mrs. G. C. Hemphill. “Last night I listened to a speech by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Senator McCarthy gave proof that our Ambassador At Large, Philip Jessup, has communistic tendencies.” Undoubtedly, not for the first time, President Truman was hearing from a constituent about one of the most newsworthy names of the early 1950s, Joseph R. McCarthy, freshman United Stated senator from Wisconsin. McCarthy had many supporters, and Mrs. Hemphill was one of the Americans who trusted him. She continued her letter, “Mr. Truman, regardless of what your feelings are toward Mr. McCarthy, you must admit the man is trying to weed out the communists in our government and you should give him credit, as he knows what he is talking about.” Other Americans shared Mrs. Hemphill’s fears about communists in the government. J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, was among McCarthy’s champions, and journalist William A. Nolen quoted Hoover’s assessment: “He is earnest. He is sincere. Whenever you attack subversives of any kind you are going to be the victim of the most extremely vicious criticism that can be made.” Senator McCarthy’s pronouncements and accusations regarding rampant communist sympathizers in high places dominated the news of the early Cold War years. Most significant were his accusations against the State Department and Dean G. Acheson.

McCarthy was a Midwest farm boy who shook off the dust of the farm, become an attorney, and ultimately a politician. He was a man’s man, hard drinking, poker playing, and glad-handing; his best quality was his prodigious energy. Backed by a Republican cohort that

despised the Truman Administration, McCarthy spent several years attacking the State Department and particularly Dean Acheson, undersecretary of state from 1945-1949 then secretary of state until the Eisenhower administration took office in January 1953. Acheson’s integrity allowed him to continue to do his duty in spite of insults, criticisms, and calls for his removal. McCarthy, on the other hand, was an opportunist who was looking for a way to make a name for himself; a man whose main concern was his political ambition. As a freshman Senator seeking reelection, he needed to bolster his popularity with the voters of Wisconsin, and he discovered that communism would help him accomplish his goal. Given the postwar tension between the Soviet Union and the United States, he realized that ferreting out communists was a means of gaining recognition. Even though, in his memoir, Acheson, has little to say about McCarthy the man, their conflict was very important. As Mrs. Hemphill’s letter indicates, the average American was confused and concerned about the sudden change from Russia as an ally to Russia as an enemy that possessed an atomic bomb. How could this be explained? McCarthy answered by accusing the State Department, the entity that shaped American foreign policy, of being riddled with communists, and its secretary of state, Dean Acheson, of harboring and protecting them. McCarthy’s charges, and the resulting furor he created, hampered the work of the State Department and Acheson said it took years to recover from the “sadistic pogrom.”

As secretary of state, Acheson knew that his duty was to help the Truman administration keep the world safe. “Consultation with my constitutional superior, the President, and my constitutional critic, the Congress,” he noted, “occupied about a third of my working time. If one adds the times spent . . . on conferences and speeches, these three activities would consume half of the Secretary’s time . . . the days were not long enough for all other demands.” He had immense responsibility, and there was very little time to spend on worrying about an upstart like McCarthy. Although McCarthy never offered any proof to substantiate his charges of communist infiltration at the highest levels of government, his diatribes attracted national attention and assured his notoriety throughout the country. Acheson considered McCarthy a

108 Ibid., 736.
pawn of a Republican clique led by U. S. Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio, a group intent on blackening the Truman administration any way they could. In his memoir, Acheson called the accusations “The Attack of the Primitives,” explaining that a British journalist, John Duncan Miller, had written of a “revolt of the primitives against intelligence.”

The Cold War with the Soviet Union, and America’s resulting fear of communism, gave McCarthy the platform for his charges and the headlines they produced.

The Times

According to historian David C. Engerman, “what made the Cold War cold did not center on direct conflict between the two superpowers . . . the two were not focused on . . . conquest of the other . . . the United States . . . did not seriously contemplate an attack . . . Soviet leaders never came close to contemplating a nuclear first strike.”

The Cold War, then, was a battle of nerves, threats, and shooting wars in third world countries. During World War II, the United States and Soviet Union had been reluctant partners in order to defeat the Axis forces, and Joseph Stalin, the Soviet premier, “viewed his Western allies . . . with the deepest suspicion and mistrust.”

Reluctance by the Roosevelt administration was based on Stalin’s history of brutal dictatorship, coupled with distrust bred by his secret prewar pact with Hitler. Stalin had signaled foreign policy trouble because of his aversion to Germany becoming part of a healthy postwar European economy, his need to surround his country’s border with non-threatening countries, and his general paranoia. There was a change in U.S. attitude toward the Soviets. In April 1946 when FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover told Undersecretary Acheson that a Soviet naval officer had been arrested for espionage, Acheson responded, “Arrest him . . . if you have the goods on him.” According to historian Ted Morgan, “During the war, the State Department had not permitted the arrest of Soviet spies, even

109 Ibid., 354, 751.
112 Ibid., 11-12.
when they were caught red-handed."\textsuperscript{113} This policy changed when the Truman administration learned of Stalin’s Moscow speech describing Soviet postwar aims, and the administration asked its embassy in Moscow to clarify the Soviet threat.

When George F. Kennan, chargé d’affaires at the embassy, received the query in February 1946, he responded with his eight-thousand-word telegram analyzing Soviet historical insecurity. Kennan apologized for the length of the telegram as he introduced his response, “I cannot compress answers into single brief message without ... dangerous degree of oversimplification.”\textsuperscript{114} He explained the basic features of the postwar Soviet outlook, the background for their views, how that outlook officially played out in practical terms, and how it played out unofficially. He went on to recommend U.S. containment as the best policy against the Soviet threat. Kennan said that Stalin and his subordinates realized that Soviet power could only survive if the United States was destroyed but, “Soviets are still by far the weaker force ... their success will really depend on degree of cohesion, firmness and vigor which Western World can muster. And this is factor which it is within our power to influence.”\textsuperscript{115} Acheson called the Kennan analysis “a truly remarkable dispatch,” affirming its effectiveness although the government didn’t respond until a year later.\textsuperscript{116} Kennan’s analysis and recommendation confirmed the Truman administration’s fears, igniting an anti-communist backlash in the United States government that was to last nearly fifty years.\textsuperscript{117} When, finally, there was no denial of Soviet intent, the issue was taken before Congress. “On March 12, 1947, [President] Truman gave a speech,” writes historian Allen M. Winkler, “in which he called on Congress to assist free peoples everywhere who were resisting subjugation.”\textsuperscript{118} Truman reported on the dire issues facing Turkey and Greece: “The United States has received ... an urgent appeal for financial and economic assistance ...
The very existence of the Greek state is today threatened... by Communists... the United States must supply that assistance.... There is no other country to which democratic Greece can turn.”

He asked for four hundred million dollars to aid Greece and Turkey then battling communist expansion. This 1947 speech was the unveiling of the Truman Doctrine. Another significant Cold War event of that year was the formation of the National Security Council as a means of coordinating policy among the various governmental departments.

Acheson called the National Security Council the vehicle that Truman used to inject orderly procedure into executive administration. “Matters brought before the council,” he stated, “were of importance worthy of the personal attention of the highest officers and decision by the President.” In 1950, when President Truman asked for a review of United States foreign policy, “the National Security Council also considered the need of a broad appraisal of the nation’s foreign commitments, capabilities, and the existing strategic situation, and on January 5, 1950, began one.” This was the genesis of NSC-68, the document that shaped United States Cold War foreign policy.

Paul Nitze, head of the NSC Planning Staff was instrumental in the creation of NSC-68. Both he and Kennan advocated containment, but Nitze also recommended military buildup. Winkler quoted Acheson: “The purpose of NSC-68 was to so bludgeon the mass mind of ‘top government’ that not only could the President make a decision but that the decision could be carried out.” Acheson talked about NSC-68, a document still classified at the time his book was published, saying that it took three months of work by both State Department and Defense Department planners, and called creating this policy “a difficult pregnancy.”

Many of my own public statements were properly based upon the fundamental conclusions stated in this leading embodiment of Government policy. The paper began with a statement of the

119 Winkler, The Cold War, 19.
120 Ibid., 28.
121 Acheson, Present At The Creation, 733.
122 Ibid., 347.
123 Ibid.
124 Winkler, The Cold War, 30.
125 Acheson, Present At The Creation, 373.
conflicting aims and purposes of the two superpowers . . . Throughout 1950, the year my immolation in the Senate began, I went about the country preaching this premise of NSC-68. Although NSC-68 was never officially signed, it became U.S. policy and “shaped . . . foreign and defense policy for the next twenty years.”

Acheson’s duty was to explain the policy and its ramifications to the citizens of the United States. He gave a press conference encouraging national unity as the Truman administration responded to the Soviet threat. Acheson raised four themes at the press conference: first, the difference between Western ideals of negotiating to mutual agreement, and Soviet doctrine of using force to gain an outcome unacceptable to the other side; second, that in dealing with the Soviets it was better to act than negotiate; third, the conversion of former enemies, Germany and Japan, into allies; and last, that bickering over the advisability of the government’s program for containing the Soviets “created both weakness and the appearance of weakness.”

Acheson also took the “national unity in the face of Soviet expansionism” theme on the road. In a speech delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, he listed Soviet roadblocks to cooperation, speaking of their police state, their obstruction in the United Nations, their attempts at undermining established governments, and their deliberate lies to their own citizens about United States aims and goals. He ended the speech by reaffirming the need for American diligence and unity saying:

I see no evidence that the Soviet leaders will change their conduct until the progress of the free world convinces them that they cannot profit from a continuation of these tensions . . . We want peace, but not at any price. We are ready to negotiate, but not at the expense of rousing false hopes which would be dashed by new failures. We are equally determined to support all real efforts for peaceful settlements and to resist aggression. The times call for a total diplomacy equal to the task of defense against Soviet expansion and to the task of building the kind of

126 Acheson, Present At The Creation, 375.
127 Winkler, The Cold War, 28.
128 Acheson, Present At The Creation, 378.
world in which our way of life can flourish... The alternative is to allow the free nations to succumb one by one to the erosive and encroaching processes of Soviet expansion.\textsuperscript{129}

The speech at Berkley laid out the problem, the government plan to combat the problem, and the need for strength and unity to combat the Soviet threat. “In years to come,” says journalist David Halberstam, “students of American foreign policy would have considerable difficulty in deciding which Secretary of State had been more militantly anti-communist—Dean Acheson or John Foster Dulles.”\textsuperscript{130}

United States foreign policy during the Cold War was based on Eurocentrism; there was a mindset in the State Department that Europe was central to the containment of the Soviet Union regardless of concerns in “third world” countries. Beisner described Acheson’s worldview, “Apart from Japan and China (and later Korea), Acheson regarded most non-European areas of the world as insignificant and nuisances,” says his biographer Robert L. Beisner, “rulers like Nehru and the Shah seemed to specialize in annoying him and stealing time from doing what really mattered, which was building the western alliance against the Soviet Union.”\textsuperscript{131} Acheson’s “penchant for sneering at peripheral states and peoples limited his sympathies” and “a sense of class and racial superiority affected how low on the totem pole he placed powerless peoples of color. So did hard calculations about what was important to U.S. policy.”\textsuperscript{132}

As secretary of state, Acheson’s Cold War foreign policy focused on containing Soviet expansion through U. S. influence in Europe, and he showed little concern for how decisions concerning U. S. security might affect other countries in the Americas.

During the decade of the 1950s in the United States, an unparalleled hysteria regarding communism developed and added the noun McCarthyism to the dictionary because of his accusations toward State

\textsuperscript{130} David Halberstam, \textit{The Fifties} (New York: Random House, 1993), 389.
\textsuperscript{131} Beisner, \textit{Dean Acheson}, 219.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 211.
Department employees about communist affiliation. Although he became the face of anticommunism, McCarthy was not the first of the inquisitors; he simply recognized a public platform and jumped on it. The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) had been founded in 1938 but became permanent in 1945. When HUAC began investigations into communism it created a “perception that there was a serious problem within the United States and helped legitimize tactics that soon threatened the civil liberties of all U.S. citizens.”133 The media circus that evolved around the HUAC hearings may have been the impetus that started Joseph McCarthy on his public pursuit of communists in governmental high places.

Conservatives William F. Buckley and L. Brent Bozell defended McCarthy in his accusations. They began by documenting the many security problems at the State Department at the close of World War II, and the subsequent years under Acheson. Buckley and Bozell contended in the fall 1945 “the State Department became the haven for every jobless ideologue in Washington” when “roughly 13,000 employees of wartime agencies” transferred. The result “presented almost insuperable problems for the Department’s security officers.” Acheson replaced Joseph Grew as undersecretary of state, and among his assistants was Alger Hiss.134 Buckley and Bozell infer that, at the end of the war, the State Department became the perfect place for communist mischief making. They explained that a “left-wing faction with the Department” established its own objectives with Hiss “becoming an adjunct to the Soviet Foreign Office.”135 Fortunately, they said, “Secretary Byrnes rejected the proposed reorganization plan. Had Byrnes accepted it, and had Whittaker Chambers remained silent, Alger Hiss would have emerged as our virtual Secretary of State.”136 Hiss is familiar to any student of Cold War history because Chambers named him as a communist, and despite Hiss’s continued denials of communist affiliation, the release of transcripts declassified in 1995 from the army’s VENONA project, suggest Chambers was telling the truth.

133 Winkler, The Cold War, 37-38.
135 Ibid., 10.
136 Ibid., 11.
The Alger Hiss Issue

Given the furor of anti-communist sentiment of the late 1940s, Beisner claimed Acheson made a serious political error by not disavowing Hiss. Chambers first accused Hiss of being a Soviet agent in 1939. Hiss had worked in in the State Department since 1936, and after Acheson arrived there in 1941, the two were friendly, but Hiss reported to Acheson for only a few months and was never his assistant. In invited to be president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in 1945, Hiss debated taking the position and tendered his resignation at the State Department on Acheson’s advice. “Take this job,” Acheson told him. “People will continue to raise these doubts about you so long as you are in a position where you are subject to this sort of attack.” With the retirement of General George C. Marshall as secretary of state in 1949, President Truman appointed Acheson. At his confirmation hearing before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Acheson was asked if Hiss had been his chief of staff or special assistant while he was assistant secretary of state. Acheson told the committee that Donald Hiss, Alger’s brother “had served me and the country with complete fidelity and loyalty ... [and] was my partner in the practice of law.” Beisner asserts that Acheson’s “declaration supporting Hiss was impetuous but not impulsive ... [it] impaired his effectiveness ... Acheson continued to conduct a capable foreign policy, but only in the teeth of incessant criticism.” In answer to a press conference question in January 1950, Acheson replied, “I do not intend to turn my back on Alger Hiss ... every person ... has upon his conscience the very serious task of deciding what his attitude is and what his conduct should be. That must be done by each person in the light of his own standards and his own principles.” Acheson’s statements regarding Hiss added an element of believability to McCarthy’s charges of disloyalty against the secretary in February 1950.

137 Acheson, Present At The Creation, 251.
138 Morgan, Reds, 271.
139 Acheson, Present At The Creation, 249.
140 Ibid., 251.
141 Beisner, Dean Acheson, 281.
142 Acheson, Present At The Creation, 360.
Writing about McCarthy’s charges against the state department, historian Ellen Schrecker argued that “class antagonisms” and homophobia determined McCarthy’s “macho disdain” for Acheson. He called him “the Red Dean of Fashion.” Halberstam agreed: “[for McCarthy] class distinctions were critical; he hated the social snobbery, implied or real, in men like Acheson and Hiss.” McCarthy’s views of Acheson and his disrespectful language probably played well in Midwest farm country and in small towns of America where upper class sophistication was suspect. On August 19, 1950, The Saturday Evening Post, one of the most popular magazines of the Cold War era, carried the article, “Why Americans Hate the State Department.” “A few days after the Korean crisis broke last June,” wrote Demaree Bess, “Senator Robert A. Taft, of Ohio, publicly declared that Secretary of State Dean Acheson should resign . . . this statement by one of the most respected members of the Senate brought to a climax a record-breaking campaign against the Department of State.” A blurb on the article’s first page said, “Often denounced as ‘cooky-pushers in striped pants’ the State Department has long been a favorite whipping boy. Why are we always willing to think the worst of this agency? Is our hatred justified?” For Bess, the State Department “serves as a lightening conductor for popular emotions” and gets the blame. Even presidents, Acheson remembered, “had uneasy doubts about the State Department.” If the general population that did not have much respect for the State Department, he suggested, the White House, as well, had to be convinced of the worth and dedication of its employees.

The Men

The striped-pants image of State Department officials fueled McCarthy’s animosity toward Acheson, but the differences in their family backgrounds further separated them. Acheson was a product of the East Coast, and he grew up near Hartford, Connecticut, the oldest of three children. Acheson’s father, Edward, “became an Episcopal

144 Halberstam, the Fifties, 54.
146 Acheson, Present At The Creation, 250.
clergyman, Middletown’s rector, and Bishop of the Connecticut Diocese,” while his mother, Eleanor, “a staunch anglophile . . . focused her energies on Middletown society.” Acheson lived a comfortable childhood, insulated from the financial stress of the Great Depression and eventually attended Groton School, a college preparatory boarding school, called by Beisner the “breeder of statesmen.” He attended Yale University where he “took on the stylish ways that later so infuriated his foes” and finished his formal studies at Harvard Law School. As a partner in his law firm, he became involved with the Democratic Party and the “fringes of the Franklin Roosevelt circle.” In 1933, as acting secretary of the treasury, he went head to head with President Roosevelt over a currency policy that Acheson believed illegal. As a result, he was either fired or submitted a gracious letter of resignation, but his biographer says Roosevelt “harbored misgivings about their clash.” The onset of World War II brought Acheson back into public service, and except for an eighteen-month hiatus in 1947-48, he served for the next eleven years. Beisner portrayed Acheson as intellectually brilliant, morally courageous, and elegantly stylish. He called up journalist Phillip Hamburger’s prose when he described Acheson as having both an outer and an inner self. “An austere, tall, slim, long-legged, and outrageously mustached fashion plate, a parody of the diplomatic virtues” on the outside, Acheson on the inside proved “a quick wit and a skeptical mind, impatient with procedural form, self-analytical to an advanced degree, and a taskmaster who will accept from himself nothing less than what he considers perfection.” The consummate gentleman, Acheson spoke in an upper class accent, stood erect, and dressed stylishly with cufflinks, a pocket handkerchief and a boutonniere. He was a statesman who went out of his way to look the part in contrast to his nemesis, McCarthy with his perpetual five o’clock shadow and his rumpled, off the rack suits.

147 Beisner, Dean Acheson, 7.
148 Ibid., 8.
149 Ibid., 9.
150 Ibid., 11-12.
151 Ibid., 13.
152 Ibid., 87.
153 Beisner, Dean Acheson, 90.
154 Ibid., 88-89.
In the matter of morals and behavior, McCarthy continued as he began, and his ascent to the senate reflected the same ambition and opportunism.

Returning from World War II, McCarthy challenged Robert M. LaFollette, Jr., in the 1946 Republican primary. LaFollette had served in the Senate for twenty years as a member of the Wisconsin Progressive Party. His father Robert, Sr. had held the seat for the twenty previous years, and his brother, Phillip, served a number of terms as Governor of Wisconsin. The 1946 senate race should have been a shoo-in for LaFollette, but he was “a man of less outward splendor and magnetism than his father, but not of less substance.” McCarthy was the exact opposite of LaFollette. Where LaFollette devoted himself to bringing order to the Senate, McCarthy threw it into disorder, and the same men who in the 1950s called McCarthy the “worst” senator had named LaFollette the “best” senator in the 1940s. Innuendos, half-truths, and flat-out lies became the essence of the McCarthy campaign.

Another view of the election was that LaFollette “had lost touch with the grass roots.” Add to that an influential enemy who was the leader of the Stalwarts, right-wingers who were held together by opposition to the LaFollettes. Tom Coleman was famous for hating the LaFollettes, and though he considered McCarthy a liability, he was won over. McCarthy told Coleman he would run with or without the Republican endorsement, and in a three-way race, LaFollette would win. Because Coleman wanted LaFollette defeated and believed McCarthy would do anything to “get what he wanted,” he agreed to support McCarthy. As “the Stalwarts fell into line,” Coleman “made every resource available to him, including a public relations firm, a campaign staff, and an enormous capital outlay.” McCarthy outspent LaFollette, but he also counted on “his personal assets—his driving ambition, his enormous physical stamina, and his insatiable thirst for

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164 Ibid., 98-103.
The campaign took on a “manic air, dominated by a figure who would say anything, threaten anyone, go anywhere to this objective.” McCarthy “kept plugging away, ever hopeful that his murderous schedule would pay off.” The scholar David M. Oshinsky speculates that McCarthy was a hyperactive child, and he harkened back to McCarthy’s early days “as someone who ‘couldn’t sit still.’ He gulped his food, ran from place to place, labored incessantly, and slept a good deal less than his brothers and sisters.” At least, this explained much of McCarthy’s disorganized mania.

The Accusations

Senator Joseph McCarthy became a powerful adversary for several years. Many Republicans encouraged him as he railed against Truman’s administration, while many Democrats kept their heads down out of his target range. On February 9, 1950, at a Lincoln Day celebration in Wheeling, West Virginia, for the Ohio County Women’s Republican Club, McCarthy took the State Department, especially Acheson, to task for harboring traitors. “I have in my hand fifty-seven cases of individuals who would appear to be either card carrying members or certainly loyal to the Communist Party,” he said, “but who nevertheless are still helping to shape our foreign policy.” David Halberstam says that if McCarthy had known what a furor the speech would raise, he would have given it in a larger venue and to a higher profile group. From Wheeling McCarthy went on to Reno, Nevada, where he began to see the impact his accusation had on the country.

The Associated Press story from Reno, Nevada on February 11, 1950 was headlined, “Senator Asks Truman to Check Red Workers.” McCarthy told reporters he was going to “make things so politically inexpedient for the President that he would just have to clear out the state department.” He telegraphed President Truman telling him the list of communists was longer than fifty-seven, and should demand

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165 Oshinsky, A Conspiracy So Immense, 37-44.
166 Ibid., 45.
167 Ibid., 6.
168 Schrecker, Many Are The Crimes, 240.
169 Halberstam, the Fifties, 49-50.
from Acheson anyone “listed as being disloyal, and who are still working in the State Department” along with “the names and a complete report on all of those who were placed in the department by Alger Hiss.” McCarthy further warned Truman: “Failure on your part will label the Democratic Party of being the bed fellow of international communism.” Upon returning to Washington, McCarthy continued his pursuit of the limelight by announcing that he would be giving the senate “a detailed report” on the communists at work in the state department. The senate chamber was nearly full when McCarthy spoke, citing “81 loyalty risks.” Without naming any names, he went through the 81 cases individually in a session that lasted nearly eight hours. The charges were officially on the record, and across the country newspapers reported the accusations by McCarthy and the denials by Acheson.

Acheson responded to the charges with a news conference defending his colleagues, reassuring the media and the American people that “the State Department sheltered no one found to be disloyal or held to be a bad security risk.” He told reporters he had received only “descriptions of alleged cases of disloyalty” from McCarthy but no names. When those descriptions were compared to a list previously given to Congress by the State Department, the “striking similarity . . . led to the conclusion that they were the same case.” Since there were no names, there was no way of proving which list was the original. But Acheson’s news conference failed to stop McCarthy. In May 1950, he asked President Truman to fire Acheson and Phillip Jessup, U. S. Ambassador at Large. McCarthy’s attack was based on “Acheson having ‘sabotaged and vetoed’ a congressional attempt to fortify South Korea against the communist invasion.”

172 “Senate To Get Details On Reds,” South Bend Tribune, February 18, 1950.
173 Oshinsky, A Conspiracy So Immense, 112-114.
The Response

When he received McCarthy’s telegram, President Truman’s initial reaction was anger. Truman considered him a “troublemaker who managed to offend his senatorial colleagues on a bipartisan basis—the antithesis of the ideal senator in almost every respect.” The message he drafted in reply to the telegram was short and to the point:

I read your telegram of February 11 from Reno, Nevada with a great deal of interest and this is the first time in my experience, and I was ten years in the Senate, that I ever heard of a Senator trying to discredit his own Government before the world. You know that is not done by honest public officials. Your telegram is not only not true and an insolent approach to a situation that should have been worked out between man and man but it shows conclusively that you are not even fit to have a hand in the operation of the Government of the United States.

I am very sure that the people of Wisconsin are extremely sorry that they are represented by a person who has as little sense of responsibility as you have.

Truman never sent the telegram, deciding to let his anger pass, but believed McCarthy to be untrustworthy and questioned why “a United States senator [would] go this far out on a limb without hard evidence.”

In response to McCarthy’s report on February 25, 1950, the Senate passed a resolution to investigate disloyalty in the State Department, and appointed a subcommittee chaired by Senator Millard Tydings of Maryland to hold hearings. He asked McCarthy, “do you know the name—I do not want you to tell it—but do you know the name of this particular high State Department official?” McCarthy responded, “[W]hen we get to case number 57 I will give you all the names in that case. No names will be held back. There are a number of names. I

178 Oshinsky, A Conspiracy So Immense, 112.
frankly cannot remember the vast number of names." 179 Tydings referred to an official in case 14, McCarthy simply went on and on about case 57, talking around, and disregarding, Tydings’ question. Nothing was cleared up in any way. It did, however, generate an abundance of media coverage making the names McCarthy and Tydings familiar to most Americans.

Acheson continued to exercise restraint in response to the McCarthy accusations and the furor that engulfed him. In his memoir, he related some of the verbal abuse heaped on Truman, Marshall, and himself by Republican senators. Four members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “followed by Senator Taft, accused President Truman and me of having invited the attack on Korea.” 180 Acheson claimed the height of the abuse came from Senator William E. Jenner, Republican of Indiana, who stated, “It is tragic . . . that General Marshall is not enough of a patriot to tell the American people the truth . . . instead of joining hands . . . with this criminal crowd of traitors and Communist appeasers who, under the continuing influence and direction of Mr. Truman and Mr. Acheson, are still selling America down the river.” 181 Acheson said of the attacks, “The foregoing summary of 1950’s shameful and nihilistic orgy exaggerates its effect upon us. Our minds were occupied with great problems and our time with equally great efforts to meet them...humor and “contempt for the contemptible” in [historian and biographer] Douglas Freeman’s phrase ... proved, as always, a shield and buckler.” 182 Acheson’s role as a statesman, and his duties as spokesman for the free world, continued to be his primary consideration in the midst of the political backbiting in Washington.

Acheson remembered being face-to-face with McCarthy only once in an elevator at the senate office building. There was no showdown, they shook hands and never spoke during the ride. McCarthy was sometimes compared to Hitler, but Acheson’s assessment of him was much more mundane and ego-bruising:

179 US Senate, State Department Loyalty Investigation: Hearings Before A Subcommittee of the Committee on Foreign Relations. Eighty-first congress, second session pursuant to senate resolution 231.a., http://archive.org/stream/statedepartmentele195001unitidivutxt
180 Acheson, Present At The Creation, 365.
181 Ibid.
182 Acheson, Present At The Creation, 366.
[McCarthy] was essentially a small-town bully, without sustaining purpose, who on his own would soon have petered out. Flattered, built up and sustained by Taft, the Republican right, and their accomplice, the press . . . he served their various purposes. After the election of 1952 they no longer had any use for him, but . . . he was not shrewd enough to see that his day was over... he became a nuisance; those who had used him dropped him . . . [Vermont] Senator Ralph Flanders, tired of the antics . . . called upon the members to censure him . . . they did by just over a two-thirds majority. The very contemptuousness of his rejection broke him.183

Afterword

Historian Ted Morgan argues that in many ways the anticom- munist paranoia of the early Cold War was justified. He suggests that release of the VENONA transcripts validated much of the concern about communist infiltration into the highest levels of government circles. “The American Communist Party served as a recruitment pool for Soviet Agents,” he says. “This was confirmed by the release in 1995 of the Venona transcripts, the decoded cable traffic between the Moscow KGB and its American stations.”184 Other historians have agreed that the VENONA information affirmed the suspicions and convictions about a number of people accused of spying for the Soviets. “Its decrypted cables,” notes Oshinsky, “proved how deeply the federal government had been penetrated by communist spies during Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s three-plus presidential terms.”185 He continues:

Thousands of workers had been needed to staff a huge bureaucracy created by FDR’s New Deal and the nation’s entry into World War II. With virtually no security system in place, communists found it relatively simple to form spy cells in some of the government’s most sensitive places: the State Department, the Treasury Department, and the Manhattan (atomic bomb)

183 Ibid., 369-370.
184 Morgan, Reds, xiii.
185 Oshinsky, A Conspiracy So Immense, x.
Project, to name a few. Among the key Soviet agents described in Verona and the KGB archives are Alger Hiss, Julius Rosenberg, and Harry Dexter White.  

In 1995, KGB’s own files proved that highly placed State Department personnel were working for the Soviets. Morgan says “the Venona transcripts have since substantiated that at least seventy-six employees of the federal government had covert relationships with Soviet intelligence during the war years.” The key phrase appears to be “during the war years,” before McCarthy was a senator. “We know the extent of Soviet espionage,” adds Morgan, “the danger was real, but by the time McCarthy came on the scene it was all but spent, and the Communist Party was moribund, so that he was in fact whipping a dead horse.” He noted:

[the] release of Venona would have nipped McCarthyism in the bud, for the true facts about real spies would have made wild accusations about imaginary spies irrelevant . . . Venona would have revealed unstinted spying, abetted by the American [Communist] party . . . It would have stifled the outcry that Communists were the innocent victims of Red-baiting and witch-hunts, and shown that McCarthy was inconsequential to the issue he rode to fame.

In February 1950 when McCarthy began his vendetta against the State Department for harboring 205, 81, or 57 “card-carrying Communists,” only the VENONA code-breakers and their handlers knew the extent of the communist infiltration in the previous two decades. But as Schrecker explains: “The FBI intercepted these messages at the time but was unable to decipher them until the late 1940s when a group of cryptographers . . . began to break the Soviet encryption.”  

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186 Ibid.
188 Ibid., xiv.
189 Ibid., 293.
190 Schrecker, Many Are The Crimes, xvii.
American traitors. Thus proof of the extent of pre-Cold War communist infiltration remained hidden until 1995, many years after McCarthy made his way into national and international headlines.

McCarthy has had his defenders over the years, but the bulk of the evidence points to a small town, small-minded opportunist who began his career by taking advantage of other men in his drive for political success. He finally made a name for himself during the tense beginning of the Cold War by accusing the Truman administration and the State Department of traitorous action in retaining communists and communist sympathizers at the highest levels of government. The example of character and integrity that Acheson exhibited during and after the “attack of the primitives” has served his reputation well. When McCarthy died in 1957, the only public comment Acheson made was, “De mortuis nil nisi bonum, [translated] say nothing about the dead unless it is good.”¹⁹¹ As for Joseph R. McCarthy, his legacy can be found beside his name in the dictionary. McCarthyism is defined as the use of indiscriminate, often unfounded, accusations, ostensibly in the suppression of communism.

¹⁹¹ Acheson, Present At The Creation, 363; Oshinsky, A Conspiracy So Immense, 313.
McCarthy did not pay much attention to the press, but the part of the Press and the politicians who made it their business to keep him in the public eye had no difficulty in assuring the American public that McCarthy was wrong. He had made statements that were patently false, and he had engaged in behavior that was offensive and that demonstrated his general lack of respect for the democratic process. The effect of McCarthy’s actions was to undermine the democratic process and to create a climate of fear and suspicion. In the end, McCarthy’s downfall was a necessary consequence of the way in which he had conducted himself.

In February 1950, when McCarthy began his vendetta against the State Department for harboring 205, 81, or 57 “card-carrying Communists,” only the VENONA code-breakers and their handlers knew the extent of the communist infiltration in the previous two decades. But as Schrecker explains: “The FBI intercepted these messages at the time but was unable to decipher them until the late 1940s when a group of cryptographers ... began to break the Soviet encryption.” 106 Description of the messages back and forth between Russia and American communists remained a secret in hopes of unmasking Soviet agents and