Anticommunism run amok: the life of Senator Pat McCarran

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Washington Gone Crazy: Senator Pat McCarran and the Great American Communist Hunt, *Michael J. Ybarra, Steerforth Press, 2004*

Michael J. Ybarra's new biography of Pat McCarran provides an opportunity to review the lasting significance of McCarthyism in America's political and social history. While the anticommunist hysteria that marked the early 1950s is most often identified with the most prominent red-baiting politician of the time, Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy, the movement was instigated and promoted by both the Democratic and Republican parties. Anticommunism was embraced as a genuinely bipartisan creed.

McCarran was a Democrat, elected to the Senate from Nevada in 1932. He played an important role in contributing to the atmosphere of fear and suspicion that was promoted with the onset of the Cold War, and drawing up the repressive legislation that was enacted in response to the "Communist threat."

While McCarthy grabbed the headlines with his sensational lists of alleged Communists who had infiltrated the government, McCarran was largely responsible for the drafting of the antidemocratic laws that became McCarthyism's legislative legacy. The infamous McCarran Act of 1950 required every Communist Party member to register with the government, and allowed for the incarceration of suspected "subversives" in concentration camps. The 1952 McCarran-Walter Act established a highly restrictive immigration system, and gave the state sweeping powers to deport foreign nationals who held "un-American" political views.

Michael J. Ybarra, a former staff reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, has brought together an enormous wealth of detail in his 800-page biography. His study is seriously distorted, however, by a determination to sharply demarcate what he views as McCarran's counterproductive and excessively authoritarian anticommunism, from what he describes as liberalism's "honorable anticommunism." This false dichotomy fails to recognize that liberalism not only acquiesced to, but actively encouraged, the extreme right's anticommunist offensive in the post-war period.

Pat McCarran was born into an Irish immigrant family in 1876 in Reno, Nevada. He grew up in poverty, as his illiterate parents struggled to earn a living from sheep farming. An injury suffered by his father forced McCarran to withdraw from the University of Nevada so as to maintain the ranch. He only passed the bar exam in 1905, after studying law independently.

Nevada politics in this era was dominated by the cause of silver. After Congress stopped the minting of silver dollars in 1873, the state's silver mining industry suffered from a steep decline in the price of the precious metal. In the 1892 presidential election, Nevada was one of four states that voted for the People's (Populist) Party, which campaigned for the restoration of the silver currency.

While the Populists' campaign featured left-wing demands (such as the eight-hour working day and the nationalization of the railroads and other utilities), there was also a distinctly reactionary side to the silver movement. "To silverites the economic turbulence besetting America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was not an accident," Ybarra notes, "it was part of an international conspiracy by British bankers and Jewish financiers to demonetize silver and thus drive up the value of gold, enriching Wall Street while impoverishing Main Street" (p. 26).

McCarran quickly assimilated such conceptions. He grew accustomed to understanding the world in conspiratorial terms, and treating his political adversaries as enemies. Communists, Jews and foreigners—usually considered analogous categories by McCarran—were feared and despised as threats to America. Or, to be more precise, threats against the American idyll that existed nowhere but in McCarran's mind—an America of God-fearing rugged individualists and pioneers, hardworking and thrifty, unencumbered by governmental intrusions.

His nationalist and xenophobic world view was reinforced by relentless personal ambition. Throughout his life, McCarran was convinced that those who enjoyed more power than he did were conspiring against him. He was driven by feelings of resentment and hatred, and felt compelled not only to defeat his enemies, but to humiliate them.

McCarran was, however, a cagey and hard-working man, and he became known as Nevada's most powerful orator through his work as a defense lawyer. After a stint as Nevada Supreme Court justice, in 1932 he secured the Senate nomination to which he had long aspired. He defeated the Republican incumbent after an appeal to Nevadans to support the incoming president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, by installing a friendly Democratic Senate.

Roosevelt and McCarran began their careers as elected federal officeholders in the midst of the gravest economic crisis in the history of the United States. The Great Depression that was sparked by the 1929 stock market collapse led to unprecedented levels of unemployment, poverty and destitution. By 1933, industrial production was approximately half of what it had been four years earlier, and national income had collapsed from $81 billion in 1929 to $39 billion in 1932. Approximately one in four Americans was unemployed by 1932.

In response to the crisis, the working class launched a series of struggles for the right to organize trade unions in basic industry, and for improved wages and conditions. The newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) led a number of violently contested, though ultimately successful disputes. These included the Toledo Electric Auto-Lite struggle of 1931, the 1934 longshoremen's strike in San Francisco, and the 1937 sit-down strikes in the Michigan auto industry. Socialists often played prominent leadership roles in these struggles: the American Trotskyist movement led the 1934 Teamsters strike in Minneapolis.

Roosevelt rightly recognized these developments to be grave threats to the Democratic Party, and more fundamentally, to the capitalist system within the United States. In order to stave off the revolutionary challenge, his New Deal instituted a series of reform measures that granted a number of significant concessions to the working class. Relief measures were instituted to ameliorate the effects of mass unemployment, with the Civilian Conservation Corps, Civil Works Administration, and Federal

Emergency Relief Administration aiding some 15 million unemployed people. Regulations were also enacted setting workers' maximum hours and minimum pay, and providing some protection to those joining a union.

Despite his campaign promises, McCarran quickly became one of the most intransigent opponents of Roosevelt's program. The senator believed that the New Deal represented an unconstitutional step towards executive dictatorship. "The innovations of executive power," he declared, "indulged in by Jackson, promoted by Lincoln, expounded by Garfield, declared righteous by [Theodore] Roosevelt and philosophically promulgated by Wilson, appear to have been but forerunners, rivulets, as it were, contributing to a flood that now sweeps on, submerging the utopian doctrines and theories of Jefferson and conferring unheard of and unfettered expansion to the executive" (p. 161).

McCarran combined grand rhetoric with a shrewd sensitivity to the interests of a powerful layer within the American bourgeoisie that considered any concession to the working class to be an unacceptable constraint on its profit-making prerogatives. He secured the backing of Nevada's business elite, which bankrolled the senator's reelection campaigns and ensured that he received favorable press coverage, despite the New Deal's wide popularity among ordinary Nevadans. By the end of the 1930s, the Nevada Democratic Party had effectively been converted into McCarran's fiefdom, and his total domination of state politics was surpassed in this period only by Louisiana's Huey Long.

McCarran also became notorious for his anticommunist tirades. He toured the country in 1935, warning against communist infiltration of the school system and alleged pro-Soviet doctoring of textbooks. He was convinced, as Ybarra notes, that Roosevelt "had surrounded himself with dangerous radicals who had not only usurped legislative authority but actually turned their bureaucratic fiefdoms into citadels of revolution" (p. 162).

By the end of World War II, McCarran had secured a number of the most powerful congressional positions. The senator, incidentally, was a fierce opponent of America's entry into the war before the Pearl Harbor attack, and appeared at an antiwar rally alongside Charles Lindbergh. "I think one American boy, the son of an American mother, is worth more than all central Europe," he declared in 1939 (p. 232).

Power in the Senate was largely based on seniority, and in 1944, shortly before commencing his third term, the senator from Nevada won the coveted post of Judiciary Committee chairman. The committee oversaw much of the legislation passing through the Senate, and controlled the appointments of federal judges.

McCarran also headed the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee that approved the budgets of the State, Justice, Commerce and Labor departments. "This is the most powerful subcommittee in the US senate because it controls the money for these departments so vital to the government," McCarran wrote to his daughter. "One can raise merry havoc with these departments by the control of their purse strings" (p. 265).

In March 1947, President Harry Truman, a Democrat, addressed a joint session of Congress and announced the "Truman Doctrine," under which the US was committed to a global engagement against communism and the USSR. The president then issued an executive order instituting a "loyalty program" for government employees. The program saw the FBI conduct 2.8 million file checks and over 10,000 full field investigations on federal workers.

The presidential sanctioning of communist witch-hunting created the conditions in which the most right-wing elements within the political establishment could flourish. Pat McCarran, previously considered something of an ideologue and crank, now found his anticommunist speeches echoed throughout Washington.

The Nevada senator won the chairmanship of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS), formed in December 1951. The body, which became known simply as the "McCarran Committee," enjoyed sweeping powers to investigate "the extent, nature and effects of subversive activities."

The McCarran Committee investigated schools and universities, trade unions, and the federal bureaucracy. The senator employed extraordinary methods of intimidation and harassment against uncooperative witnesses. He had the city's vice squad conduct checks on those who appeared before the committee, and threatened to publicly expose homosexuals if they did not fully satisfy the committee's demands. Hostile witnesses were ruthlessly interrogated and threatened with contempt charges.

McCarran formed a secret alliance with the head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, J. Edgar Hoover. As Ybarra describes: "The FBI would act as a kind of private detective agency for SISS, investigating suspects and furnishing leads, while the committee would launder information for the bureau, publicly pillorying suspected subversives against whom a court case could not be made" (p. 547).

The committee spent 18 months investigating who had "lost China" to communism. The historic anti-imperialist struggle of the Chinese people that culminated in the rout of the corrupt nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek could be understood by the far-right only as the product of a communist conspiracy within the US government. The committee's investigation ended the careers of scores of loyal diplomats within the State Department, and led to the suicide of one wrongfully accused official. "If [his] conscience was clear," McCarran responded dismissively, "he had no reason to suffer from what he expected of our committee" (p. 656).

McCarran also evoked the specter of communism in his fierce attacks on immigrants and refugees. He repeatedly denounced any proposal to allow the entry of European refugees into the United States. "Unassimilable blocks of aliens with foreign ideologies," McCarran called them. He also suggested that pressure to accept refugees was being driven by a "pressure group" with "unlimited money"—a none-too-subtle euphemism for Jews.

Together with fellow right-wing Democrat Francis Walter, he sponsored the Immigration and Nationalities Act in 1952. The McCarran-Walter Act, as it was known, enshrined the quota system that had first been introduced in 1924. Under this system, visas were granted to countries on a basis proportional to their representation in the US population. This favored British applicants, while restricting immigration from countries such as Italy and Greece. The act also allowed anyone deemed a "subversive" to be banned from entering the country, or to be deported after arrival.

McCarran's most important bill was the Internal Security (McCarran) Act of 1950. This proposed a number of measures including: forcing Communist Party members and those involved in what were deemed to be CP front organizations to register with the government, and have their literature stamped as propaganda; banning Communists from holding passports or government jobs; making a crime of any action deemed to contribute towards the formation of a totalitarian state within the US; and a raft of anti-immigrant provisions, including giving the government the power to revoke the citizenship of naturalized immigrants who joined or associated with any subversive organization within five years of becoming an American citizen.

The liberal wing of the Democratic Party, led by senators Paul Douglas and Hubert Humphrey, put forward an alternative bill that empowered the president to intern suspected subversives in concentration camps in the event of a national emergency. Rejecting any principled opposition to the grossly antidemocratic measures in McCarran's proposal, the liberal senators attempted to defeat the McCarran Act by countering with their own repressive measures.

Right-wing senators lined up to denounce the idea for its "totalitarianism." McCarran declared, "This title, Mr. President, is one of the most startling products of legislative draftsmanship which has ever

been printed under the sponsorship of a United States senator. It is a workable blueprint for the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the United States; but it is not workable under any of the accepted standards of Americanism, which include preservation of the fundamental freedoms guaranteed in the Bill of Rights" (p. 523).

The senator soon found a way to make the proposal more "workable"—he added a provision for habeas corpus, and then incorporated the liberals' bill into the McCarran Act. Humphrey responded by attacking McCarran from the right. "I have never seen such solicitude on the part of so-called anticommunists for the communists," he declared. "If we are in war and these despicable traitors decide to blow up every building we have, if they decide to destroy every means of communication, every port facility, and every dock, Mr. President, do you know how they would get protection? They would have it through the writ of habeas corpus, under this bill" (p. 530).

The McCarran Act eventually passed in the Senate, 70 votes to 7, with the support of Humphrey and other liberal Democrats. Truman (who despised McCarran) vetoed the bill, after the CIA, and the Justice, Defense and State departments criticized the act's provisions for being cumbersome and unworkable. "We would betray our finest traditions if we attempted, as this bill would attempt, to curb the simple expression of opinion," the president said. "The course proposed by this bill would delight the Communists, for it would make a mockery of the Bill of Rights and of our claims to stand for freedom in the world" (p. 528). The veto was overridden by a large majority vote in Congress.

The passage of the bill became McCarran's lasting contribution. He died in September 1954. While many sections of the act were soon declared unconstitutional, it was only fully repealed in 1990.

The role played by the Democratic Party, and particularly the liberal faction of the party, in the drafting of the McCarran Act highlights the fact that were it not for liberalism's adoption of anticommunism in the postwar period, McCarran's influence, and, indeed, McCarthyism itself, could never have developed as they did.

The credibility of Ybarra's biography is fatally undermined by his failure to recognize this fact. *Washington Gone Crazy* acknowledges the essential rottenness of McCarran's political record, but draws no broader conclusions about what his rise to power says about the postwar political and social system in the US, and about the vicissitudes of American liberalism. The author is, above all, concerned to erect a completely artificial dividing line between liberal anticommunism and McCarthyism.

"The Communist Party presented a unique challenge to American liberty," Ybarra writes. "The party was simultaneously a movement and a conspiracy that enjoyed the constitutional protections of a society it despised and was trying to destroy. Anti-Communism, then, was both a rational and necessary response. Anti-Communism run amok was something altogether different.... McCarran, it turns out, was half right. There actually were Communists in Washington. But it was the hunt for them that did the real damage" (pp. 8, 759-60).

Such a perspective is both intellectually dishonest and morally bankrupt. There is nothing legitimate about anticommunism, irrespective of what form it adopts.

The central premise of anticommunism is that the state can and should proscribe certain political ideas. For the anticommunist, the Bill of Rights and other constitutional protections of freedom of speech and association are applicable only to those who accept the premises of the present political and social order. These antidemocratic conceptions inevitably give rise to authoritarian and fascistic tendencies. McCarthyism was not, as Ybarra maintains, the unfortunate manifestation of an "excessive" anticommunism—rather, it was the logical expression of anticommunism's reactionary essence.

The ruling class promoted anticommunism as a de facto state ideology, not out of any principled opposition to the crimes of Stalinism, but rather because it was the necessary ideological prop for the United States' most critical geo-strategic goals. Following the Second World War, the US was the world's dominant imperialist power, with the USSR the sole challenger to its global hegemony.

While the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union had betrayed the cause of international socialism, the USSR's nationalized property relations and state monopoly over foreign trade blocked the untrammeled penetration of international capital into the resource-rich country. In addition, the Stalinist state's ideological and material support for national liberation movements in Asia and Africa was viewed as a serious threat to the stability of the international capitalist system. The communist bogeyman was erected to condition the American people to accept the initiation of far-reaching international engagements against the USSR—most notably in Korea and, later, Vietnam.

Anticommunism also served a vitally important domestic function. The ideology facilitated the suppression of any independent working class movement. The two years following the end of the Second World War saw an unprecedented strike wave throughout the country, as workers fought to prevent a return to the social conditions of the 1930s. Anticommunism was the banner under which a purge of militants and socialists from the trade unions was carried out. It was, moreover, the ideological and political cement for the AFL-CIO's postwar alliance with US imperialism.

Anticommunism was further utilized by the right wing to advance its long-standing objective of obliterating all remnants of the New Deal reform measures. The reactionary forces behind McCarthyism sought to associate any social reform measure that compromised the ruling elite's accumulation of wealth with communism.

Robert Griffith, in the second edition of his important study, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), emphasized this point: "While McCarthyism was thus obviously a product of the Cold War and of a new cold war politics shaped by both liberal and conservative elites, it was also, and this needs to be stressed, a politics firmly rooted in the powerful, conservative reaction to the New Deal, which began during the late 1930s and which, though partially adjourned during World War II, resumed in force after the war's end. Indeed, to underestimate this fact is to risk misunderstanding both McCarthyism and the Cold War" (p. xvii).

Ybarra's claim that the Communist Party posed a "unique challenge to American liberty" and was trying to destroy American society is simply false. The party, founded in 1919, was originally guided by revolutionary Marxist principles, and fought for a society based on social equality and the fullest development of democracy in every sphere of society. The degeneration of the CP in the 1920s, culminating in the 1928 expulsion of James P. Cannon and other supporters of Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition, was the result of the victory of the Stalinist bureaucracy within the USSR and the Communist International over the genuine socialist and revolutionary forces within the international workers' movement.

The 1917 Russian Revolution was conceived by the Bolsheviks as the first shot in an international revolutionary movement. The subsequent defeat of revolutionary socialist movements in Europe and the consequent isolation of the Soviet Union created the conditions in which the state bureaucracy, led by Joseph Stalin, expanded its privileges and power over the working class. The conservative and nationalist interests of the bureaucracy were expressed in Stalin's anti-Marxist conception of building "socialism in one country," which overturned the internationalist perspective that guided Lenin and Trotsky and underlay the 1917 Revolution.

Stalinist reaction in the USSR had profound implications for the international communist movement. Communist parties throughout the world were converted from revolutionary organizations of the working

class into the Soviet Stalinist regime's diplomatic bargaining chips. After Stalin adopted the perspective of securing an alliance with Britain and France against the rising German threat, Communist Parties were ordered to adopt, in the name of "anti-fascism," the Popular Front policy of joining or supporting bourgeois democratic governments, thereby abandoning, in practice, any perspective of social revolution.

Stalinism in the United States played a counterrevolutionary role within the American labor movement. After 1935, the American Communist Party embraced the Popular Front of all so-called democratic forces, and was an enthusiastic supporter of Roosevelt and the New Deal. ("Communism is twentieth century Americanism," the party famously proclaimed.) The CP's alliance with the liberal middle class was secured only after the party abandoned any conception of waging a struggle for the political independence of the working class.

The party's slavish obedience to the zigzags of Stalin's diktats, including the Stalin-Hitler pact of 1939, and its class-collaborationist policies, particularly after Germany invaded the USSR in June of 1941, when it denounced all war-time strike action by American workers, disoriented the most advanced workers, including those sincere worker militants within its own ranks. By the 1950s, the CP was a demoralized and marginalized force, desperately attempting to cling to the alliances it had forged with sections of the trade union bureaucracy and Democratic Party under the New Deal. This orientation prevented the party from even attempting to independently mobilize the working class in opposition to the right-wing McCarthyite offensive.

None of these issues are seriously addressed in *Washington Gone Crazy*. The extensive research that has evidently gone into the biography indicates that this is not the result of the author's ignorance. In the 1990s, a number of historians—elevating ideology above historical truth—began an effort to rehabilitate the liberal anticommunism of the late 1940s and 1950s. Ybarra's conscious alignment with this group has inevitably produced a distorted and false understanding of the role played both by Stalinism and McCarthyism in America's political and cultural history. As a consequence, the real significance of figures such as Pat McCarran remains to be properly assessed.