

Where's My Roy Cohn?: A documentary on McCarthy's right-hand man, mentor to Trump

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The title of this newly released documentary refers to a tirade reportedly unleashed by Donald Trump early in his presidency, after Attorney General Jeff Sessions recused himself from the federal investigation into Trump's alleged ties to Russian "meddling" in the 2016 campaign.

Although Cohn had by then been dead for 31 years, Trump was wishing he still had the services of the man who became infamous as the 26-year-old second-in-command to the notorious senator from Wisconsin Joseph McCarthy at the height of the anti-communist witch hunt of the early 1950s. Cohn later became the mentor to the New York real estate developer who now occupies the Oval Office. Many observers have already noted the similarities in style and politics between Trump and Cohn—the barefaced lying, gangster mentality and tactics, disdain for elementary democratic rights, and fanatical hostility to socialism and communism—but further examination of the connection between the two men is certainly appropriate.

The film, directed by Matt Tyrnauer, a journalist for *Vanity Fair* magazine, adds little to what is already known about Cohn's life and fails to offer a serious explanation of Cohn's rise to prominence or his legacy. That legacy, however—the contemporary role of the ultra-reactionary politics he personified—makes this a timely film, if only for its archival material.

A generation that was not even born when Cohn died in 1986 can learn something from the newsreel footage, old television interviews and other elements presented. Among those interviewed for this film are journalists David Cay Johnston, Ken Auletta and Sam Roberts; Cohn's cousins Anne Roiphe and David Marcus; and others. There are snippets of television journalist Mike Wallace, as well as a brief excerpt from an angry televised exchange between Cohn and writer Gore Vidal.

As recounted in the film, Cohn was born in 1927 into a wealthy New York City Jewish family. His father was a judge. His mother had by all accounts the greatest influence on him as he grew to maturity. He attended private schools in the city, and then Columbia College and Law School, from which he graduated at the extraordinarily young age of 20. He was only 21 when, thanks to family connections, he became an assistant US attorney.

Soon he joined the prosecution team in the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who had been charged with conspiracy to commit atomic espionage for the Soviet Union. As the documentary notes, Cohn, along with trial judge Irving R. Kaufman, was used to immunize the government against charges of anti-Semitism.

The authorities were well aware that a large percentage of American Jews were influenced by the Communist Party and by the left in general. They used the prosecution both to whip up anti-Semitism and also, at the peak of the Cold War, to secure the allegiance and obedience of that section of the Jewish population that occupied a prominent place in

government, business and academia. Cohn played a particularly filthy role in railroading the Rosenbergs, and it was later revealed that he had had telephone discussions with Judge Kaufman, a flagrant violation of judicial ethics, to insist that both defendants be put to death.

Cohn's aggressive role in the Rosenberg trial brought him to the attention of J. Edgar Hoover, the fanatically anti-communist director of the FBI. Hoover then recommended Cohn to Joseph McCarthy, who, as chairman of the Senate Special Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, was riding high in his crusade against suspected communists and their sympathizers in government, the media and elsewhere.

Cohn's role with McCarthy came to an end in 1954, after the Army-McCarthy hearings. Cohn was accused by the Army of repeated and improper attempts to secure special treatment for G. David Schine, his "close personal friend," who had been hired as a consultant to the McCarthy committee and drafted into the Army in 1953.

Part of the hearings were televised to a wide audience, as shown in video footage in the documentary. Behind the specific charges leveled against Cohn were bitter tactical differences within the ruling establishment. The proceedings led eventually to McCarthy's censure by the Senate in December 1954, a blow that proved fatal to his political career and was followed by his death a few years later.

Cohn had been forced to resign from his Senate staff position. The young anti-communist crusader did not disappear, however. On the contrary, as *Where's My Roy Cohn?* explains, he went on to enjoy a lucrative legal career.

Cohn became a partner in the New York firm of Saxe, Bacon and Bolan. Business executives and various white-collar criminals were eager to make use of his services. Cohn used his trademark methods to amass great wealth over the next several decades. His clients included the New York Yankees and the Catholic Archdiocese of New York. In the 1970s, Cohn became prominent as the attorney for the biggest Mafia families, including those headed by the likes of Carmine Galante, John Gotti and Tony Salerno.

It was during this period that Cohn was also retained by Donald Trump. The Trump Organization had been sued by the US Justice Department in 1973, accused of racial discrimination in the rental of apartments it managed in Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island. Cohn countersued for the improbable sum of \$100 million. While the countersuit was dismissed, Trump was able to settle the case out of court a few years later. Cohn became a mentor to the young Trump, who at the time was not yet 30 years old.

Alongside his wealth, and despite his notoriety, the former McCarthy aide continued to enjoy significant political influence during the 1970s and 1980s. Cohn was always able to get through to the White House

during the Nixon and Reagan years, serving at times as a kind of unofficial adviser.

In the late 1970s he met Rupert Murdoch, who had bought the erstwhile liberal *New York Post*, his first major foray into the US media market. It was Cohn who later introduced Trump to Murdoch. There is thus a fairly direct connection between the McCarthyite prosecutor of the 1950s and today's Fox News, the semi-official media outlet for the Trump White House.

Cohn never lacked for friends in high places, in both business and government circles. These connections are illustrated in the film in striking photographs of Cohn at various social and political functions. One shows him with Trump and New York Mayor Ed Koch. Another has Cohn between former Vice President Hubert Humphrey and New York's arch-right-wing Francis Cardinal Spellman (one of Cohn's strongest supporters). Other footage shows Cohn at New York's Studio 54 nightclub, hobnobbing with the likes of Andy Warhol.

Although he was the subject of federal investigations on several occasions in the 1970s and 1980s, Cohn—no doubt helped by many friends among both Democrats and Republicans—was able to either avoid charges or win acquittal. In 1986, this support began to wane.

The Appellate Division of the New York State Supreme Court disbarred Cohn, citing, among other things, misappropriation of clients' funds and pressuring a comatose client to amend his will. The documentary dwells on this latter case, concerning Lewis Rosenstiel, the multimillionaire founder of Schenley Liquors. Cohn lifted the hand of the unconscious and dying man. The resulting "signature," shown to somewhat comical effect on screen, was ruled indecipherable and inadmissible in court.

Only five weeks after his disbarment, Cohn was dead of AIDS. His refusal to the very end to acknowledge either his homosexuality or his illness is highlighted at some length in the film. What makes this pertinent is Cohn's own use of right-wing homophobia. In the 1950s he assisted McCarthy in the so-called Lavender Scare, during which homosexuals were hounded out of their federal jobs on the grounds that they were security risks. Thousands suffered ostracism and humiliation, and a few committed suicide.

It is necessary to understand Cohn and not merely to describe him. On this score, *Where's My Roy Cohn?* gives generally shallow answers. How did he become so prominent when he was still in his early 20s? Why was he able to go on to a life of wealth, privilege and continuing political influence even after he was disgraced in the Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954? And why, above all, has he seemingly been reincarnated in the Trump White House today?

The usual answers, including attributing Cohn's behavior to his mother's influence or to some inexplicable lust for power, are either false or misleading. Cohn's vitriolic anti-communism drove him from the beginning. He never wavered for an instant, never softened his views during the more liberal decade of the 1960s. He is shown in an interview toward the very end of his life. Asked whether he had any regrets about sending the Rosenbergs to their deaths, he replies, "If I could have pulled the switch, I would have done it myself."

His rabid anti-communism made Cohn useful to the ruling elite. The McCarthyite Red Scare, with Cohn playing such a prominent role, must be understood in the post-World War II context. The American ruling class faced a massive strike wave in the years immediately following the end of the war. At the same time, it had to confront the Chinese Revolution of 1949, the growth (based in part on the prestige of the Soviet Union, despite the crimes of Stalinism) of the Communist Parties in Western Europe, especially in France and Italy, and the colonial revolution sweeping much of Asia and Africa.

A major aim of the anti-communist hysteria was the purging of the labor movement, especially the housebreaking of the CIO, which had emerged out of the industrial union struggles of the 1930s. A major reason for the

shift in the political winds against McCarthy by 1954 was the consolidation of a bitterly anti-communist and pro-imperialist bureaucracy in both the AFL and CIO. The two union federations merged in 1955 on the basis of ferocious anti-communism and support for US imperialism in the Cold War against the Soviet Union. The development of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy as a bulwark in defense of capitalism persuaded sections of the ruling class that the Wisconsin demagogue, with the reptilian Cohn at his side, was no longer necessary—especially when he began to attack the pillars of the capitalist state, including the Army.

As noted, Cohn did not fade away, despite pious liberal denunciations of McCarthyism in subsequent years. For capitalism in the period of imperialist decay, democracy is always disposable. The ruling classes may prefer to rule when they can through forms that allow for open debate within the establishment, along with the promotion of certain democratic illusions for the masses. The past century has shown how quickly these democratic forms are dispensed with, however.

Cohn's friendships in high places were an indication that his methods were still being held in reserve. The whole McCarthy era passed, but the impact of the devil's bargain made by American liberalism with the most reactionary anti-communist forces continued to be felt. Cohn's brand of semi-fascism was put on the shelf, but never buried.

Which brings us to the Trump presidency. *Where's My Roy Cohn?* clearly aims to point the finger at Trump with an eye to the 2020 election. To the extent this film has a message, it is that today's self-proclaimed "progressives" are the answer to the dangers emanating from the White House.

This "message" is based on a lie. The Democrats, one of the major parties of American imperialism, have never been principled defenders of democratic rights. The very first prosecution under the notorious Smith Act was directed against the Trotskyists of the Socialist Workers Party by Franklin Roosevelt in 1941. After the war, the Democrats were fully complicit in the anti-communist witch hunt, launched under Harry Truman in the late 1940s and supported by the Democratic Party tops for a number of years under Dwight Eisenhower. In the ensuing decades the Democrats no less than the Republicans have had the blood of millions of workers and peasants around the world on their hands.

Since the theft of the 2000 election, it has become increasingly clear that there is no longer any constituency within the US ruling class or either of its major parties for the defense of democratic rights at home, as well as throughout the world.

This finds expression today both in the Trump presidency and the Democrats' efforts to attack Trump from the right. In the White House itself, Trump's 34-year-old chief aide Stephen Miller struts about like a resurrected Roy Cohn. Trump, the political descendant of McCarthy and Cohn, has ascended to higher office than his mentor and is encouraging the formation of a fascist movement. Yet such is the depth of the political crisis of American capitalism that Trump can argue, with some perverse justification, that he is the victim of a witch hunt, as the Democrats play the national security card over issues such as Ukraine and Russia.



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