

COVERING SENATOR JOE McCARTHY

A Former Wire Service Newsman's Recollections of Two Years
On the Trail of the Controversial Wisconsin Red-Hunter

BY ALVIN SPIVAK

The first time I encountered Joe McCarthy he was at a loss for words, and Dick Nixon bailed him out.

It was early 1952, and Republican Senators Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin and Richard M. Nixon of California, along with Karl Mundt of South Dakota, were the minority members of the Senate's Democratic-controlled Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations.

The episode was among many that sprang to mind recently when the subcommittee made public five volumes – 4,232 pages – of testimony that had been held secret for 50 years after McCarthy became chairman of the panel when Republicans took control of the Senate in 1953. This accompanied Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidential election sweep in November 1952.

More than 400 witnesses appeared in those closed sessions, which present-day leaders of the subcommittee described as evidence of McCarthy's high-handed tactics in his supposed "Communist-hunting" crusade.

-- MORE -

What follows are recollections of a newsman who covered two years, the final half, of McCarthy's glory days (as his supporters saw them) as a wild-swinging Red-basher who (as his critics saw him) did a great deal of bashing but failed to uncover any real Communists. Some of what follows is based on off-the-record conversations at the time with parties who have since died, which I believe gives me liberty to quote them now. This is not an attempt to rewrite or retrace history, but simply to offer some personal recollections.

McCarthy's momentary inability to come up with a stinging riposte, mentioned above, occurred a year before he became chairman, while that lofty post was held by courtly Democratic Senator Clyde Hoey of North Carolina. Hoey was a living anachronism, the very last Senator to come to the Capitol each day wearing a traditional knee-length, swallow-tailed black or grey frock coat and white wing collar, giving him the appearance of Li'l Abner cartoonist Al Capp's legendary "Senator Phogbound" -- though Hoey (pronounced Hoo-ee) was anything but a hillbilly blowhard and clown.

It was the first committee or subcommittee hearing I covered as a young reporter newly-assigned to the Senate staff of the old International News Service (INS) which six years later was merged into the United Press (UP) -- with only the "I" of its name remaining in United Press International (UPI).

-- MORE --

The Hoey subcommittee was investigating post-war sales of surplus U.S. oil tankers to American or foreign interests which in turn sold them or used them for the benefit of Communist countries. The witness was Newbold Morris, a New York political figure and attorney for some of those interests. Morris, at the time of the hearing, was the “Cleanup” overseer for President Harry S Truman’s scandal-pocked White House. McCarthy and the other Republicans went after Truman’s handpicked aide with a vengeance.

Accusing Morris of accepting huge amounts of money in legal fees from alleged law-breaking clients, McCarthy began to describe the payments when his face reddened and his voice sputtered while he searched for words. “Blood money!” Nixon whispered, leaning in toward McCarthy who sat next to him on the dais. “Blood money!” McCarthy shouted in triumph, while Morris struggled to insist he was only doing a routine lawyer’s job.

It was roughly 10:30 A.M. and – as I learned and observed -- McCarthy almost always was sure to inject a pithy accusation or denunciation at that time. He knew that reporters for the three wire services – Associated Press (AP), UP and INS -- who were covering the hearings wanted to leave temporarily at about that time to update the relatively static stories they had written overnight to set the stage. McCarthy knew our needs and desires as well as we did, and he fashioned his hearings around them.

-- MORE --

In those days, the wire services were bread and butter to publicity-seeking politicians. No round-the-clock cable television networks existed. Reporters for major newspapers and radio/TV networks attended, but their coverage wouldn't appear until hours later. Only the AP, UP and INS reported instantaneously 24/7, serving among others the evening newspapers (of which there still were many) which had editions to freshen as the daytime hours went by. McCarthy, assisted by his chief counsel Roy Cohn, gave the wires ample opportunities to provide that service.

McCarthy mostly used the morning time frame to do that, making accusatory statements and calling accusatory witnesses to launch the sessions, so that the first stories would not – could not – include responses by the witnesses under attack who would not testify until later. Many of those invoked their constitutional Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination, opening them to being branded “Fifth Amendment Communists” or worse by McCarthy, more grist for the news mill.

The question often has arisen: weren't the reporters, especially those from the wire services, being used to advance McCarthy's purposes, or notoriety, at a time the nation was sharply divided on the propriety, accuracy, or even decency of what he was doing? I've often asked the question of myself – then, and through ensuing years -- and I fear the answer is yes.

-- MORE --

Speaking from a wire service standpoint, my only explanation, frail as it may be, is that we were under severe competitive pressures to report *immediately* with *what we had* or face demands from our news desks to match our opposition. (Our slogan, or UP's at least, was "A Deadline Every Minute.") There were times when statements or events were so obviously egregious that we omitted them, but McCarthy as a rule knew how to play the wire service system, and he played it like a violin.

I must emphasize also that when contrary statements, events, or opinions were available – as McCarthy's subcommittee colleagues or witnesses increasingly defied him -- we played those up too. But more often than not, it was on a trailing news cycle, after the initial damage was done.

McCarthy had another pet device for dealing with the wire services. Late each afternoon, after subcommittee sessions or on the eve of new hearings, he and Cohn would meet with us in his office for what a baseball-loving colleagues dubbed "dugout chatter." He would lay out plans for the next day, amplify on the previous session, and expound otherwise on a "background" non-quotable basis. We were free, of course, to seek opposing viewpoints to use in our breaking or our "overnight" stories for the next day.

-- MORE --

At those late-afternoon office sessions, McCarthy poured drinks, bourbon for me and whatever my two competitors were having. For himself, McCarthy with a flourish and a giggle inevitably mixed a “Black Russian” cocktail, two-thirds vodka and one-third Kahlua or coffee brandy over ice. He always announced that his drink was a “Black Russian” and emphasized that the vodka came from the U.S.S.R.

Joe, as he preferred to be called by us, got through to other reporters in other ways, but “dugout chatter” was for the three wires. We were joined by a fourth journalistic presence in 1954 when the Army-McCarthy and the Censure sessions (about which more later) were held. This was Broadway gossip columnist Walter Winchell, a friend and supporter of McCarthy and Cohn, whose column was syndicated by the Hearst Corporation’s King Features syndicate. Hearst also owned INS, where I worked, so Winchell and I were colleagues though on widely different ends of the pay scale.

This relationship caused occasional problems. Winchell, whom I admired when I was a youth in the 1930’s and 1940’s and he was denouncing and exposing Nazi or pro-Nazi activities in the U.S., had gone downhill by 1954. His column was losing subscribers, his status was on the wane at Hearst, and his behavior convinced me he was becoming senile.

-- MORE --

One day, Winchell told me he had an exclusive tip from Cohn and demanded that I “put it on the wire.” I told him I would check it first. Later that day, Winchell asked if I had “put it on the wire.” I told him I indeed had checked , it was wrong, and our news desk agreed with me to withhold it. Winchell bristled and shouted (to no avail): “I told you to put it on the wire. If it’s wrong, so what?”

A couple of months later, during the televised hearings that led to McCarthy’s censure by the Senate and beginning of the end of his swashbuckling career, Winchell obtained a classified document, presumably from another friend of his, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. The document related to a witness, and members of the special Censure committee were furious. Chairman Arthur Watkins, a no-nonsense Republican senator from Utah, called Winchell to the witness stand to testify under oath.

His signature fedora next to him on the witness table, Winchell was asked where he got the document and what he had done with it. He refused to answer the first question and said he had flushed the paper “down the toilet.” A Senator then asked if he had shown the forbidden item to anyone. With a grin, Winchell scanned the crowded press table and said he had shown it to reporters Joseph Loftus of the New York Times, Jerry Green of the New York Daily News – “and Al Spivak of INS.”

-- MORE --

Loftus, Green and I looked at each other in disbelief. Winchell was lying. Each of us was subpoenaed and each, in private questioning by the committee counsel, said so. None of us was asked to testify publicly.

Army-McCarthy and Censure in 1954 climaxed a series of frenzied events surrounding McCarthy. The sequence began in mid-1953 when the three Democrats on the subcommittee walked out in protest over a top McCarthy aide's attack on the Protestant clergy as Communist-infested. The Democrats - John McClellan of Arkansas, Stuart Symington of Missouri and Henry M. Jackson of Washington - - boycotted hearings until early 1954 when McCarthy agreed to some of their demands about subcommittee staffing and procedures.

One of those demands was for a minority counsel, and the man they picked was Robert F. Kennedy, 26 years old at the time as was Cohn, and (for whatever it's worth) as was I. Kennedy had worked for the subcommittee earlier, as assistant to chief counsel Francis (Frip) Flanagan, who became his mentor on investigative and cross-examining techniques. Kennedy despised Cohn, whom McCarthy brought in to replace Flanagan. Bob made it publicly obvious, once even (in the hearing of reporters including me) during a hot post-hearing argument asking Cohn, "Do you want to step outside and settle this?" Cohn didn't want to.

-- MORE --

Kennedy resigned his assistant counsel's post after a few months, presumably to get away from Cohn, but not because of any differences with McCarthy. One evening, Kennedy invited a press group including the three wire service reporters for a pleasant cruise on the Potomac River aboard a yacht belonging to the Skakel family of Bob's wife, Ethel. Over cocktails, Bob joined Herb Foster of the UP and me on deck and genially said, "Off the record, I gather that the press corps doesn't like Senator McCarthy. Why?" We knew that Bob and others in his family, primarily patriarch Joseph P. Kennedy, were strong McCarthy supporters and I told Bob, "It's not personal. He's friendly and available, and we try to keep open minds, but many of us don't like his tactics." "I don't understand," Bob said, "all Joe is trying to do is fight Communism."

Communism ostensibly was the issue in the minds of McCarthy and his supporters when the Senator picked a nasty fight with the Eisenhower Administration and the U.S. Army over whether suspected Reds were in the Signal Corps at Ft. Monmouth, N.J., principally a dentist named Irving Peress. "Who promoted Peress?" became McCarthy's battle cry when the dentist rose from captain to major. But the issue in the minds of Eisenhower administration officials, on up to the President himself, a former five-star general, was the Senator's roundhouse assault on Army officers and Army Secretary Robert Stevens as an outgrowth of those hearings.

-- MORE --

The climax came when McCarthy scornfully told Brig. Gen. Ralph Zwicker, a World War II combat hero who was Peress' commanding officer and refused under Army regulations to provide private information about his subordinate, "You are not fit to wear the uniform!"

McCarthy thrived on his role as an attack dog, and Republican colleagues rarely spoke against him while the targets of his attacks were in the Democratic Truman Administration. Eisenhower, though with a bad taste in his mouth, even remained mute during his 1952 campaign after McCarthy assailed Truman's Secretary of State George C. Marshall – who as Army Chief of Staff in World War II was instrumental in Ike's rise from Lt. Col. to five star General -- as a tolerator of Communists in the State Department.

But an attack dog needs victims to attack – and when Eisenhower took office and McCarthy became subcommittee chairman in 1953, Joe's targets inevitably shifted to the Republican administration. This became increasingly intolerable to Ike and his GOP administration fold.

-- MORE --

My tipoff to the White House's back being up came during a Saturday morning off-the-record séance with Vice President Nixon in his office off the Senate chamber, something he did each week with representatives of the three wire services. Nixon used these sessions to tell the three wires on a not-for-quotation basis about the Administrations positions on legislation and other congressional matters. It was early 1954, and one of us asked Nixon - McCarthy's former committee colleague -- what Ike was going to do about McCarthy's attacks on the Army where the President spent his career and rose to Supreme Commander of Allied forces in World War II.

"McCarthy's not the problem, it's Roy Cohn, and we're going to get him," Nixon calmly replied. I knew that Nixon was not naïve, but thought his answer sounded that way. I suppose it was more politically exigent than naïve, but it served as a harbinger of events that came to a head in April of 1954.

That was when the Army's counsel, John G. Adams slipped to some senators and to the *Baltimore Sun's* reporter Phil Potter a 34-page single-spaced "chronology" of efforts by Cohn, with McCarthy's backing, to force the Army to give Roy's recently-drafted buddy G. David Schine a direct promotion to lieutenant, assign him to serve his military term on the staff of the subcommittee, and enjoy sundry other favors. The bottom line was a charge that Cohn threatened to "wreck the Army" if his wishes were rejected.

-- MORE --

A special telecast by Edward R. Murrow in early 1954 is credited as the major journalistic blow that helped bring McCarthy to bay. Perhaps so, but Potter, in *Sun* reportage starting long before Murrow's program, provided his readers and his Fourth Estate colleagues with factual indictments of McCarthy's investigative activities. Adams, a fellow South Dakotan and long-time friend of Potter's, knew Potter would make good use of the anti-Cohn, anti-McCarthy chronology, Potter, in turn, knew that the chronology was potential dynamite and his unsyndicated story would get nowhere unless other news outlets had it too.

The way Potter told it to me later, he therefore offered a copy of the Adams chronology to Arkansas Democratic Sen. John L. McClellan, ranking minority member of McCarthy's subcommittee. McClellan was an arch-conservative and at first didn't oppose McCarthy, but he grew to despise the Wisconsin Republican's tactics. And so, with Potter's guidance, McClellan invited a small group of reporters to his Fairfax Hotel apartment in Washington and leaked the chorology to them. I was one of those invited. Others included reporters for AP, UP, the New York Times and the Washington Post.

-- MORE --

There is another version of this episode, recounted in the excellent book “Who Killed Joe McCarthy” by former Eisenhower aide William Bragg Ewald Jr. This was that McClellan and other members of the McCarthy subcommittee got their own copies of the chronology from Adams. But I firmly believe it was Potter who urged McClellan to leak it to other reporters.

There was only one copy of the chronology available at McClellan’s suite, so the four other reporters and I laboriously hand-copied each of the 34 single-spaced pages of the document, passing each page to the other reporter until all were finished copying. We didn’t finish until close to midnight. From the hotel, I phoned a “bulletin” and brief story to the INS news desk in Washington, to catch the wire at the end of what we called the “A.M. cycle” for morning papers. It was too late for the story to get much play in morning papers, at least in the East and Midwest. I returned to our bureau to write a lengthy P.M cycle account which highlighted our wire when it opened at 2 A.M. (EST).

We thus caught first-edition deadlines of evening papers – of which there still were many in 1954 – and radio and television newscasts. The story exploded into eight-column banner headlines and led broadcasting news. McCarthy was quick to respond, accusing the Army by mid-morning of “blackmail” and of using Schine as a “hostage” to discredit his communist-hunting crusade.

-- MORE --

The attendant national uproar led McCarthy's committee colleagues to call a special series of hearings, with McCarthy as a witness rather than as chairman (Sen. Karl Mundt presided instead). These sessions, held in the vast Caucus Room of what is now the Russell Senate Office Building, were televised live and McCarthy's conduct, frequently interrupting proceedings with a guttural "Point of Order!" and other disruptive tactics, brought him into unfavorable national focus and sent him toward his senatorial downfall..

The *coup de grace* came when Cohn was on the witness stand being questioned aggressively by Joseph N. Welch, the Army's special counsel, a folksy, puckish Boston attorney. McCarthy angrily interrupted and sprang to Cohn's defense, claiming irrelevantly that a young associate of Welch's law firm had once been a member of a Communist-front organization.

Dramatically, in words that have been played back innumerable times on video retrospectives of the McCarthy years, Welch emoted: "Until this moment, Senator, I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?" There were audible gasps. The hearing fell into long silence, and McCarthy never recovered.

-- MORE --

At the time, and for years afterward, I thought Adams had prepared and leaked his chronology on his own, in retribution for his and his Army colleagues' treatment by McCarthy and Cohn. Thirty years later, the full story came out in Ewald's deceptively titled "Who Killed Joe McCarthy" book. Ewald provided chapter and verse on how Adams was only one player in a broadly mounted but confidential assault on McCarthy and Cohn by the Eisenhower White House, Department of Defense, and Department of the Army. The President himself was described as publicly silent but vitally active in orchestrating the developments that spawned the Army-McCarthy hearings. Ewald's book was a vivid reminder of Nixon's off-the-record "we're going to get him" assertion about Cohn at our wire service session with him in 1954.

I was amused, when the McCarthy subcommittee's closed-session testimony was made public in May of this year, to read an AP report that it was provided to the news media in the same Caucus Room where McCarthy "held his Army-McCarthy hearings" in 1954. The reporter and his editors, probably not born then, were not aware that McCarthy did not *hold* those hearings. He was the target of them, along with Cohn.

-- more --

At the time of the hearings, I recall walking with McCarthy from the subway linking the Capitol to the Senate Office Building, and asking why he insisted on standing firmly behind Cohn when it was clear that the Army and members of the investigating committee were aiming their fire more at Cohn than him. "Don't print this," he said, "but I've got to support a staff member or risk losing the loyalty of my whole staff."

I doubted this was his real reason. I assumed it actually was stubbornness, or arrogance. Others, some in print, surmised there were other reasons including even a homosexual relationship. I still do not believe this about McCarthy, but Cohn's homosexuality was "outed" years later.

While the initial target was Cohn, McCarthy as Cohn's boss and defender inevitably shared and even hogged the bull's eye through his outlandish behavior during the televised hearings. The administration-backed momentum thus continued after those hearings were over, when a drive mounted for the Senate to censure McCarthy. A special committee conducted hearings, again televised, and in December 1954 the Senate voted to "condemn" McCarthy - not for investigative missteps but for objectionable conduct toward his Senate colleagues.

-- MORE --

In the election a month earlier, Democrats regained control of the Senate and McCarthy lost his chairmanship, along with the respect of most of his colleagues. He was shunted to the background in the Senate – and in the news media. But his name and reputation lived on, if only in the term “McCarthyism” to denote ruthless investigative tactics and character assassination – and now, in the public release of his closed-door 1953-54 hearings.

My coverage of McCarthy extended literally to his grave. After his censure, McCarthy drank heavily and in May 1957 he died at the age of 48 of cirrhosis of the liver. For INS, I covered a solemn requiem mass for him at St. Matthews Cathedral in Washington. UP’s Jim Donovan, a competitor but a close personal friend, was seated in a pew reserved for the press when I arrived at the cathedral, jammed with mourners, admirers, politicians, government figures and newsmen. I sat next to Jim and he handed me a printed page, saying, “I know you’re not Catholic, Al, so I got this for you in the Sacristy –an English translation of the Latin solemn requiem mass.” What a nice guy, I thought.

-- MORE --

The only English portion of the mass was the eulogy, a monsignor's vigorous praise of McCarthy and a fierce denunciation of McCarthy's enemies and doubters. No question, this was the lead of the story. When the mass ended, I went to a telephone outside and began dictating to a typist in the INS bureau. An editor's voice cut in, demanding: "The UP has been out for more than an hour with that eulogy. Where the hell were you?" I knew that no excuses were in order, gulped and confessed I goofed, unaware that a monsignor would provide an advance press copy of his eulogy.

Later, over a martini at the National Press Club bar, I sardonically thanked Jim for the Latin-to-English translation of the mass, and told him he could have spared me a lot of note taking if he'd shared the eulogy as well. Jim, a St. Matthews Cathedral parishioner and the only reporter to obtain an advance copy, gave the UP an hour's beat against the AP as well as INS. He had a right to smile impishly and say, "The mass was 2,000 years old, and I was glad to let you read it in English."

That was solemn requiem mass No. 1. I don't recall where No. 2 took place, but I was there as well, and at No. 3 the next day in Appleton, Wis. McCarthy's body had been flown there aboard an Air Force transport plane, accompanied by a coterie of his most ardent Senate supporters, plus some House members - and two reporters, Gwen Gibson of the New York Daily News and me.

==MORE ==

The flight was an airborne Irish wake, of sorts, with not only drinks in ample quantities but also a poker game played by some of the congressional passengers, using the top of Joe's flag-draped casket as a table. The casket was at the front of the cabin, and Gwen and I sat at the rear, gazing in disbelief at the goings-on. But the ground rules were clear. We were told in no uncertain terms that statements and activities en route were off-the-record, and we agreed as a condition of going on the airplane.

At the first two funeral masses, I had observed McCarthy's former staffer Bob Kennedy from afar, among the many in attendance. At the third, in Appleton, before McCarthy was buried at St. Mary's cemetery there, reporters were seated in a choir loft overlooking the church. In the second row, behind me, sat Bob Kennedy. Like Jim Donovan, Bob was a devout Roman Catholic and knew that I wasn't. He tapped my shoulder, leaned forward and whispered:

"Three solemn requiem masses in two days, Al! That's a lot. Have we got you yet?"

#