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McCARTHY'S AMERICANS
Red Scare Politics
in State and Nation,
1935–1965

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For my wife, Lesley

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
PART I RED SCARE POLITICS IN THE STATES	1
1 The Politics of Exposure: Investigating Committees	7
2 The Politics of Patriotism: Loyalty Oaths	28
3 The Politics of Regulation: Communist-Control Laws	54
PART II RED SCARE POLITICS IN MICHIGAN	79
4 Class Conflict and Party Politics, 1933–1945	83
5 The Republican Offensive, 1945–1950	104
6 The Triumph of Liberalism? 1950–1954	125
PART III RED SCARE POLITICS IN MASSACHUSETTS	149
7 The Contours of Red Scare Politics, 1935–1945	153
8 The Populist Assault, 1945–1952	171
9 Red Scare and Resolution, 1953–1962	191
PART IV RED SCARE POLITICS IN GEORGIA	213
10 Defending the Old Order, 1935–1948	218
11 Controlling Communist Subversion, 1948–1956	234
12 The Red Scare as Last Hurrah, 1956–1966	254
PART V CONCLUSION	277
13 McCarthyism in State and Nation	281
<i>Notes and References</i>	302
<i>Index</i>	355

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MJH
New Year's Eve, 1996

ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations and acronyms are used in the text.

ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
ACTU	Association of Catholic Trade Unionists
ADA	Americans for Democratic Action
AFL	American Federation of Labor
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations
AMVETS	American Veterans of World War II
AVC	American Veterans Committee
AYD	American Youth for Democracy
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CIO-PAC	Congress of Industrial Organizations-Political Action Committee
CLUM	Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts
CP	Communist Party (of USA)
CRC	Civil Rights Congress
CUAC	California Un-American Activities Committee
DAR	Daughters of the American Revolution
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FEPC	Fair Employment Practices Committee
GCE	Georgia Commission on Education
GE	General Electric Company
GM	General Motors
GOP	Grand Old Party
HUAC	House Committee on Un-American Activities
IFLWU	International Fur and Leather Workers Union
ILWU	International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union
IUE	International Union of Electrical Workers
LWV	League of Women Voters
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
NSL	National Student League

OUAC	Ohio Un-American Activities Commission
PTA	Parent and Teacher's Association
SCEF	Southern Conference Educational Board
SCHW	Southern Conference for Human Welfare
SISS	Senate Internal Security Subcommittee
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SRC	Southern Regional Conference
UAW	Union of Automobile Workers
UE	United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America
UPW	United Public Workers
VFW	Veterans of Foreign Wars
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

PREFACE

Some years ago a conference held at Harvard University on the topic 'Anticommunism and the US' was advertised by a poster presenting the brooding, baleful face of Senator Joe McCarthy. The image was a powerful one but it was also misleading, because, as most of the conference participants knew perfectly well, the late Senator had done little or nothing to create the phenomenon he had come to personify. McCarthy is not synonymous with McCarthyism, even less with American anticommunism, and his troubled presence has sometimes obscured those historical processes that helped to make his career possible. Over the last generation several scholars have sought to reach beyond the image, and a number of superb studies now illuminate parts of what might be called McCarthy's hinterland, but the process remains incomplete. Probably no area has been as patchily addressed as that represented by the basic building blocks of the American system of government, the American states themselves. No major episode in American political history can be fully understood without a knowledge of what was happening outside Washington, and the purpose of this book is to look beyond the McCarthyites of Capitol Hill to their counterparts in the states. Among other things, the study provides yet further evidence of the irrelevance of Senator McCarthy to the movement which bears his name.

One limitation of the term McCarthyism is that it slights the long history of red scare politics in the United States before Joe McCarthy's high-pitched whine was first heard in the United States Senate. Domestic anticommunism, that tendency to spy a red enemy within, has been a primary feature of American politics since the late nineteenth century. At times the fear of subversion, or at least the exploitation of that fear, has been so intense and pervasive as to constitute a red scare, as in the Haymarket Affair of 1886-87, the Palmer Raids of 1919-20, and the McCarthyism of the early 1950s. This is not the place to explore the political and cultural roots of American anticommunism, but any study of a particular episode needs to be aware

of that resilient tradition. More than most societies, Americans have been defined by shared values rather than by ancient institutions, and have thus always been sensitive to the prospect of ideological subversion. The peculiar burden placed on political ideology in the United States has been the greater because of the variegated nature of its people. A diverse society has not easily cohered, and conceptions of Americanism have been pressed into service in attempts to strengthen the social fabric. But patriotism can take different forms, and may divide as well as unite. Both the American Civil Liberties Union and the John Birch Society have grounded their legitimacy in American conceptions of freedom. The actors encountered in this book may seem capable of the most egregiously partisan and cynical behaviour, but they were also conditioned by values which stretched back to the beginnings of the American republic. Red scares have been part of the American political process, inseparable from its instrumentality and its ideology, not aberrations or the products of mindless hysteria or the spawn of gifted demagogues.

But even the red scare associated with Senator McCarthy was not triggered by his celebrated speech at Wheeling, West Virginia, in February 1950. Several scholars have pointed to the significance of episodes and policies associated with President Harry Truman's first beleaguered term, and some have emphasized the rightward thrusts of American politics during the later part of the New Deal, as illustrated by the foundation of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1938. (A fuller discussion of McCarthy historiography is offered in the Conclusion.) A focus on state politics emphasizes the value of this longer perspective. One way of perceiving the Senator's excesses is as part of a political cycle which first emerged in the mid-1930s and took two decades or more to run its course. In several states, the political configurations which were to make possible the red scare politics of the Cold War years had first taken shape in the 1930s, if not earlier. McCarthyism was not so much an aberration as a product of long-term processes that favoured conservative politics. In some states, indeed, McCarthyite political formations survived after a fashion and were provoked to new spasms by the radicalism of the 1960s. The revitalized conservatism of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan was not created in a vacuum and owed something to tensions which Senator McCarthy and the little

McCarthys in the states had exploited. They had helped to expose the fragility of what is sometimes known as the New Deal political order.

If McCarthyism was in part made possible by an older rightward trend in American politics, key events of the 1940s and 1950s undoubtedly furthered the cause. Scholars have rightly pointed to the demoralizing impact of the course of foreign affairs on both public opinion and policy-makers, most evidenced by the extension of Soviet control over eastern Europe after the Second World War and by the unnerving 'loss' of China and the revelation of Soviet possession of the A-bomb in 1949. The responses of the Truman administration and of the public at large to the escalating threat of world communism helped Senator McCarthy and his brethren to move from the political wings to centre stage. Yet a state-level examination raises questions both about the critical junctures in international relations and about the Senator's influence. For one thing, anticommunist politics did not emerge simultaneously throughout the land. In some states red scares arrived early and in others late, suggesting that external stimuli of themselves have limited explanatory power, that as much attention needs to be paid to internal political pressures. But if there was a foreign crisis which had a clear impact on state politics it was the outbreak of the Korean War. Because McCarthy's heyday was almost coincident with the Korean War, it is difficult to disentangle the influence of the two on the extensive political terrain outside Washington, but the evidence suggests that Korea was more important than McCarthy (or even other foreign policy reverses) in precipitating anticommunist programmes.

It may be that both national and state governments exaggerated the prospect of a Third World War in these years. But anxiety over Korea cannot simply be dismissed as irrational. Recently some scholars, while contemptuous of the irresponsible antics of Senator McCarthy, have presented moderate anticommunism on the foreign and domestic fronts as a reasonable response to a real and present danger. They have identified a threat not only in the murderous Soviet regime but also inside the United States, where there was both an active Communist party which sympathized with the Soviet Union and authentic Soviet espionage. This view implies a correlation between Communist

and anticommunist activity, and whether one existed is a question that can be asked of state politics. The following pages do reveal something of such a connection. But the evidence also suggests that the rationality of anticommunist behaviour often reflected more a self-regarding partisanship than a selfless patriotism. The threat of domestic communism was invariably magnified by the operations and culture of American politics.

A study of state politics also makes possible a consideration of other important questions scholars have raised about McCarthyism. It has been held that McCarthyism was primarily the product of populist or grassroots pressures revolting against a political establishment, that is a form of mass insurgency fuelled by status anxieties or resentments. More recently responsibility has instead been substantially assigned to various elites, whether presidential administrations or powerful institutions like the FBI. The political establishment in Washington or the major parties engaged in conventional partisan politics, in this view, far from being the targets of grassroots anger, were the prime creators of this Frankenstein's Monster. Yet, with some valuable exceptions, neither perspective has been much informed by research at state or local level. If it is necessary to establish whether McCarthyism was a populist phenomenon, welling upwards through the American political system, or an elitist phenomenon, introduced at the top and trickling downwards, it seems logical to examine the states, for they were the arenas in which local and national pressures met. This question helped to inspire this study, although it may now be doubted whether it is a very useful one, for it assumes a tidier political system than that possessed by the United States, in which the whirls and eddies of political currents are not easily charted. McCarthyism, like other American political movements, was not static. It varied according to place and changed in character over time. It will be suggested in the following pages that the populist–elitist dichotomy is largely a false one. A populist impulse was of critical importance at times, just as at other times elitist pressures were the dominant ones. Further, the two frequently interacted in a dynamic that neither wholly controlled.

But a study of the states should reveal more than the direction of McCarthyite pressures. The state arena provides a context in which at least some of the ingredients of red scare politics might

be identified and their interaction examined. Quite apart from the inseparability of national and state politics, it was also the case that the state McCarthyites often blazed the trails for their federal counterparts. Controlling sedition and subversion, after all, had traditionally been a state responsibility, and by the time the federal government formally moved into this sphere with the Smith Act of 1940, the state statute books bristled with laws directed at anarchists and Communists. (This also provides a reason for focusing on states rather than local communities. More studies of community red scares are necessary, and this book will draw attention in particular to the role of large cities in the generation of McCarthyism, but cities are legally the creations of states, and governmental programmes to combat communism were framed primarily at state level.) Congressmen fought the red menace with HUAC, but several states had their own little HUACs, some of which anticipated the techniques used by the various congressional inquisitors of the 1950s. Loyalty oaths were widely deployed by the states before President Truman introduced his loyalty programme for federal employees in 1947; the Communist party was even outlawed by one state some years before Congress contrived to do something similar with the Communist Control Act of 1954. This is not to suggest that the federal measures and probes of the 1940s and 1950s owed their force to state example. Sometimes the states took the initiative and sometimes the federal government did, and the latter could generally exert more influence. The dynamics of party politics, the Cold War and the national security state did exert powerful pressures from the centre, but they also need to be seen as operating in a constitutional structure which allowed the states significant autonomy. Indeed, this author has argued elsewhere that it was the very flimsiness of the federal government which in part explains the historic strength of anticommunism in the United States.

For the most part in this book the term red scare politics is preferred to the term McCarthyism. Some limitations of the term McCarthyism have already been indicated; it sits poorly with a story which began before the Second World War and continued after the Wisconsin senator's death. Further, in some accounts the term has been used to direct attention to the political purge of the Cold War era and its victims. That is a vital issue which other

scholars have addressed, and it is not the intention here to document every judicial proceeding or job loss. The term red scare politics is meant to suggest a somewhat different concern, one which allows a focus on the operations of state politics, which may witness the redbaiting of party opponents as well as the hounding of suspect employees. Attention here is paid more to the ways in which governments sought to protect their states from red subversion, an essentially political process, than to the often sad fates of those who fell victim to these programmes.

One problem confronting any scholar who addresses the history or politics of the American states is that there are today 50 of them. There is room for 50 studies of red scare politics (for the territories, especially Hawaii, did not escape the experience), had authors, publishers and readers the patience for them. One solution is to offer an overview, generalizing broadly about the state experience, and one or two brave scholars have attempted this in essay-length surveys. The difficulty with this approach is achieving the complexity and intensity needed to enhance understanding of McCarthyite politics. The other solution is to undertake one or more case studies, which may add depth but at the expense of comprehensiveness. This book seeks to achieve a balance between these two approaches. Part I offers an overview of the states generally, one which attempts to delineate the broad contours and suggest the patterns that might be discerned in a myriad of anticommunist activity. Parts II, III and IV offer case studies of three states in different parts of the Union. While there were some similarities in the way in which the Communist issue worked its way through the political culture of each of these states, there were major differences too and a distinctive story to tell in each case. To a large extent this book has become a comparative study of state (or regional) political cultures, using McCarthyism as the instrument of dissection. Part V returns to an overview and offers a conclusion.

McCarthyism – or red scare politics – was a complex phenomenon, and can be explained only by addressing the American political structure as a whole and by reference to a variety of pressures. While the political passions which peaked in the 1950s had their roots in the 1930s, it makes no sense to try to understand them without considerable attention to the Cold War and the imperatives of the national security state. Without these later

pressures the anticommunist persuasion, strong though it already was, would not have achieved the potency it did. But there were other essential ingredients too, among them what in another context has been called reactionary populism. Historians have lately been recognizing that the conservative rejection of the celebrated consensualism of the 1950s was not confined to the unreconstructed rich, and that distaste for New Deal liberalism or the liberal consensus extended to many workers (and to some of the middle and professional classes too). A form of reactionary politics also flourished in the South, and again Senator McCarthy and his ilk would not have enjoyed the prominence they did without the critical role played by this section in the American political system. Yet complex phenomenon though McCarthyism was, ultimately the red scare politics of the 1940s and 1950s were an expression of a kind of political fundamentalism, or rather of a variety of fundamentalisms. The focus of some early scholars on the fears of those of modest status may have been somewhat misleading, for anxieties were liberally distributed throughout society. The term status anxiety may be inappropriate, but at many levels there were people and interests clinging fiercely to traditional forms. In different and subtle ways, the precepts of class, race and religion were militating against the emergence of a genuinely multicultural society. For many Americans, McCarthyism was a cry of pain for the sundry worlds they had lost.