

'McCarthyism' on the Left

Craig J. Cantoni

The "McCarthyism" of Democrats is largely unknown, because they are much better than Republicans at scrubbing history of negatives about themselves.

The odds are pretty good that you've heard of Republican Senator Joe McCarthy and his "witch hunts," which began in the late 1940s to uncover communists in the U.S. government, Hollywood, and elsewhere. After all, thousands of articles have been written about them, scores of movies have been produced about them, and, according to Amazon, 65 books have been written about them.

Not only that, but the word "McCarthyism" has come to mean the subversion of civil and political rights in the name of national security or patriotism, by means of demagoguery and largely unsubstantiated accusations. The word is typically associated with actions of the right, not the left.

The odds are also pretty good that you have not heard of A. Mitchell Palmer, the progressive Democrat U.S. attorney general under President Woodrow Wilson, whose hunts to find communists in 1919 and 1920 were more egregious and numerous than McCarthy's.

Although I've been a history buff over my adult life, I didn't know about Palmer and his travesties of justice until recently reading *Young J. Edgar: Hoover and the Red Scare, 1919-1920*, by Kenneth D. Ackerman. The book details how J. Edgar Hoover, as a young man before becoming the head of the FBI, had worked for Palmer in rounding up actual and suspected communists and violating their due-process rights. Most were immigrants and members of labor unions.

To quote the nonpartisan book:

The result was a civil liberties catastrophe: Between five and ten thousand people—the exact number is impossible to calculate—were rounded up and detained, often beaten and terrified. They were dragged from their homes and families, many taken from their beds in the middle of the night or arrested *en masse* at dances, theatres, or neighborhood clubs, locked up for weeks or months, often railroaded through sham hearings, cut off from lawyers and friends, and kept in decrepit, overcrowded, make-shift prisons. None of these immigrants was accused, much less convicted, of violating any state or federal law. For most of them, no evidence was ever presented beyond the unsubstantiated word of a Justice Department agent on a pre-printed form that they belonged to some organization—not that they actually *did* anything or even said anything.¹

So why are Palmer's travesties less known than McCarthy's? Is it because Palmer didn't blacklist Hollywood notables, thus giving Hollywood no reason to produce movies castigating him? Is it because Palmer's victims tended to be working-class people without the means or platforms to sway public opinion,

while McCarthy's victims tended to be educated professionals with the means and platforms? Is it because McCarthy's congressional hearings were televised, but television didn't exist in the Palmer era?

Even if the answer is yes to each of these questions, that doesn't explain why the facts of Palmer's travesties didn't later become better known, or at least used by Republicans to put McCarthy's "Red-baiting" in historical context. Instead, Americans have been left with the belief that there was no Democrat precedent or parallel to McCarthyism.

Certainly, no one deserves losing civil liberties and facing persecution for holding unpopular beliefs and being foolish. But, as an aside, it's noteworthy that the fools who believed in Bolshevism in 1919 were not as foolish as those who believed in it in 1950. In 1919, the Russian Bolshevik Revolution was just two years old, and it was easy for idealistic intellectuals and poor industrial workers in America to be enamored of the idea of a workers paradise. But by 1950, the horrors of communism were obvious to anyone who took the time to look. And in fact there were many communists infiltrated into the U.S. government.² Many American intellectuals on the left kept their blinders on, however, in their yearning for a utopia of equal outcomes. That yearning continues today, but in terms of race, not class.

Palmer's crusade targeted the very same working class that Woodrow Wilson and other progressive and populist Democrats claimed to want to protect from the capital class and big business—from horrible working conditions, from the destitution caused by illness and workplace accidents, from tainted food, and from goons and scabs hired by industrialists to break strikes (and heads).

Responding to Germany's belligerent submarine blockade of American ships, Wilson would go on, despite substantial anti-war sentiment,³ to send the working class to die in the trenches of Europe in the First World War.

In an example of how the parties have switched roles and constituents over time, Trump's populist wing of the GOP is now an advocate for the working class, while today's Democrat Party has become beholden to big banks, big tech, and big education. Also, Trump wanted the US to stay out of European conflicts and for Europe to pay for its own defense—or the opposite of what Wilson ended up doing.

Roles and constituents have also switched regarding immigration. Republicans are generally in favor of immigration restrictions, especially at the southern border, while Democrats are not in favor. But 100 years ago, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) progressives wanted to stop immigration from southern and eastern Europe, because, as they expressed in vile racist terms, they saw immigrants from those regions as non-white, inferior, and un-American. The progressives and their allies in the press laid the groundwork for the passage of the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924, which accomplished

most of what they wanted.

Now, ironically, progressive Democrats, under the guise of anti-racism, demean Americans of southern and eastern European ancestry as white, privileged, and racist.

I wish they'd make up their minds, so that I would know as an Italian-American whether I'm non-white, inferior, and un-American, or white, privileged, and racist.

The ultimate in cancel culture and speech codes also occurred 100 years ago, when the Wilson administration used a new espionage law to arrest reporters, pacifists, and common folk for speaking out against America's involvement in World War I. This was in line with Attorney General Palmer's arrest of union leaders and members who spoke in favor of communism and against capitalism. A similar cancel culture was later adopted by Joe McCarthy, who has gone down in history as a right-wing reactionary, a label that could just as well be applied to the progressives who had preceded him.

Today, the current cancel culture and speech codes embraced by progressives are not as egregious, in that they have not resulted in arrests—at least not yet. They have, however, resulted in the destruction of careers, as in the McCarthy era. Don't expect movies to be produced about this.

Thankfully, Republicans have not borrowed something from the Progressive Era: eugenics. That was the decades-long movement to sterilize undesirables to keep them from procreating. Working-class Republicans should be wary, though, given that Democrats have called them undesirables.

As evidenced by their belief in the Russian collusion hoax, Democrats are obsessed with the notion that Russia is influencing U.S. elections. They were also obsessed with Russians 100 years ago. At that time, they suspected all Russian immigrants of being Bolsheviks who were loyal to Russia and desirous of overthrowing democracy. As such, they got special attention from Palmer in his roundups of alleged communists.

They had a point. Back then, a lot of Russian immigrants, as well as Italian immigrants and other nationalities, were communists, or at least socialists. Many others were anarchists. The same was true of many union officials, including Eugene Debs, the socialist leader of the Industrial Workers of the World and a perennial candidate for president. Debs got 1 million votes in one election, at a time when the U.S. population was much smaller. Debs would eventually be prosecuted and sent to prison, from which he ran for office once again.

All of these disaffected people had a shared goal, often stated in their publications, of overthrowing democracy and capitalism, using violent means if necessary—in stark contrast to Jan 6 defendants.

Bombings and assassinations were two of their means, and Attorney General Palmer was one of their targets. Prior to his 1919 campaign to round up malcontents, his house in Washington, D.C., was bombed. The force was so powerful that the front of the four-story townhome was blown off and debris was scattered for blocks. Miraculously, he and his wife, who were home at the time, were unscathed.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor, the future President and first lady, just missed being killed or injured by the bomb. They lived across the street and had just parked their car in a garage a couple of blocks away after returning from a dinner engagement. If they had returned several minutes

sooner, they might have been directly across from the bomb when it went off.

It's not surprising that in this atmosphere, and in the midst of a world war, Americans were willing to exchange some civil liberty for safety. As the *New York Times* wrote in 1917 concerning the passage of the Espionage Act,⁴ "Aliens who belong to a society of revolutionists are not entitled to any tenderness from the Government." It also wrote: "The conspirators, pacifists of the malignant type who are associated with anarchist societies are not of the nation. They have no right to be accounted citizens of the Republic."

A similar tradeoff between civil liberty and safety was made 82 years later in response to the 9/11 terrorist attack, most notably in the form of the Patriot Act, which was signed into law by George W. Bush. Many civil libertarians and Democrats have since decried the act and blamed Bush for bullying Congress into passing it. The *New York Times* would join the chorus, in a reversal of what it wrote in 1917.

As with so much of history, it has been largely forgotten that Democrats had assaulted civil liberties long before 9/11. That's because Democrats excel at cherry-picking history to make themselves look good and make Republicans look bad. Republicans try to do the same to Democrats but are far less skilled at it.

From where I sit as a classical liberal, or a libertarian in today's parlance, the McCarthyism of both parties scares me, especially with both parties once again beating war drums in tandem.

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