Lessons of McCarthyism

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Review of *Ike and McCarthy: Dwight Eisenhower’s Secret Campaign against Joseph McCarthy*. By David A. Nichols. Simon & Schuster. 368 pp. $27.95

Between February 1950, when he charged that the State Department was “infested” with communists and held up a list, which he claimed contained the names of subversives, and December 1954, when he was censured by the United States Senate, Joseph McCarthy was a potent force in American politics. Since then, the word McCarthyism has become synonymous with red-baiting witch-hunts based on half-truths and alternative facts.

In *Ike and McCarthy*, David Nichols, a former professor and dean at Southwestern College, and the author of two previous books about President Eisenhower, provides a detailed hour-by-hour account of the escalating war between the White House and the junior senator from Wisconsin. “The general in the Oval Office,” Nichols argues, was not nearly as passive as he appeared. Eisenhower opted for a “disciplined deceptive campaign” to bring McCarthy down, “agile enough to respond to new circumstances,” and carried out by trusted foot soldiers.

Nichols supplies a new lens through which to view this confrontation. He documents Ike’s active involvement in the clandestine campaign, directing the release of information damaging to McCarthy’s aides Roy Cohn and David Schine, coaching Secretary of the Army Robert Stevens on his testimony before Congress, and expanding the doctrine of executive privilege to restrict the release of information to McCarthy’s Committee on Government Operations. That said, Nichols may well give the president too much credit for masterminding the strategy that brought McCarthy down.

Nichols claims, for example, that the president realized that “if you imitate your enemy you risk becoming like them.” Nichols acknowledges, however, that Eisenhower put in place a program, designed in part to “take the issue away from McCarthy,” that “required complete and unswerving loyalty to the United States” and opened the door for the dismissal of government employees who were deemed security risks “by reason of personal habits or actions” (including alcoholism, adultery, and homosexuality). And that Ike encouraged Attorney General Herbert Brownell to accuse former president Harry Truman of knowingly nominating Harry Dexter White, a Russian spy, as executive director of the International Monetary Fund.

It is worth noting, moreover, that Eisenhower did not take decisive action until Ralph Flanders, a Vermont Republican, delivered a blistering attack against McCarthy from the floor of the United
States Senate and Edward R. Murrow declared on *See It Now*: “This is no time for those who oppose Senator McCarthy’s methods to keep silent…we cannot defend freedom abroad by deserting it at home.”

Nichols recognizes that “it is dangerous to assume that, because things happen at the same time, one is the cause of the other.” Although Murrow would not have colluded with “a White House he held in disdain,” he speculates that Sherman Adams, the president’s chief of staff, might have recruited Flanders. The important point, it seems to me, is that the White House did not release the report on the efforts of McCarthy and Cohn to get favorable treatment from the Army for Private Schine until it “got a little help from a friendly senator” and a powerful broadcast on CBS television.

What lessons can be learned from the campaign against McCarthy? “The reason Joe gets away with so much,” Secretary of State William Rogers maintained, “is that he always has the other guy on the defensive before the slugging starts.” The Eisenhower administration, it seems clear, didn’t go on offense when public opinion seemed to be on McCarthy’s side and feared splitting the Republican Party. Until 1954, the president, who insisted that he didn’t want to “get into the gutter” with McCarthy, didn’t find ways to tell voters, as Murrow ultimately did, that they should put the threat of communist subversion in the proper perspective; should not “confuse dissent with disloyalty” or forget that “accusation is not proof and conviction depends upon evidence and due process of law.” Ike stopped McCarthy, not McCarthyism.

Taking on both, of course, contained political risks. As it always does.