

Michael Connolly, "Showing More Profile Than Courage: McCarthyism in Massachusetts and its Challenge to the Young John Fitzgerald Kennedy" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 36, No. 1 (Winter 2008).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work:

[masshistoryjournal@westfield.ma.edu](mailto:masshistoryjournal@westfield.ma.edu)

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.



Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/ number/ date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.westfield.ma.edu/mhj>.



**Showing More Profile Than Courage:  
McCarthyism in Massachusetts and its Challenge  
to the Young John Fitzgerald Kennedy**

**By**

**Michael C. Connolly**

One method of beginning to analyze the impact of McCarthyism on Irish America is to look briefly at an historical precedent that involved some similar aspects. The infamous Father Charles E. Coughlin and his National Union for Social Justice (NUSJ) would be such a precedent to consider.

In the early 1930s Father Coughlin, known as “the radio priest,” emerged as a national figure whose innovative technique of using the broadcast medium soon brought him into the homes of more than forty million Americans.<sup>1</sup> His listening audience grew rapidly to include stations in all of the continental United States and many overseas countries by way of international shortwave. Coughlin’s early radio career was widely identified with his enthusiastic support for the newly elected president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Father Coughlin’s early and forceful support for Roosevelt stemmed from the fact that he viewed Roosevelt’s opponent, Herbert Hoover, as a tool of “international bankers” and also as being totally incapable of ending the Depression. By 1935, however, Coughlin and Roosevelt were themselves moving further apart due to personal antagonisms and serious fiscal disagreements. Coughlin’s major financial message was to counsel the use of inflationary economics as an immediate means of reducing America’s debt and stimulating the circulation of currency.

---

<sup>1</sup> Sheldon Marcus, *Father Coughlin* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1973), 34.

On December 11, 1934 Father Coughlin created the National Union for Social Justice (NUSJ), which marked his formal entrance into the political forum. Throughout the next year and one-half his estrangement from Roosevelt intensified, and finally on June 19, 1936 Coughlin announced his support for the newly created Union Party, whose purpose was, he stated, “to eradicate the cancerous growths from decadent capitalism and avoid the treacherous pitfalls of red communism.”<sup>2</sup>

The initial challenge to Roosevelt by such dynamic and diverse figures as Huey Long and his successor Rev. Gerald L. K. Smith, Dr. Francis Townsend, and finally Charles E. Coughlin, failed completely in the utter demise of William Lemke’s campaign as the Union Party candidate for President in 1936. Roosevelt swept back into power losing only two states in the electoral college: Maine and Vermont. The old political canard, “As Maine goes, so goes the nation” was appropriately revised to “As Maine goes, so goes Vermont.” Following this political landslide it became clear that Roosevelt had pre-empted the center-left of the American political spectrum and this signaled the readjustment of Father Coughlin’s emphasis, both socially and politically.

From 1936-1942, Coughlin moved steadily rightward and in the process his obsessive anti-communism became blurred with increasingly anti-Semitic and even pro-fascist sentiment. His journal, *Social Justice*, published information directly from the World Press Service, a Nazi propaganda source. Finally in 1942 the US Postal Service banned *Social Justice* after it was charged under the Espionage Act.<sup>3</sup> Father Coughlin that same year discontinued his radio and printing activities, thereby avoiding trial on the charge of sedition. A 1938 Gallup poll showed a more than 2:1 difference in approval of Coughlin by Catholics as

---

<sup>2</sup> Marcus, 113.

<sup>3</sup> David H. Bennett, *Demagogues in the Depression* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1973), 281.

opposed to Protestants and 4:1 to Jews: Catholics (42%), Protestants (19%), and Jews (10%).<sup>4</sup>

In the fall of 1930, at the same time that Father Coughlin was beginning his first nationwide broadcasting season with CBS Radio, a twenty-two year old freshman was entering Marquette University, a Jesuit college in Milwaukee. This young student was Joseph Raymond McCarthy. McCarthy was born in Grand Chute, Wisconsin, near Appleton, in 1908. He was the fifth of nine children born to Timothy and Bridget (née Tierney) McCarthy. His father was native born, half Irish and half German, while his mother was an Irish immigrant. Their immediate neighborhood was known as “the Irish Settlement,” what Richard Rovere called “an island of Hibernians in a sea of farmers of predominantly German and Dutch ancestry.”<sup>5</sup> The Irish nature of his parentage and upbringing should not be overemphasized, according to Donald F. Crosby, S.J., who says, “the senator seems to have made little out of his Irishness; nor does his Irish background seem to have been one of the more important influences on his career.”<sup>6</sup> Concerning Crosby’s latter contention, it seems that much evidence exists to the contrary, at least concerning how others viewed McCarthy.

McCarthy’s childhood was certainly not an overly unusual one, except for the contention that he was his mother’s favorite and was, therefore, pampered. He left school at age fourteen to work on the family farm for the next six years. His determination was demonstrated by the fact that at age twenty he was able to finish all of his high school requirements in just one year. After entering Marquette University in 1930 as an engineering student, McCarthy changed to law and graduated

---

<sup>4</sup> Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Rightwing Extremism in America, 1790-1970* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 172.

<sup>5</sup> Richard H. Rovere, *Senator Joe McCarthy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 79.

<sup>6</sup> Donald F. Crosby, *God, Church, and Flag: Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and the Catholic Church, 1950-1957* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 27.

on schedule in 1935. He was “a big man on campus” and was president of his class. He was remembered as being fun-loving, popular, deferential to clergy, and faithful in his religious duties. “He certainly would have heard something about the church’s position on communism (and the related issue of social justice), but it seems to have made little impression on him.”<sup>7</sup>

Joe McCarthy quickly rose from his position as a small-town lawyer to a Wisconsin circuit court judgeship. He left this position to join the Marines at the outbreak of World War II, a brief foray into military life which later earned him the titles “Marine war hero” and the more popular “Tail Gunner Joe.” In actuality his stories about combat wounds and combat missions were largely fabrications. His “wounds”, i.e., a broken leg, came as the result of a party aboard a seaplane, and his “combat missions” were mainly made as a passenger sitting in the only available seat, that of the tail gunner. His official Marine Corps record “shows no notation of his having qualified for an aerial gunner’s wings or being credited with combat missions.”<sup>8</sup> McCarthy was an active Marine from June 1942 until December 1944 and his main responsibility was as a pilot de-briefer (an intelligence officer). These two and one-half years would play a crucial role in the public perception of this man.

While still in the Marines in 1944, and in the midst of the Pacific war, McCarthy took a thirty day leave in order to campaign for the Republican nomination for Wisconsin’s US Senate seat then held by fellow Republican Alexander Wiley. He placed a respectable second in that race. Late in 1944, McCarthy resigned his commission in order to campaign for re-election as a circuit judge:

He was re-elected circuit judge in 1945, and the following year was elected to the Senate seat held for twenty years by Robert M. LaFollette, Jr., and for twenty years before that by LaFollette’s father, perhaps the

---

<sup>7</sup> Crosby, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Rovere, 95.

noblest figure in the flowering of political idealism in the Middle West early in this century.<sup>9</sup>

Joseph McCarthy's primary victory over the well-known LaFollette in 1946 was a shock to Wisconsin and the nation, even despite his narrow 3,000 vote margin. McCarthy quickly turned his attention to his Democratic opponent, University of Wisconsin Professor Howard McMurray. McMurray, a liberal, was subjected to what has since been recognized as the "McCarthy treatment," with McMurray being once referred to as "Communistically inclined."<sup>10</sup> The result of the 1946 Senatorial contest was an overwhelming victory for Joseph R. McCarthy. He would be the Republican Senator from Wisconsin for most of the last ten years of his life. The first three years of his Senate term gave little indication of what was to come. It did, however, reveal the political Joe McCarthy to be quite closely identified with conservative causes in the 80th Congress between 1947 and 1949. "Of the fifteen key bills that the Congress had considered, McCarthy had voted with the conservatives in all but one. By contrast, the other five Catholic senators had voted consistently with the liberals."<sup>11</sup>

After briefly considering the earlier years in the life of Joseph McCarthy, one must come to the point of his famous speech to the Republican Women's Club of Wheeling, West Virginia on February 9, 1950. What led McCarthy to make this speech warning of communist infiltration in the U.S. State Department? Why was this speech seized on so eagerly by the domestic press and the Senator thus catapulted into such overnight prominence? To answer these questions one must begin to consider historical and ideological trends. The possibility that Joseph McCarthy was more a character in a play already written, albeit a lead

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 98-99.

<sup>10</sup> Crosby, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 31.

character, than the author or even director of the play itself must also be considered. David Caute has the following to say about this consideration:

When Harry S. Truman became President of the United States on April 12, 1945, the federal and state statute books were already bristling with anti-Communist legislation. All that was required -- and conspicuously lacking under Franklin D. Roosevelt -- was the will to enforce it.<sup>12</sup>

What then were the factors between 1945-1950 that summoned the will of Americans to enforce and extend anti-communist legislation? These five short years between World War II and the Korean War were filled with tensions and potential confrontations that directly and indirectly contributed to what we today call McCarthyism. First, and perhaps foremost, was World War II itself. The war had stimulated a weak economy, but more importantly for our purposes it had also stimulated a weak national psyche. The despondence of the Depression had been replaced by a sense of national purpose, and "Dr. Win the War" was reassuringly in firm control. In April of 1945, however, Roosevelt died, and the burden of leadership fell on Harry S. Truman.

It was Truman who had to face a post-war American public that was disgruntled by the notion that the war had, after all, not been a final resolution of international tension. To many Americans it seemed that fascism had merely been replaced by communism, yet another totalitarian threat to America's "liberal democratic" political ideology. For Republicans, this sense of post-bellum anxiety was intensified by their unexpected defeat at the hands of Truman in November 1948. Thomas E. Dewey's loss was keenly felt, and it only served to exacerbate the east-west split in the G.O.P. symbolized by the Dewey/Lodge (New York/Massachusetts) wing as opposed to the wing of "Mr. Republican," Senator Robert Taft of Ohio.

---

<sup>12</sup> David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 25.

There was an increasing view that the Democrats, through the initiatives of the New Deal and now the Fair Deal, had effectively monopolized the domestic economic issues, and the G.O.P. despaired of winning future elections through an emphasis on the domestic economy. Foreign policy also presented a problem, as the “eastern establishment” or “internationalist” Republicans had forged a loose coalition with the Truman Democrats on such vital policies as the Marshall Plan, NATO, and the United Nations. The acceptance by the eastern Republicans of Truman’s containment policy from 1947, allowed a degree of bipartisanship in foreign policy. The western, rural, isolationist Republicans were alienated by these turn of events. This group sported a “Fortress America” philosophy -- keep the boys at home, build up the military, extend our influence throughout Central and South America, and finally if communism were judged to be an actual threat, then its outright defeat should be America’s goal.

Thus the western Republican wing, which included the young Senator McCarthy, favored an unchallengeable, powerful America domestically, and it offered as its foreign policy the liberation of communist nations when necessary. When contrasted to this call for the “roll-back” of communism, the Truman containment policy took on the pale hue of appeasement for many. This then was the milieu within the Republican Party that heartily welcomed McCarthy’s anti-communist rhetoric in February 1950.

The United States during this inter-war period was alarmed by the increasing Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe. Poland was the symbol. Poland, and its invasion by the Nazis, had been the cause of western intervention against Hitler, but now this country was fully controlled by Soviet forces. Two other factors involving Poland are important: the first is the presence of a very large number of practicing Catholics within the country, and the second is the domestic issue of the millions of Polish Americans with direct and often quite recent ties to their homeland. The interest of the Catholic Church in the matter of Eastern Europe was intense and it was heightened by information concerning the harsh treatment of members of the church hierarchy such as Archbishop Aloysius Stepinac of Yugoslavia and Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty of Hungary. Groups such as the Catholic War Veterans and the Knights of Columbus were vociferous through these years, but none



better expressed the growing anti-communist fear and hatred than did Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York and his assistant, Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen. Of the former, Donald Crosby states:

Without question the nation's best known Catholic prelate, Spellman took every opportunity to pound home the gospel of anticommunism, exhorting the practice of a brand of anti-Marxism that was both truly Catholic and fully American. His language may have been clumsy and repetitive, but no one could claim that his message was obscure.<sup>13</sup>

Spellman's view of communism was the "simple faith" view that it was inherently evil, just as America was inherently good. The moral boundaries were clear to him. Spellman began to show concern about the internal threat of communism, and he eventually came to doubt the will of Roosevelt and other liberals to "*ecrasez l'infame*" (crush the infamy), as he saw it. Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen has been called anti-communism's "prophet and philosopher," and although he remained somewhat detached from the McCarthy-era purges, he was responsible for several well-publicized conversions to Catholicism by prominent ex-Marxists. Perhaps his best known "moral conquest" was Louis Budenz, the former editor of the *Daily Worker*, who in 1945 returned to the Catholic fold "and subsequently carried on a fanatical crusade against his former Marxist comrades. Not surprisingly, he became one of Senator McCarthy's warmest supporters."<sup>14</sup>

In 1948-49 three major events played their own part in this continuing drama. The first was the Berlin crisis which culminated in the air lift of food and supplies to a West Berlin that was encircled by communist East Germany. The symbolism of a "democratic island" in a "communist sea" was not lost on the American public, and this symbolism was fully

---

<sup>13</sup> Crosby, 14.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

exploited by both church and state. In 1949 the Chinese Communist revolution led by Mao Zedong was successful, and the “loss of China,” which implied that it was somehow America’s to lose, was bemoaned throughout the “Free World.” It was in America, and in particular the US State Department, that a price was exacted for this event. This began the trend towards a foreign service that tended to report what the administration in power wished to hear rather than the true facts on the ground. The fear of job security in this essential branch of the government was one of the long-range effects of McCarthyism, and probably it was a partial reason for such questionable advice concerning Indochina given to later Presidents by some of “the best and the brightest” in our foreign service. Finally, one last event of importance within these two years was the detonation of the Soviet Union’s first atomic bomb in 1949.

Concurrent with the Soviet’s mushroom blast, the American nuclear monopoly vaporized. Any use of the A-bomb as a threat from this date onward had to be weighed against the ever increasing potential of Soviet nuclear retaliation. The atomic age, inaugurated by the US in 1945, had thus been fundamentally restructured. The psychological impact of this event on the American people was significant. Initial fear was augmented by the suspicion that the USSR had somehow received assistance in its A- bomb program, and an explanation was called for. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg would soon become the nation’s most famous nuclear scapegoats:

The Rosenbergs, whose guilt was still being hotly debated many years later, were in no way associated with the government. Still, the [Klaus] Fuchs case was proof of the need for security. McCarthy, many Americans told themselves, might be a little rough in his methods, but his goals were noble. If permitted to continue, he would uncover the “traitors” in government.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> James T. Patterson, *America in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 354.

The domestic phenomenon of McCarthyism cannot properly be separated from its contemporary event, the Korean War. The Korean War began formally with the crossing of the 38th parallel by communist troops on June 25, 1950, and it continued through the ceasefire of July, 1953. These three years fall directly within the nearly five year period of Joe McCarthy's dominance, i.e., February 1950 through December 1954. Although McCarthyism deals basically with the internal communist "threat," the war in Korea served as the foreign lens through which many Americans perceived these domestic threats.

The ending of the Korean War by an armistice in July 1953 was in itself an example of how McCarthyism could affect foreign as well as domestic policy. The idea of an armistice was fairly consistent with the philosophy of containing communism, as opposed to that of its roll-back or even its total defeat. Because of his unimpeachable military record, General, now President, Dwight D. Eisenhower was in a favorable position to promote such a compromise with the communists. This signified the formal division of the Korean peninsula into separate sovereignties. In all likelihood a Democratic administration would have been looking over its shoulder before agreeing to such a compromise. Former President Harry S. Truman said, "I would have been crucified for that armistice."<sup>16</sup>

These then were some of the major factors leading to the rise of McCarthyism between World War II and the Korean War. They included inflated post-war expectations; despair of the Republicans then out of presidential power since 1932; communist gains and further threats in Eastern Europe; the "loss of China"; the Soviet A- bomb explosion; and finally the Korean War itself. With this serving as a general background, this essay will now turn to a discussion of the relationship between McCarthyism and one specific group in America: the Irish-Catholic community, especially in Massachusetts.

Any analysis of the type of support which Joseph McCarthy received from various social, economic, religious, or ethnic groups should be made with some knowledge of two major schools of historiography: the

---

<sup>16</sup> Rovere, 15.

pluralist and the political.<sup>17</sup> The earlier pluralist school of Seymour M. Lipset, Daniel Bell, and Richard Hofstadter argued that McCarthy appealed to Catholics and other groups who were anxious about their tenuous status in American society. The more recent political school of Nelson Polsby and Michael Paul Rogin maintained that McCarthy's Catholic support was basically limited to conservative Catholic Republicans.

These two schools were in agreement that McCarthyism flourished where levels of education were lower. Independent studies have confirmed this theory, and they further show that the decline in support for McCarthy along this inverse ratio to education was roughly the same for both Catholics and Protestants. A select sample of Catholics surveyed in 1954 revealed that those with only a grammar school education approved of McCarthy by 68%, while those who were college graduates approved by only 38%.<sup>18</sup>

This section of the essay intends to highlight some of the more relevant points made by Lipset and Raab. To initiate their claim that new wealth was related to new insecurity, the authors asserted:

The man who amasses wealth himself feels more insecure about keeping it than do people who possess inherited wealth. He also feels more aggrieved about social reform measures which involve redistribution of the wealth, as compared with individuals, still wealthy, who have grown up in an old traditionalist background,

---

<sup>17</sup> Crosby, 236.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 237. Donald Crosby is critical of Lipset and Raab's findings in *The Politics of Unreason* basically because he claims that they support their theories with inadequate data, and he in fact comes out more in support of the more recent political school in this debate.

with the values of tolerance associated with upper-class aristocratic conservatism.<sup>19</sup>

The period from 1930-1945, roughly equivalent to the Roosevelt years, was a time of liberal sentiment in American politics. The years to follow would be different:

The anxieties of postwar America were thus sharply different from those of prewar America: new wealth as against pervasive poverty, Communism as against Fascism as an antagonist on the world scene. These differences induced a generally conservative mood and provided a radically different framework for the development of extremist political groups.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1930s the Nye Committee and the LaFollette Committee exposed big bankers and big business, while in the 1940s the Truman Committee exposed big business profiteering in World War II. Even the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUA) was originally started by John McCormack of Boston and others for the purpose of investigating pro-fascist organizations. The post-war period, however, with its new set of anxieties forming around the issue of communism, tended to re-legitimize American free enterprise and put conservative forces on the offensive. It was Joseph McCarthy who best expressed their fears and anxieties, and in the name of anti-communism he rallied their forces.

To Seymour Lipset, McCarthy appeared more an instrument than a creator. He was at the right place at the right time and only too willing to assume a leadership position. It appears true that McCarthy needed McCarthyism as much as it needed him. By 1950 he realized the necessity of creating a viable image if he wanted to insure his own re-election to the Senate, then only two years hence.

---

<sup>19</sup> Lipset and Raab, 210.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

McCarthy and Father Charles Coughlin are contrasted by Lipset. Although McCarthy often took an anti-intellectual, anti-elitist stance, he did not invoke a particular identifiable group such as Coughlin's "international bankers" or "Jewish merchants." McCarthy's advisors included several Jews, the most prominent being Roy Cohn and David Shine. Surveys show that McCarthy's supporters tend to be no more anti-Semitic than his opponents.<sup>21</sup> "For McCarthyism, the enemy was an ideology, Communism... McCarthy's Communism as an internal threat remained generalized, and McCarthyism remained more a hysteria than a political movement."<sup>22</sup> Lipset provides a series of tables which analyze the social basis of McCarthy's support. The first shows a large discrepancy between Democrats and Republicans in their support for McCarthy in 1954:

	Attitude Toward McCarthy		Strong		Weak		Strong	
	Dem.	Dem.	Dem.	Indep.	Indep.	Rep.	Rep.	Rep.
Pro-McCarthy	10%	9%	8%	12%	12%	12%	12%	25%
Neutral	37	44	42	54	50	47	43	
Anti-McCarthy	50	40	41	21	32	33	27	
Other	3	7	9	13	6	8	5	
Excess of anti-	40%	31%	33%	9%	20%	21%	2%	<sup>23</sup>
Over pro-attitudes								

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 222-224.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 225.

The preceding table shows pro-McCarthy attitudes to be fully two and one-half times greater among strong Republicans than among strong Democrats, and similarly strong Republicans exhibited only one-half the anti-McCarthy feeling expressed by strong Democrats.

The next table shows the percentage difference between approval and disapproval ratings of McCarthy in various categories. These entries reflect the percentage of difference between approval and disapproval of McCarthy in 1954. Note the consistently increasing degree of support with decreasing levels of education:

<b><u>Education</u></b>	<b><u>Party Identification</u></b>		
	<b>Democrat</b>	<b>Independent</b>	<b>Republican</b>
Graduate School	-59	-44	-28
College	-44	-24	-19
Vocational	-41	-20	-19
High school	-27	-8	-5
Grammar school	-18	-8	+6 <sup>24</sup>

Of the various socio-economic and occupational categories it was found that “McCarthy’s main opponents were to be found among professional, managerial, and clerical personnel, while his support was disproportionately located among self-employed businessmen, farmers, and manual workers.”<sup>25</sup> Also it appears that opposition to McCarthy by students was overwhelming. Among the various Protestant denominations the degree of opposition to McCarthy increased with the level of socio-economic status of the group itself. The most opposition came from the high status Episcopalians and Congregationalists while

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

the most support came from the lower status Baptists. This Roper survey showed virtually the same order of results as did an earlier study of denominational support for Father Coughlin. Finally, this last table combines two important factors, religion and ethnicity, in evaluating support for McCarthy near the peak of his power in 1952. It records the percentage difference between approvers and disapprovers:

<b>Catholics</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Protestants</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>%</b>
4 <sup>th</sup> gen. Am.	198	-11		1190	-2
Ireland	81	+18		29	+7
Italy	61	+16		--	--
Germany	54	+13		172	+2
Great Britain	13	*		108	-8
Poland	36	-6		--	--
Scandinavia	--	--		68	-3
Negroes	--	--		252	-7
Jews	--	--		96	-6 <sup>26</sup>

Lipset, agreeing with Michael Rogin, makes the distinction between the man and the movement -- McCarthy as opposed to McCarthyism. The latter is incapable of accurately being measured on an electoral basis. Lipset says, "It was never a political movement; it was a political tendency, unorganized, activating certain impulses in a sympathetic audience, which had certain affects in areas of public life."<sup>27</sup> The

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 233.



following represent the three main groups most likely to support McCarthy, according to Lipset: 1) the economic conservatives; 2) the status-volatile; and 3) the uneducated. He goes on to say that “insofar as they were different groups, McCarthyism was able to bind them together for a while under the banner of a moralistic, monistic, conspiracy-style anti-Communism, which had different significances for them.”<sup>28</sup> David Cate speaks specifically of the Irish factor:

Fordham graduates were clearing (or not clearing) Harvard men. Who now carried the flag? Thomas Murphy, prosecutor in both trials of Alger Hiss, remarked during a St. Patrick’s Day parade, “I can’t even recall one Irish name on Un-American Activities.”<sup>29</sup>

Donald Crosby also deals with the Irish/Catholic factor, and he writes a substantial amount about Massachusetts and its nascent politician, the young John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Separating the Irish from Catholicism is a task to be undertaken gingerly. Similarly, to equate the two is to invite a multitude of discrepancies. This dilemma is perhaps best illustrated by what Stephen Mitchell, Democratic National Chairman, referred to as a “revival of religious prejudice against the Catholic Church.” Mitchell further stated that he personally resented “the transfer of [McCarthy’s] reputation to that of my Church.”

Even though Protestants were wrong in thinking that Catholics were conformists and undemocratic... nevertheless it was imperative that Catholics (and the Irish as well) oppose McCarthy so vehemently that

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>29</sup> Cate, 109.

everyone would see how divided Catholics were over McCarthy.<sup>30</sup>

Donald Crosby makes a determined effort to dissociate McCarthyism from a direct correlation to Catholicism, and specifically Irish Catholicism. Speaking of McCarthy's Catholic support, he states:

It simply was not true as some observers said then (and a few still say) that the Irish in America had taken Joe McCarthy's cause to heart. To be sure some had, but some had not. Not even in Boston or New York could McCarthy count on undisputed affirmation from the Irish-American citizenry. In sum, the nation's Irish divided on McCarthy about as much as the rest of the Catholic populace.<sup>31</sup>

Continuing on this theme of demolishing the myth of monolithic Catholicism, Crosby analyzes the degree of Catholic support for McCarthy in three different cities: New York, Chicago, and Boston. In most cases the degree of liberality, which Crosby equates with opposition to McCarthy, or conservatism, equated with McCarthyite support, can be traced to the hierarchical leadership of these cities. In New York, the duo of Francis Cardinal Spellman and Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen produced a socially conservative climate ripe for McCarthyite support. Conversely, the archdiocese of Chicago was "the most liberal in the nation," and had probably acquired this tendency from the earlier social programs of Cardinal George Mundelein and Samuel Stritch. Bishop Bernard J. Sheil continued this progressive inclination, and he was known nationally for his frequent attacks on the Wisconsin senator. It was in Massachusetts, however, that "Archbishop (later Cardinal) Richard Cushing of Boston, a friend of McCarthy's millionaire supporter

---

<sup>30</sup> Crosby, 153-154.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

Joseph P. Kennedy, issued constant imprecations against Communism and went so far as to appoint Louis Budenz as his adviser on the subject.”<sup>32</sup>

Factors were favorable in Boston for strong McCarthyite support. The hierarchy, symbolized by Archbishop Cushing, was certainly supportive, and applying Lipset’s theory of status anxiety, Massachusetts is a classic example, i.e., a large “minority” population, an entrenched Yankee elite, and finally political control as yet not completely attained statewide by the “out group” — this most clearly represented by the presence of patrician Republican Senators Henry Cabot Lodge and Leverett Saltonstall:

McCarthy probably enjoyed his greatest popular strength in John Kennedy’s Boston, though even there the legions of Catholic liberals rose in wrath to oppose the senator and his “ism.” It seems clear, however, that McCarthy’s most widespread grass-roots support among Catholics was in Boston. A 1954 survey of opinion on McCarthy in ten key states showed Massachusetts with the highest proportion of Catholic McCarthyites.<sup>33</sup>

The theme of Boston being atypical of the Irish and Irish-Catholic experience elsewhere in America is found in many sources, notably Lawrence McCaffrey’s *The Irish Diaspora in America*.

Thus in the most heavily Catholic section of the country, urban New England, McCarthy’s support was the strongest.<sup>34</sup> In the 1952 general election, however, the Catholic Democratic vote, though undoubtedly affected by the Eisenhower landslide, still provided a small margin for Adlai Stevenson with 43.5 percent as compared to 41 percent for Eisenhower nationwide. A closer look at these same results yields the

---

<sup>32</sup> Cate, 109.

<sup>33</sup> Crosby, 232.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

more specific revelation that the Irish vote stayed safely within the Democratic fold by a 55% to 38% margin.<sup>35</sup>

Any consideration of McCarthyism and Irish America would hardly be complete without some analysis of the Kennedy family, and in particular John F. Kennedy. James MacGregor Burns in *John Kennedy: A Political Profile*, first published in 1959, just before Kennedy's election as president, entitled chapter eight, "McCarthyism: The Issue That Would Not Die."<sup>36</sup> The young Kennedy was elected freshman Congressman from Boston's North End in the 1946 election, the very same election that first brought Joseph McCarthy to the Senate. The Eleventh Congressional District was heavily Irish and Democratic (Kennedy was preceded by James Michael Curley and followed by Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill). Kennedy successfully defended his House seat in 1948 and again in 1950 before deciding to take on the Yankee, Brahmin icon, Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., in 1952. Lodge had originally won election to the Senate in 1936 in a closely-contested race against then Governor James Michael Curley.

Kennedy's position on McCarthy is difficult to analyze. He sometimes privately voiced concern over McCarthy's uncivil behavior and demeanor, but publicly he was much more restrained. This public reticence to openly criticize the Wisconsin senator would later give rise to the quip that Kennedy had shown "so much profile and so little courage."<sup>37</sup> At a November 1950 meeting with Harvard professors and students, Kennedy had dismayed the liberal audience by declaring that he "knew Joe pretty well and he may have something."<sup>38</sup> In the early 1950s Kennedy had privately referred to McCarthy with "articulate dislike, but showed no interest in saying so publicly." Few in the Senate (Herbert Lehman, Estes Kefauver, and J. William Fulbright) took McCarthy on

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>36</sup> James MacGregor Burns, *John Kennedy: A Political Profile* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959), 131-155.

<sup>37</sup> Crosby, 213; Burns, 153.

<sup>38</sup> Crosby, 108.

politically, and some who did and paid an electoral price for doing so. Political defeats suffered by Millard Tidings and William Benton “remained instructive.”<sup>39</sup> Historian Richard Rovere famously reported that “the truth is that everyone in the Senate, or just about everyone, was scared stiff of him.” In the 1952 election, for example, McCarthy had campaigned against the re-election of four Democratic Senators “and every one had been defeated.”<sup>40</sup>

Eventually, several Senators would challenge McCarthy once he had “gone too far.” His attacks upon a Republican president, Eisenhower, the Army, and eventually other fellow Republicans, were defined as going too far. Foremost among these early opponents of McCarthy would be fellow Republicans George D. Aiken of Vermont and Margaret Chase Smith of Maine in their courageous, even if at the time ineffectual, “Declaration of Conscience.”<sup>41</sup>

One of the factors involved in Kennedy’s reluctance to take a more forthright position on McCarthy was family considerations. Robert Kennedy served on McCarthy’s Permanent Senate Subcommittee on Investigations, but only for six months in 1953, and he left after a personal feud with McCarthy’s controversial assistant, Roy Cohn. “Bobby never disavowed McCarthy, remaining loyal to the end.” But according to James MacGregor Burns, however, “Bobby was never one

---

<sup>39</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 12.

<sup>40</sup> Burns, 142.

<sup>41</sup> Burns, 137. I remember fondly a chance meeting with Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota in the early 1970s at Saint Leo’s College in Florida. In the course of a pleasant afternoon of exchanging political anecdotes with a small group of student admirers he asked me, perhaps because of my down east accent, where I was from. Upon hearing Maine, McCarthy said that we Mainers should be very proud of the efforts of our former Senator, Margaret Chase Smith, to control the excesses of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the early 1950s.

of McCarthy's intimates."<sup>42</sup> More important, however, was the apparent fondness of the Kennedy patriarch for Joe McCarthy:

Joseph Kennedy liked him most of all and invited him from time to time to Hyannis Port. He was a black Irishman, lowbrow and roughneck, with a certain animal vitality, coarse charm, broad humor and amusing impudence. Something about him, perhaps this instinctive insolence toward the establishment, may have reminded Joseph Kennedy agreeably of his own youth.<sup>43</sup>

The Senator was an occasional dinner guest at Cape Cod, and in 1952 he was presented with a \$50,000 campaign contribution from the elder Kennedy. Even though John F. Kennedy, a fellow Roman Catholic and a real war hero, might have been in a strong position to challenge McCarthy had he so decided, other factors argued against him doing so:

The Wisconsin Senator could be engaging in the Victor McLaglen manner, and the Ambassador even perhaps saw the campaign against this fighting Irishman as one more outlet for anti-Catholic sentiment which had so long oppressed the Irish American community.<sup>44</sup>

The issues behind this "friendship" with the elder Kennedy are complex, and it has been alleged that the large contribution was given in order to keep McCarthy out of Massachusetts in 1952 for fear of his possible

---

<sup>42</sup> Crosby, 106; Burns, 141.

<sup>43</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 100.

<sup>44</sup> Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days*, 12.

damage to John F. Kennedy among certain liberal and secular segments of the voting public.<sup>45</sup>

The “Beacon Hill affair” of that same year was an incident in which Joseph P. Kennedy dramatically and forcefully intervened to prevent his son from renouncing McCarthy and McCarthyism. The episode, while very instructive, is even now shrouded in secrecy. Apparently, a group of Kennedy supporters, led by Gardner “Pat” Jackson, on loan to the campaign from the CIO, had urged the young Kennedy to make the break with McCarthy, and to do it publicly once the influential fellow Massachusetts Congressman John McCormack agreed to go along. Kennedy shared his Irish-Catholic background with McCarthy, while his Senate opponent, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., only shared his party affiliation. After McCormack’s agreement had been obtained, Jackson arrived at Kennedy’s Beacon Hill apartment to read the statement that had been prepared and to get the young Kennedy’s endorsement. Jackson was surprised to find Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr., waiting for him on Beacon Hill. The Kennedy patriarch spoke in no uncertain terms, at one point storming over to Jackson as if to attack him and claiming, “You and your friends are trying to ruin my son’s career.”<sup>46</sup> Of course, no endorsement was forthcoming. John F. Kennedy, apparently, had stayed silent during this harangue, and later explained his father’s emotional outburst and tirade against Jackson as simply “pride of family.”<sup>47</sup> After an extremely energetic, well-organized, and well-financed campaign, Kennedy was able to overcome the Eisenhower landslide of 1952 and defeat Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., by a narrow margin of 70,737 votes.<sup>48</sup> Any mistake by Kennedy, regarding McCarthy, in this crucial race would have been potentially disastrous. Eric Sevareid, writing in 1960, opined that had Kennedy taken a “bold stand against McCarthy” in

---

<sup>45</sup> Burns, 108.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-110; Crosby, 111.

<sup>48</sup> Crosby, 111.

this pivotal and early test of his political skills on a statewide campaign, “he would have been overwhelmingly defeated.”<sup>49</sup>

Donald F. Crosby provides four factors to explain the popularity of McCarthy in Massachusetts: first, the Irish dominated hierarchical Catholicism and Democratic politics in Massachusetts. Second, Massachusetts Catholics had a running feud with the Protestants since the time of Mayor James Michael Curley and long before. Third, the conservative hierarchy of William Cardinal O’Connell (1906-1944) followed by Richard Cardinal Cushing who was an active McCarthy supporter. Finally, the similarity in the irreverent style of McCarthy and James Michael Curley, both of whom “slyly broke the rules and winked roguishly while doing it -- but all for a good cause.”<sup>50</sup> Crosby asserts that Kennedy was only being politically pragmatic when considering his options concerning Senator McCarthy: “Kennedy was right to assess the situation shrewdly and to weigh his moves with great care: the Catholic McCarthyites in his home state were ready to stand up and fight if he decided to duel with the junior senator from Wisconsin.”<sup>51</sup>

Once in the Senate, Kennedy continued his neutral position. In the 1954 Senatorial campaign between Democrat Foster Furcolo and Senator Leverett Saltonstall, Kennedy’s neutrality almost certainly contributed to the Republican’s narrow victory. Kennedy “liked the old blue blood [Saltonstall] personally,” but “many in Massachusetts considered the rivalry [with fellow-Democrat Furcolo] in part a sign of the mutual suspicion between the Irish and the Italians.”<sup>52</sup> Both Massachusetts Senators attempted to avoid the McCarthy issue, but with varying degrees of success. “One suspects that the Boston Irish expected Kennedy to ‘conform’ on McCarthy because, after all, he was Irish and Catholic, just as they and Senator McCarthy

---

<sup>49</sup> Eric Sevareid, *Candidates 1960* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 202-203, as cited in Crosby, 112.

<sup>50</sup> Crosby, 112-113.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>52</sup> Burns, 147-148.



himself. Kennedy was ‘one of their own.’”<sup>53</sup> Kennedy, however, did not seem to share his father’s admiration for McCarthy whose “vulgarity was hardly to John Kennedy’s Brahmin taste.”<sup>54</sup>

While in the Senate together, Kennedy opposed McCarthy in several ways, principally on several of the latter’s nominations. One of the best examples would be from August 1954 while Kennedy was serving on McCarthy’s Government Operations Committee, although not on its subcommittee on investigations that conducted the sensational hearings. Kennedy strongly opposed McCarthy’s nomination of former Senator Owen Brewster of Maine to serve as the committee’s chief counsel.<sup>55</sup>

The final episode in this relationship revolves around the Senate’s motion to censure Joseph McCarthy in late 1954. Kennedy remained “elusive, devious and temporizing.” To historian and Kennedy biographer Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., he remarked, “Hell, half my votes in Massachusetts look on McCarthy as a hero.”<sup>56</sup> Kennedy himself, in a later speech favoring the censure of McCarthy that was never delivered, stated, “I am not insensitive to the fact that my constituents perhaps contain a greater proportion of devotees on each side of this matter than the constituency of any other Senator.”<sup>57</sup>

One basic problem for Kennedy seemed to be that in the mid-1950s his commitment to civil liberties was nowhere near as concrete as it would become by the early 1960s. Kennedy essentially perceived the whole issue as a legal judgment: had McCarthy broken any laws or had

---

<sup>53</sup> Crosby, 198.

<sup>54</sup> Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times*, 100.

<sup>55</sup> Burns, 141-143. This is a curious nomination by McCarthy as Brewster had much earlier in his career been elected as Republican governor of Maine (1924) with alleged support from the Ku Klux Klan. See John Syrett, “Principle and Expediency: The Ku Klux Klan and Ralph Owen Brewster in 1924,” *Maine History* 39, Number 4 (Winter 2000-01) 215-239.

<sup>56</sup> Crosby, 209, 206; Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days*, 12.

<sup>57</sup> Burns, 142.

he not? By a coincidental twist of fate, Senator Kennedy was not present for the crucial December 2, 1954 Senate vote on censure. He was instead, from November-December, 1954, and well beyond, recovering from a very serious spinal surgery. He failed to register or pair his vote, again on the strict legalistic argument that he had not been personally present in the Senate to hear the whole case and the specific arguments for and against censure. Massachusetts, and particularly Boston, had shown themselves to be a special case:

Massachusetts's Catholic population demonstrated a deeper conservatism than Catholics in the rest of the country (and even in the remaining northeastern states), and they gave evidence of a stronger propensity toward McCarthyism and its associated conservative positions than Catholics in other parts of the nation.<sup>58</sup>

This censure episode revealed much about the nature of McCarthy, the man, and McCarthyism in Massachusetts — it signaled the beginning of the end of both:

Though McCarthy's Catholic followers everywhere grew more anxious in the waning days of the censure fight, nowhere did they take the struggle more seriously than in Boston. They remained loyal to McCarthy... John Kennedy would survive his ordeal of November and December 1954; Joseph Raymond McCarthy would not.<sup>59</sup>

Donald Crosby's, *God, Church and Flag*, is a valuable and extremely well-researched work on the nexus of the topics of church and state, personal and public morality. On the large question of "Catholics"

---

<sup>58</sup> Crosby, 214.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

versus “others,” Crosby does provide several methods of analyzing support for McCarthy, not simply in terms of religion, but also in terms of social class and levels of education. The nexus of these factors provides a much clearer and more analytically sophisticated explanation of the source of McCarthyite support in Massachusetts and in America as a whole.

Concerning the main topic of this essay, the relationship between Joseph R. McCarthy and John F. Kennedy; this seems to be one very revealing episode in the larger drama of the Irish-American experience, especially concerning their political assimilation. The political demise and premature death of Senator McCarthy, who arguably represented a narrower, more parochial, and pessimistic philosophy, is contrasted with the concurrent rise of the broader, more fluid, and increasingly liberal, tolerant, and optimistic philosophy of the future president.

Joseph R. McCarthy was censured by the Senate on December 2, 1954 on a vote of 67 to 22 with only three abstentions — the two Senators from Wisconsin and John F. Kennedy.<sup>60</sup> McCarthy

“receded into anonymity, increasingly isolated from political life and declining both physically and emotionally... Seldom in American history has a major political figure descended into oblivion as quickly and with such finality... It seemed that the nation had no sooner forgotten Joe McCarthy than he died suddenly on 2 May 1957.”<sup>61</sup>

Even within the truncated political career of the young John F. Kennedy, in these early years we can start to see a slowly emerging sense of pluralism, albeit hesitatingly, that will greatly assist the journey of Irish Catholics in Massachusetts and in America along the path to a fuller sense of assimilation and acceptance. By 1956, Kennedy would attempt, unsuccessfully, to become the Democratic nominee for Vice President on the ticket with Adlai Stevenson of Ohio. Early in 1956, while

---

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

convalescing from back surgery, Kennedy had completed his collection of essays on political fortitude entitled, *Profiles in Courage*. Kennedy's perceived neutrality on the vexing question of McCarthyism, however, would have consequences, both in 1956 and in 1960. "Kennedy's silence on McCarthy contrasted with Stevenson's eloquent defense of civil freedom; and, if [Hubert H.] Humphrey had been silent too; he had not made the mistake of writing a book entitled *Profiles in Courage*."<sup>62</sup>

Eleanor Roosevelt, still a formidable figure in the Democratic Party, was particularly troubled by Kennedy's apparent lack of backbone on this central moral question of the 1950s. Mrs. Roosevelt questioned someone

who understands what courage is and admires it, but has not quite the independence to have it...I think McCarthyism is a question on which public officials must stand up and be counted. I cannot be sure of the political future of anyone who does not willingly state where he stands on the issue... I believe that a public servant must clearly indicate that he understands the harm that McCarthyism did to our country and that he opposes it actively, so that one would feel sure he would always do so in the future.<sup>63</sup>

Shortly after the death of Joseph R. McCarthy in 1957, John F. Kennedy would go on to be re-elected as Massachusetts Senator in 1958, and from this platform he would mount his ultimately successful candidacy to become the first, and to this point in time, the nation's only Roman Catholic president.

Some today regret that Kennedy's emergence from his father's control and, perhaps, from the strictures of his own ethnic and religious environment in Massachusetts, did not occur earlier. If he had been able to confront sooner the extreme elements of McCarthyism and its long

---

<sup>62</sup> Schlesinger, Jr., 13-14.

<sup>63</sup> Burns, 153; Schlesinger, Jr., 14.

shadow of fear across the country, Kennedy may have, even unwittingly, provided Americans with a clearer and personal example of political heroism. Some have suggested that *Profiles in Courage* was written as an act of contrition for his failure to take a stand on the McCarthy censure. The nature of the contrition would differ, of course, depending on one's own view of McCarthy:

His work on courage helped emancipate him from a narrow conception of a politician's responsibilities to this district. It opened up vistas of political leaders who were willing to defy public opinion in their states and districts because there was something bigger – a moral principle or the welfare of the whole nation – for which they would fight and even face defeat.<sup>64</sup>

John F. Kennedy should have the last word on the subject, it seems, so when historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., once suggested to the future president that he had paid a heavy price for choosing that particular title for his book, Kennedy responded, "Yes, but I didn't have a chapter in it on myself."<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Burns, 167-168.

<sup>65</sup> Schlesinger, Jr., 14.



Courage is the virtue that President Kennedy most admired. He sought out those people who had demonstrated in some way, whether it was on a battlefield or a baseball diamond, in a speech or fighting for a cause, that they had courage, that they would stand up, that they could be counted on. That is why this book so fitted his personality, his beliefs. "Only to God and to the angels to be lookers on." It was his conviction that a democracy with this effort by its people must and can face its problems, that it must show patience, restraint, compassion, as well as wisdom and strength and courage, in the struggle for solutions which are very rarely easy to find. When Mr. Kennedy first considered leaving his House seat last year to challenge Mr. Markey in a primary race, some in the party wondered if the 74-year-old incumbent would step aside for the 39-year-old political scion. Also crucial to Mr. Markey, who joined the Senate after John F. Kerry left the seat to become secretary of state in 2013, has been a successful digital operation. His staff used the work-from-home months, when most voters were glued to screens, to cast him as something of an unintentional hipster who still wears chunky 1989 Nike Air Revolutions. Mr. Kennedy was viewed just as warmly as he rallied union supporters in Dorchester, where black and white images on a wall inside the I.B.E.W. hall include a picketer in a hard hat wearing a "Kennedy" T-shirt. John Kennedy, or Jack, as he was known, grew up in a home where political issues were frequently discussed and sometimes debated. His father's strong views evidently influenced his older brother, Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr., more than they did him. In college, Kennedy for the most part showed a greater dedication to enjoying himself socially than he did to developing his mind. John Kennedy began to make speeches around Massachusetts in 1945 and the following spring ran in a. Kennedy took pains to disprove a columnist's challenge to his authorship and even won a retraction, but in 1980, Herbert Parmet, a dispassionate Kennedy biographer, concluded that Kennedy had in fact "served principally as an overseer or more charitably as a sponsor and editor." The JFK Library Foundation honor, which has been called the Nobel Prize for public figures, is given for an act, or a lifetime, of political courage. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi was named the recipient of this year's Profile in Courage Award by the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation. The award, which has been called the Nobel Prize for public figures, is given for an act, or a lifetime, of political courage. In a statement, Caroline Kennedy called Pelosi "the most important woman in American political history." The first female to be elected Speaker, and the first person elected Speaker in non-consecutive terms in over 60 years, Pelosi has served in the House of Representatives since 1987.