

# “McCARTHYISM WAS MORE THAN McCARTHY”: DOCUMENTING THE RED SCARE AT THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVEL

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*ABSTRACT:* Although the post World War II red scare is popularly associated with the activities of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and his impact on the federal government, the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s actually went far beyond McCarthy and Washington, D.C. Institutions and individuals in communities throughout the United States experienced their own local versions of the red scare. The purpose of this article is to urge archivists involved in documenting local history to be aware of the need to collect materials related to the extreme anti-Communist reaction at the local level. Using the example of the author's study of the red scare in Houston, Texas, the article discusses types of records that are likely to prove useful for research in this important subject.

The cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union has loomed darkly over American life since the end of the Second World War. This conflict between two superpowers with opposite world views has provided a frightening framework for everyone living in an era of incomprehensibly destructive nuclear weapons. The cold war has been a primary determinant of United States foreign policy for the last forty years. But the cold war has also had a domestic manifestation which has been labeled by one historian as “the Great Fear,” by a playwright as “Scoundrel Time,” and by another writer as the “Time of the Toad.” This domestic manifestation of the cold war, however, is more frequently called “the red scare.”<sup>1</sup>

The red scare is best defined as a widespread series of actions by individuals and groups whose intentions were to frighten Americans with false and highly exaggerated charges of Communist subversion for the purpose of political, economic, and psychological profit. The usual tactic employed by those carrying out the red scare is known as McCarthyism: the use of indiscriminate, often unfounded accusations, inquisitorial investigative methods, and sensationalism ostensibly in the suppression of communism. The red scare's best known symbol was Joseph R. McCarthy, the Republican senator from Wisconsin whose own behavior provided a name for the principal red scare technique.<sup>2</sup> Although Senator McCarthy embodied the phenomenon nationally,

the postwar anti-Communist movement actually permeated all levels of society, affecting nearly every facet of American life for almost ten years. Opposition was nearly nonexistent at its height and what little did exist was generally ineffective. Indeed, the anti-Communist hysteria of the late 1940s through the 1950s may have been the greatest crisis America has ever suffered in terms of her liberal and democratic values.

Historians know much about how the red scare operated at the national level. We have definitive biographies of Joe McCarthy, in-depth studies of blacklisting in the entertainment industry, and memoirs written by many of the red scare's key participants (both victims and perpetrators). But the red scare was more than the "Hollywood Ten" and the House Committee on Un-American Activities. As David Cauter has shown in a broad and generalized way in *The Great Fear*, the red scare had a virulent effect in components of American life outside the national political and entertainment arenas. There were red scares in labor, education, religion, business, the fine arts, and, in a multiplicity of forms, at the local community level.

Study of the red scare at the local level holds as much promise as any for understanding the extreme anti-Communist impulse in American life. Indeed, a study of the red scare at the local level tells us as much about the ethos of the community studied as it does about the red scare. This is because the red scare was basically a technique, a tool, a simplistic device for some members of the community to use against a whole set of unwelcome developments threatening those members' conception of the perfect and proper community. These unwelcome developments usually included the growth of labor unions, the rise of racial and ethnic consciousness, and the penetration of local schools and churches by non-traditional ways of looking at the human condition.

These developments *usually* included these perceived problems. With a few exceptions, however, we don't really know how or why the red scare worked itself out at the local level. More local case studies have to be done before we can make well-founded judgments and conclusions. And, as we are all aware, those studies must necessarily be based on the historical record. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to encourage archivists and manuscript curators at agencies with a local focus to incorporate the need to document the red scare in their collection development strategies and to be aware of materials within previously accessioned collections that pertain to the phenomenon.

As professionals, all of us know that the value of any component of a collection changes with the passage of time, usually due to shifts in concerns of scholarly research. We have all seen material originally ignored (such as that related to blacks and women) become important as perceptions of importance evolve. This is the case with the red scare at the local level. There is already in place in the manuscript and archival repositories in this country a rich lode of material of great potential use to anyone wishing to do research in this topic. Too often, however, reference staffs are unaware of it. This is usually because the red scare was simply not perceived as a topic during the subject analysis stage of processing. The result is that finding aids fail to reflect it.

This brings me to specifics about not only the types of old collections that should be reevaluated as possible sources for local red scares, but also the range of material that should be collected in the future. My own recently published book on the red scare in Houston serves as an example of where these primary

sources may be found.<sup>3</sup> The following list is neither at the archival edge nor especially profound, because the same types of sources can be and have been used to document other historical developments. My purpose is to indicate how one historian pieced together this particular story with the hope that archival agencies in other localities will put into place or identify the same sort of material for studies of the red scare in their area.

The most obvious sources are the personal papers of individuals who were red scare participants; in other words, the victims, accusers, and first-hand observers. In Houston, the most publicized victim was the deputy superintendent of the public schools, Dr. George W. Ebey. The Houston school board fired Dr. Ebey in 1953 after a red scare campaign had been waged against him for over nine months. Ebey and his wife accumulated and subsequently kept everything they could find that documented his experience, including local ephemera that is almost impossible to find anywhere but in the Ebey papers. Red scare victims often collected such material in a comprehensive way, usually for the purpose of clearing their names in what they hoped would be a saner future.

Observers of red scare incidents or campaigns who kept records were usually writers, mainly journalists. In Houston, Ralph S. O'Leary, an investigative reporter for the *Houston Post*, assembled an invaluable record of the red scare at the grassroots level when he gathered material for an exposé which the *Post* published in eleven installments. O'Leary's material included notes, memoranda, and transcripts of his interviews with members of red scare organizations. The vast majority of O'Leary's material never made it into the newspaper series, so he stored it in an old suitcase in a closet to be used for a book after his retirement. His early death prevented that, but his widow kept his collection and eventually placed it in the Houston Metropolitan Research Center.

In Houston, individuals who *accused* their neighbors of subversive tendencies tended not to keep records. I am convinced, however, that there are such collections in other communities. For one thing, there were usually two or three persons among grassroots red scare leaders whose main function was to find potential victims for their groups to attack. This was often accomplished by compiling material, usually lists, distributed by what I call the national red scare network. This informal network served as a means for the exchange of information among members of national organizations which had local chapters, such as the Daughters of the American Revolution. In Houston, the local chapter of Pro-America was in contact with the Pro-America group in Portland, Oregon. The two chapters exchanged information about Dr. Ebey, who had been a Portland school administrator prior to coming to Houston. Those who served red scare organizations as researchers also assembled material from the vast quantity of misinformation distributed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and by several red scare senators and congressmen. In Houston, the woman who served as the list compiler for the red scare coalition died in the early 1960s and her family destroyed the archive she had created. But the point is that a potentially invaluable source for documenting how these local witch-hunters operated is the papers of the local list-makers.

The red scare in Houston and in other communities was encouraged and supported by members of the local business and civic power elite. Through their newspapers, radio stations, financial contributions, and public rhetoric, the

local elite legitimated and conferred credibility on the activities of red scare fringe groups. The papers of individual community leaders are usually quite useful for the study of the local red scare, even when those leaders may not be personally identified with the red scare. In Houston, one such person was Jesse Jones, a former cabinet member in Franklin Roosevelt's presidential administration. Jones was the publisher of the *Houston Chronicle*. For his own very personal reasons, Jones coldly manipulated the red scare in Houston through the editorial policies of his newspapers. Jones himself never took a personal public position on the phenomenon, but his papers are rich in documentation illustrating how he worked with his editor in encouraging Houston's red scare.

Because the local press often played a key role in encouraging community red-baiting, its archives (especially its morgues) are another potential source. The unpublished manuscript of an investigative journalist's "exposé" of a local labor union attorney appeared in a file marked "Communists" in the morgue of a now defunct Houston newspaper. The newspaper refused to publish the article because its lawyer considered it libelous. Nevertheless, the manuscript proved to be a valuable source. It led me to individuals and other sources that I may have otherwise overlooked. There were other useful materials in the Communist file because reporters often used the morgue to file bits and pieces of information that might be helpful for future stories. Significantly, many of the items were notes and news clippings about liberal clergy, school educators, and civil rights and labor leaders—all filed under "Communists." Groups that were targets of the red scare, such as labor unions, often kept their own newspaper clippings files and these prove helpful because local newspapers are rarely indexed. For example, I found such a clippings file in the Texas AFL-CIO records housed at The University of Texas at Arlington.

Of even greater potential value, however, are the official records or archives of community organizations. Because the red scare was so pervasive and widespread, almost any community institution may have had its own problems with the phenomenon. The possibilities are many, but likely sources for red scare-related documents include any educational institution, especially the public schools and their parent-teacher associations; labor unions, especially those representing maritime, longshore, teacher, artistic, and municipal workers; social welfare agencies; public libraries and their friends groups; fine arts and other public museums; religious institutions, especially Methodist, Jewish, Catholic, and Episcopal; fraternal and mutual aid groups, particularly those associated with racial and ethnic justice causes; civic and business booster organizations, specifically the local Chamber of Commerce; professional organizations such as the local bar and medical associations, especially the latter due to the issue of "socialized" medicine (in Houston even the local barbers' association engaged in red-baiting); and local party organizations.

The records of local government agencies and businesses also have significant potential value for studying the red scare. Although privacy issues may have to be confronted, the records of government civil service and business personnel departments have value for this issue. Local governments and businesses occasionally used red scare tactics to combat the attempts of their employees to organize collective bargaining groups. David Caute documents the dismissal for security reasons of over 250 municipal workers in New York City during the red scare. Similar firings occurred in Los Angeles, Detroit, and

elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> Especially important are the personnel records of industries engaged in scientific or defense-related work. Many workers (the number remains unknown) were fired from these industries because of security clearance problems, often caused by rumors or even mistaken identities. A Cleveland engineer with an otherwise spotless record was dismissed from his job because it had been determined that he had maintained a "close and continuing relationship with his parents" whose names appeared on one of the hundreds of lists published by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).<sup>5</sup> An even more enlightening source would be the records of the local police department "red squads," which proliferated throughout the nation in the 1950s and 1960s. These police squads became notorious for their propensity to spy on law abiding citizens whose only crime was that they held anti-establishment political views or supported labor or civil rights causes. In Houston, the red squad engaged in illegal surveillance tactics and harassed and compiled dossiers on prominent citizens, including a popular mayor and his supporters. Unfortunately, the acquisition of local red squad files is unlikely due to official objections and because many of those records have been destroyed.

The files of elected state and federal officials are another valuable source. Hopefully, such files will reveal the extent of personal involvement in the red scare not only at the state and national levels, but also in local communities. Some of my most important archival sources were the constituency files of Texas congressmen. Many red scare "foot soldiers" in local communities were prolific letter writers and many of those letters were sent to their congressional representatives. I found enough of those letters, which expressed in great detail the specific fears of their authors, to piece together something like a collective world view or mind set for Houston's red scare participants. These constituent letters also provided clues about the writers' personal lives, their husbands' occupations (most were female), their religions, addresses, political party affiliations, and levels of education. In addition, I discovered that some congressmen were only too happy to serve constituent requests for the names of local residents who might appear on some obscure HUAC list. "Yes," Congressman "Know-Nothing" would cheerfully reply to his constituent, "John and Jane Doe are listed on HUAC files as possibly having attended a mass concert at the public auditorium in which folk singer Joe Bob Jumpback (believed by HUAC to belong to a subversive organization) briefly played his guitar." The congressman would then conclude with a helpful "if I may be of further service to you at anytime in the future, please let me know." Typically, local red scare participants would use the information provided by this "service" for public attacks on the unsuspecting Doe family. Although this is a fictional example, it is representative of many actual episodes, all documented in congressional constituent mail.<sup>6</sup> One may deduce correctly from the above that I am vigorously opposed to the mindless destruction of congressional files by well meaning archival records appraisers.

Another, more obvious source for documenting local red scares are the records of conservative pressure groups. These precursors to our contemporary Political Action Committees (PACs) proliferated during this period. In Houston, these included the Minute Women of the U.S.A., Inc., the most active red scare group; Doctors for Freedom, composed of physicians opposed to federally supported health insurance; the Committee for Sound American Education,

a right-wing organization involved in school board elections; the Committee for the Preservation of Methodism; and the Americanism Committee of the American Legion. The same or similar groups could be found in every community. Because some of these organizations were single-issue oriented, relatively short-lived, and without any formal office, their records may be difficult or impossible to locate. One may be able, however, to piece together a sample of a pressure group's archives by locating individual leaders and other members and acquiring whatever records may be privately held.

Finally, another way to document local red scares is through oral history, because the most virulent phase of the red scare occurred in a period now some thirty to forty years ago. Oral history, of course, is an old standby that can be at the same time both terribly flawed and excitingly informative. But in my work with the red scare, oral history proved to be the *only* way I could get to the heart of a number of important issues. One of the most frightening aspects of the red scare during the 1950s was the fear on the part of many otherwise outspoken people to speak out against anti-Communist demagoguery and to reveal their true feelings about politically and socially sensitive issues. After thirty-five years I found a few persons who remained too frightened to discuss the period. But I found many others who were eager to exorcise their guilt by talking for the first time. Several of the more than 100 persons I interviewed have now passed away. So time is a factor here.

In conclusion, I want to make a couple of brief philosophical comments about historical documentation and archival collecting strategies. Those of us with administrative responsibility in this endeavor have always had to make educated guesses in an attempt to anticipate future research needs. I feel strongly that interest in the red scare and in the political style we call McCarthyism, especially at the local level, will continue and may even increase due to the current political environment. So let's get to work. And finally, maybe I'm an unreconstructed child of the 1960s, but in my view, the need for a usable past did not end with that decade. I believe archivists can play a socially relevant role by getting out in the community and preserving the evidence of activities and beliefs (such as racism and political witch-hunting) that seem to haunt American society on a too frequent basis. The kind of documentation I have discussed today can be done only by archivists who are willing to leave their shops and actively collect. For those archivists who are reluctant to leave their archival *nests*, I will conclude with an anecdote about Winston Churchill. During the height of the German blitz on London, Churchill entered Parliament with the fly of his trousers embarrassingly wide open. When he rose to deliver a major speech, an opposition leader loudly brought Churchill's forgetfulness to the attention of the crowded House. The Prime Minister, without missing a beat, looked down at his colleague and said "Have no fear, sir, *a dead bird never leaves his nest.*"

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## NOTES

1. David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); Lillian Hellman, *Scoundrel Time* (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1976); Dalton Trumbo, *The Time of the Toad: A Study of the Inquisition in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).
2. For the definitive biographies of Joseph R. McCarthy see, Thomas C. Reeves, *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy* (New York: Stein and Day, 1982) and David M. Oshinsky, *A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy* (New York: Free Press, 1983).
3. Don E. Carleton, *Red Scare! Right-wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism and Their Legacy in Texas* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1985). Documentation for the incidents mentioned in the following discussion can be found throughout *Red Scare!*
4. Caute, *The Great Fear*, 345.
5. Caute, *The Great Fear*, 461.
6. For an actual example of this congressional tie with a local red scare, see Carleton, *Red Scare!*, 147.

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