

History retold

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

There is an effort to rehabilitate the memory of Joe McCarthy, the pugnacious anti-communist who, as Wisconsin's junior U.S. senator in the 1950s, led a Red Scare crusade widely viewed in history as heavy on witch hunt and short on facts. The latest effort is a book by conservative journalist M. Stanton Evans, "Blacklisted by History." The Journal Sentinel's Craig Gilbert wrote of the book and the author recently. We're all for getting history right. The argument seems to be that newly available Soviet files indicate a spying effort that would have warranted McCarthy's fear-mongering and that he even got some names right. But did he even care whether the names were right? There seems little indication that he did. Moreover, his tactics attempted to tar left-leaners, communists and Soviet spies all with the same dirty brush.

In the McCarthy-Roy Cohn world, one was either on the anti-communist team or wearing red shirts. McCarthy contributed significantly to an atmosphere in which an accusation was enough to ruin. And he didn't seem to much care.

He was a native son, and he did make history. But not all native sons are worthy of praise, and not all history is good. It's telling that even his nickname, "Tail Gunner Joe," is premised partially on a lie. He had a Distinguished Flying Cross from World War II that he didn't deserve, historians agree.

The Senate officially censured McCarthy in 1954. The rehabilitation effort started soon after and continues today.

Our take is that the famous question put to McCarthy has the same answer today as then: "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?"

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