

# “New McCarthyism” in the Age of Bipartisan Democracy

By [Paul R. Pillar](#)

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*Image: Sen. Joseph McCarthy, R-Wisconsin, who led the “Red Scare” hearings of the 1950s.*

*Since Chuck Hagel’s name was floated as possible Secretary of Defense, the former Republican senator has been subjected to vilification to blacklist him from public service, a new form of McCarthyism that replaces suspected leftist sympathies with insufficient support for Israel.*

I was born just early enough to have some faint but direct memories of the stain on American history that became known as McCarthyism. One recollection is of my parents watching on television in 1954 substantial portions of the Army-McCarthy hearings, which was the first Congressional inquiry to be nationally televised.

Although I was too young to understand it at the time, those hearings marked the beginning of the end of Joseph McCarthy’s red-baiting campaign of slander. Before the end of the year he would be formally censured by the U.S. Senate.

One important factor in stopping McCarthy’s reputation-ruining rampage was the working of media in those early days of the television era. Media coverage of the 1954 hearings, which lasted several weeks and in which accusations and counter-accusations were made and confronted in concentrated form within a single hearing room, made it impossible to turn a blind eye to what McCarthyism was about. The gavel-to-gavel television coverage, bringing such a dramatic event into living rooms across the country for the first time, was especially influential.

Another important factor was the willingness of visible figures to call McCarthy to account and to shame him, clearly and directly. A key figure was Joseph Welch, the prominent lawyer who served as chief counsel for the U.S. Army at the hearings. When McCarthy attempted to apply his usual method of innuendo and guilt-by-association to a junior lawyer at Welch’s firm, Welch labeled McCarthy’s tactics as “reckless cruelty” and spoke the most eloquent and memorable line of the hearings:

“You’ve done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?”

The stars do not always align today in a way that encourages a calling to account of latter-day equivalents of McCarthyism. The mass media are far more diffuse, with a million ways to impugn someone via the Internet and with talk shows inflicting more of the impact of television and radio than live broadcasts of Congressional hearings.

Then there is the matter of the willingness of visible figures to speak up and to call a spade a spade — clearly and explicitly. The Israeli journalist, academic and businessman [Bernard Avishai writes](#) about the dearth of such willingness as it relates to the most prominent current instance of McCarthyite-style tactics: the defamation (often under the guise of what Avishai calls “fake campaigns against defamation”) of those who dare to question Israeli policies or U.S. abetting of those policies. The defamation is practiced by an assortment of protagonists who claim to have Israeli interests at heart but instead are enforcing unquestioning support for policies of the right-wing Israeli government of the day, which is something different.

Avishai, who is slightly younger than I am, also begins by noting the similarity of the current phenomenon to the original McCarthyism. Today’s defamation includes the dragging up of whatever can be used to sink nominations as well as reputations. This process features, but is not limited to, reckless and unjustified charges of anti-Semitism.

And like the original McCarthyism, the process relies not just on the direct defaming of selected targets but also on intimidation of many others who might otherwise question not only the Israeli and U.S. policies involved but also the intimidation process itself. Avishai’s piece is an especially earnest and trenchant call for speaking out on this subject; I could quote at length from it but instead will just urge that [the piece itself](#) be read.

Avishai’s occasion for writing is the tumult over the possible nomination of Chuck Hagel to be Secretary of Defense. [As I](#) and others have observed, this matter has gotten so much attention that how it is resolved will have a major effect in either boosting the new McCarthyism or setting it back. It is encouraging that many prominent figures have come to Hagel’s defense. But the President still has not acted.

Even if the Hagel matter comes out well, that is not enough. There is still the need for prominent people to name and shame, directly and explicitly, the new McCarthyism practiced by groups and people claiming to be lovers of Israel — and to name and shame it not just with respect to any one nominee or any one issue.

When Joseph Welch shamed McCarthy, the gallery in the hearing room burst into applause. I believe many as-yet-passive observers will applaud if the same thing is done to the new McCarthyism.

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