The Neon Closet: Roy Marcus Cohn and McCarthyism

Thesis

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Abstract

The following is an investigation of the experience of Roy Marcus Cohn, American lawyer, bureaucrat, federal prosecutor, and celebrity, during his time working as the chief counsel to the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations headed by Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. It argues that Cohn pursued power by actively falsifying a public image of stereotypical masculinity while privately engaging in non-normative sexual behaviors. His upbringing and youthful experiences informed his understanding of mid-century American masculinity, his early professional career allowed him an audience in front of which to perform his version of masculinity, and his entry onto the national stage as an ally of McCarthy’s finally brought this ruse to an end during the Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954. An exploration of this period in American history and Cohn’s life fosters a deeper understanding of themes of masculinity, homosexuality, queerness, public knowledge, gossip, power politics, the lavender scare, the red scare, and McCarthyism.
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Everything is possible because of my parents. My love to both of them.

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“It had nothing to do with what it said it was doing.”

- Roy Cohn on the Army-McCarthy Hearings
Introduction

The cherry blossoms had fallen by the time the witnesses began testifying. As participants and spectators entered the Senate Office Building for the eighth day of the Army-McCarthy Hearings on April 30, 1954, the damp air hung heavily around them, with thunderstorms predicted for later in the day. Many of the attendees must have dreaded the muggy Washington summer foreshadowed by such a humid spring.

The hearing room – officially the Caucus Room in the Senate Office Building – was designed to hold no more than 300 bodies.¹ Now over 800 spectators squeezed into the four thousand square-foot room, men and women elbowing each other as if sitting in the bleachers at Griffith Stadium. Droplets of perspiration appeared underneath starched collars as cigarette smoke wafted toward the chandeliers above. So full was the hearing room at times that even Congressmen were escorted out of the overcrowded space by Capitol policemen citing public safety.²

The room’s design was intended to mirror the weighty matters discussed within. It had previously been used for Senate hearings investigating the sinking of the Titanic, the Teapot Dome scandal, and the attack on Pearl Harbor. The entire space was surrounded by twelve Corinthian columns carved from Italianate black-veined marble and spaced

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¹ N.B. – The office building in question was not re-named “The Russell Senate Office Building” until 1972. Until that year, there was only one office building for the Senate in Washington. Since September 14, 2009, the Caucus Room has been known as the Kennedy Caucus Room, named for brothers John, Robert, and Edward, all of whom served in the United States Senate.
evenly around three large French windows. Four ornate chandeliers hung from an elaborate ceiling featuring a pattern of acanthus leaves and gilded rosettes. A detailed frieze supported by the columns included intricate patterns inspired by Greek temples. The massive tables and benches, specially made for the space by the Francis Bacon Furniture Company of Boston, were carved from mahogany, giving them a crimson-brown hue. It was impossible to stand in the room and not feel part of something grand, something important, something historic.³

Though the multi-story windows and large chandeliers normally provided enough light, on this day the room was also lit by massive flood lamps. Since the start of the hearings, the lamps and television cameras had established residence in the Senate Caucus Room, further cramping the already overcrowded space. The harsh artificial light caused the room’s temperature to slowly climb the longer they remained in use. But the discomfort the participants felt was surely secondary to their central role in broadcasting a live feed of the hearings to twenty million viewers each day.

As the Caucus Room filled following the day’s lunch break, questioning once again turned to a photograph Joseph McCarthy had presented as evidence to support his case against the United States Army. Having discovered that the photograph had been cropped, Special Counsel for the Army Joseph Welch wondered aloud where the photograph had originated and who had ordered the doctoring. On the stand sat a perspiring Jim Juliana, the McCarthy assistant who had prepared the photograph, pudgy-faced and dressed in a suit that looked borrowed from an older brother. After Juliana

repeatedly told Welch that he did not know the photograph’s precise origin, Welch asked whether Juliana thought the photograph “came from a pixie.”

A sarcastic comment, certainly, one of the type Welch had employed throughout the hearings. But this critique cut more deeply than Welch’s prior barbs. Mixed in with the light laughter following Welch’s query were guffaws of deeper understanding. Keenly aware of the large audience and hoping to parry Welch’s attack by inserting a humorous comment of his own, McCarthy asked Welch to define the term “pixie,” claiming that Welch was possibly an expert on the subject. Seeing an opening, Welch replied that a “pixie is a close relative of a fairy” and asked if his definition had “enlightened” McCarthy.

As the audience burst into laughter, the television feed cut from a wide shot of the entire Caucus Room to tighter shots showing the faces of Welch, McCarthy, and those seated at their respective tables. Television viewers could see the Senator from Wisconsin emit a knowing eye-roll and laugh. They could also see a young man sitting next to McCarthy, a young man who by that point was familiar to all of them. He sat with his boss at one of the custom-made mahogany tables, shoulders slumped and hands in his lap. Roy Marcus Cohn tried to smile but a look of frustration came over him and he dropped his eyes to the table, or perhaps to his hands.

The audience did not have to be told to look at the young lawyer. The television director knew to keep the reaction shot of McCarthy wide enough to capture both the

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Senator and his assistant. It was as if the entire nation had suddenly come to an understanding. Nobody had to say a word, nobody had to explain. They all just knew.

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Reporters attending the Army-McCarthy hearings frequently commented on the two faces of Roy Cohn presented to the world during the spring and summer of 1954. One was a brilliant young lawyer who had selflessly given up probable riches as a private attorney to serve his country combating the communist threat. The other was a brash, foul-mouthed opportunist who would go to any lengths to increase his power and that of his boss, Senator Joseph McCarthy.⁵

This Janus-like visage that appeared on American televisions for the hearings’ thirty-six days was not unlike the image of Roy Cohn that developed in the American consciousness over the next three decades. Cohn was that rare individual who spent nearly the entirety of his adult life in the public eye while remaining an enigma. For over thirty years his name was rarely absent from newspaper gossip columns. National magazines did cover stories on him. He was a bestselling author who commonly appeared on television news programs such as Meet the Press. He had a penthouse in Manhattan and a summer home on Cape Cod. He traded Christmas cards with J. Edgar Hoover. He partied at Studio 54 with Donald Trump and watched the Bronx Bombers from George Steinbrenner’s box in Yankee Stadium. He dined with Cardinal Spellman and escorted young starlets to New York’s most exclusive clubs. Tabloid magazines continually reported that his engagement to Barbara Walters was just around the corner. At one point,

his ubiquity was so complete (even after his death) that an April, 1988 cartoon in the *New Yorker* featured a frustrated bookstore patron asking the bookseller, “What have you got that’s not about Roy Cohn?” He was perhaps the most famous, best-connected lawyer in a city full of famous, well-connected lawyers.

Despite his fame, Roy Cohn was broke for much of his adult life. In the face of his playboy image, he lived with his mother until he was forty, an arrangement only dissolved with her death. He was continually investigated by local police, the New York and United States Attorney General’s Offices, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, whose file on him runs more than four thousand pages. He was infamous for failing to prepare for cases and was accused on more than one occasion of jury tampering, insider trading, and insurance fraud. As owner of the Lionel Corporation, a company he purchased from his great-uncle, Cohn drove the beloved toy train manufacturer to bankruptcy. Weeks before his death in 1986, he was disbarred in the state of New York. Upon his passing, the Internal Revenue Service seized all his property.

But the greatest duality surrounding Roy Cohn was the secret he tried to keep until his dying day, his homosexuality. Rumors of it had prompted the audience’s laughter following Welch’s double-entendre on April 30, 1954. To counter this chatter, Cohn cultivated a public image specifically designed to illustrate his adherence to the overt masculinity expected of postwar American men, particularly those in power. In short, for his professional benefit Cohn pretended to possess a degree of machismo that was not part of his personality. He used sympathetic media contacts to plant false stories

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7 These general reconstructions of Cohn’s life and power come from *Citizen Cohn* by Nicholas von Hoffman, *The Autobiography of Roy Cohn* by Sidney Zion, and various media reports.
about his thriving, heterosexual romantic life, including the aforementioned rumor that he was involved with Barbara Walters. To support these erroneous reports, he was sure to be photographed on dates with attractive young women at New York and Washington’s most popular nightlife spots. Most importantly, he consciously exuded a brash confidence and did not shy away from opportunities to express his masculinity by verbally (and, possibly on one occasion, physically) standing up to his rivals. At every stage of his life, Roy Cohn consciously, publicly performed a version of masculinity that was expected of him (and his station), always mindful of his ultimate goal of gaining increased political power and social statue.

In light of Cohn’s overt homophobia and his role in outing individuals who appeared before the McCarthy committee, his sexual preference is what has most enthralled and troubled those who have examined his life, critics and defenders alike. Beyond any other aspect of his character, it was Cohn’s homosexuality that made him a cultural touchstone in the late 1980s and 1990s, his psyche thoroughly examined through Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Angels in America*, two popular biographies, and the HBO film *Citizen Cohn*. He embodied that strange brew of power, ambition, sexuality, fame, and hypocrisy that writers and journalists find addictive.

Through these works, Cohn has largely become a caricature. *The Simpsons*’ blue-haired lawyer with questionable morals is modeled on Cohn and the cartoon’s 1999 season finale featured a bit surrounding a finance guru who was able to purchase his suit.

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8 Cohn has also appeared, almost always as a means of exploring self-hating homosexuals, in a variety of works including Ron Vawter’s *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* (1995), Kushner’s *G. David Schine in Hell* (1996), Mary-Beth Hughes’ *Wavemaker II* (2005), and Thomas Mallon’s *Fellow Travelers* (2007). In addition, he has been parodied as a gleefully immoral lawyer on the television show *The Simpsons*. 
cheaply because “Roy Cohn died in it.”9 In more serious commentary, Cohn is commonly portrayed as the archetypical self-hating man (conveniently both Jewish and homosexual) who is haunted on his death bed by past misdeeds. From the tone of these popular depictions, it appears that many people regard Cohn’s contraction of and eventual death from complications related to AIDS as a form of poetic justice; the disease made it impossible for him to deny the truth.

Cohn is easy to lambaste and mock. Yet such derision provides little worthwhile insight into either the individual or the time in which he lived. Cohn’s dualistic character and closeted homosexuality provide a singular opportunity to view a complex, contradictory era in American history through the eyes of an equally complex, contradictory individual. Specifically, Cohn’s experience working for and with Joseph McCarthy illuminates the role homosexuality played in McCarthyism from a unique perspective and complicates historical understanding of power, sexuality, and acceptance in 1950s America.

From a cultural standpoint, Roy Cohn’s tale affords a unique perspective on the homosexual experience in America before Stonewall and Harvey Milk. In contrast to the barely-visible homosexuals of Gore Vidal’s The City and the Pillar and James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room, Cohn was at the center of American public life in the 1950s, arguably one of the most powerful men in the nation for two years. He was not sequestered in a gay-friendly subculture such as Hollywood or expatriate Paris; he was not frequenting the underground gay bars Alfred Kinsey described. Cohn found a home in the Stork Club and

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the halls of Congress. In sum, Cohn’s role in McCarthyism and its aftermath provides a complex illustration of the nature of power in Cold War America: how it was won, how it was retained, and how it was distributed.

More specifically, a close examination of Cohn also allows for a reassessment of the relationship between McCarthyism and homosexuality, particularly the moment of unbridled homophobia in 1950s America that has come to be known as the Lavender Scare. As historian David K. Johnson explains:

The Lavender Scare – a fear that homosexuals posed a threat to national security and needed to be systematically removed from the federal government – permeated 1950s political culture. Originating as a partisan political weapon in the halls of Congress, it sparked a moral panic within mainstream American culture and became the basis for a federal government policy that lasted nearly twenty-five years and affected innumerable people’s lives. Though based on the flimsiest of evidence… it prompted congressional hearings, presidential executive orders, and executive agency security briefings. Fed by postwar fears that America was in a state of moral decline, dominated by a new class of powerful government bureaucrats, and threatened by communism, the Lavender Scare was used to justify a vast expansion of the national security state.  

This expansion of the federal government’s sphere of influence into the private lives of American citizens, linked as it was to the panic over communism, may explain the period’s zeitgeist of fear. The anxiety was most palpable for those employed by the United States government, who were constantly watched by their superiors and peers. In the early months of 1950, Deputy Undersecretary of State John Peurifoy revealed that 91 homosexuals had been dismissed from the State Department for being “security risks.” A June 1950 cartoon in *The New Yorker* played on the public’s awareness of the State Department’s well-publicized dismissals, depicting a man on a job interview explaining a failing in his résumé by claiming, “It’s true, sir, that the State Department let me go, but

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that was solely because of incompetence.”  

It has been estimated that between February and November of 1950 alone, nearly six hundred government employees were fired due to suspected homosexuality, a pattern that would continue well into the decade.  

By December 1953, at the end of his first year working for the McCarthy Committee, whisperings of Cohn’s homosexuality were common in Washington. Joe McCarthy and other members of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations were certainly aware of the rumors, as were numerous reporters and some members of the general public.  

Though his bureaucratic peers in the State Department and other federal divisions had been dismissed on less evidence, Cohn retained his position as chief counsel to the McCarthy Committee and continued to comfortably reside in that unique spotlight where celebrity and political power meet. Cohn was only removed from his position in the federal government after he was grandly outed in the course of the era’s most public spectacle, the Army-McCarthy hearings. Cohn’s ability to survive – indeed, thrive – in McCarthyite Washington raises an obvious question. If the Lavender Scare was truly an ideologically-minded movement that could not tolerate queerness in any form, how did Cohn retain his power in the face of such widespread accusations?  

The primary answer to this question is at the heart of this work. Roy Cohn acquired and maintained political influence through a complex performance in which he falsely positioned himself as quintessentially masculine. In designing this character Cohn took cues from his complicated upbringing and his experiences as a young prosecutor trying to breach the halls of power in New York and Washington, D.C. By the time he

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12 David K. Johnson, The Lavender Scare, 2.
13 Cohn FBI file: Box 19a, Page 95; Box 19b, Pages 14+26.
began working for Joe McCarthy, Cohn had constructed an identity for himself by approximating how he felt a powerful man should act in 1950s America, focusing on characteristics such as perseverance, boldness, intelligence, aggressiveness, and promiscuous heterosexuality.

To accomplish the illusion of masculinity, Cohn was agile in his management of private information concerning public individuals – most importantly, himself. Working in concert with a variety of powerful men including popular gossip columnists Walter Winchell and George Sokolsky, Cohn either held or leaked such information depending on political expedience. He worked tirelessly to spread rumors about himself that emphasized his intelligence, fearlessness, and heteronormativity while concurrently attempting to paint his rivals as powerless and effete.

While this ability to control the flow of information has long been a hallmark of those in power, the postwar era witnessed an extreme increase in the release of private information about public individuals. This was largely a result of politicians’ attempts to manage an increasingly complex and powerful media, one that had an ever-increasing reach. Because of these developments, it is possible that Cohn was part of a generation that was confronted with a relatively new political challenge, one in which the ability to manage the media became almost a prerequisite for political power.

Closely related to this issue is the increased role of gossip and coded language in political discourse following World War II. Direct accusations of homosexuality were hardly ever made during the Lavender Scare. Even those dismissed from the State Department were officially classified as “security risks” rather than “homosexuals,” “perverts,” or “sexual deviants.” This practice of burying accusations of homosexuality
under bureaucratic jargon extended across the US Government. The United States Army discharged homosexual men and women from military service during World War II, for example, by classifying them as psychologically unfit for service via a practice known as a “blue discharge.”

Likewise, no major print journalist, radioman, or television personality ever publicly wrote or uttered the words, “Roy Cohn is a homosexual” during the time Cohn worked for Joe McCarthy (or, for that matter, before Cohn’s 1986 death). Even the notoriously sensationalist tabloid newspapers and books of the era avoided printing anything directly accusing Cohn of queerness. But rumors of Cohn’s homosexuality proliferated throughout Washington during the early 1950s (the nation’s capital, it is often said, is a small Southern town after all) and filtered to the general public through coded language employed by news reporters and gossip columnists, then spread through word-of-mouth conversations. Thus, due to a shared cultural vernacular and a national tone of suspicion, a wide number of Americans were undoubtedly aware of the rumors during Cohn’s heyday with McCarthy. The dissemination of this knowledge highlights the role of nonofficial, unsubstantiated, and possibly untrue information in creating Americans’ perception of public figures, notably politicians and bureaucrats in the immediate postwar era.

Historian Andrea Friedman has demonstrated how coded language and gossip were used by McCarthy’s enemies to queer him in her insightful essay, “The Smearing of

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15 The difference between the Cohn rumors and other political rumors – say, the suggestion that Grover Cleveland had fathered a child out of wedlock – is that the accusations about Cleveland were clearly printed in major newspapers. At least between 1950-55, Cohn was never accused in such direct language; all charges were implied through conjecture and opaque terminology.
Joe McCarthy.”16 She is particularly erudite in illustrating how the media slowly transformed private knowledge into public gossip. An examination of Roy Cohn allows for a deepening of this argument because his background and character were so different from those of his boss. Most importantly, Cohn was much more deliberate in constructing his masculine identity; whereas McCarthy was actually brash, uncouth, and stereotypically mannish, Cohn was only pretending to possess those characteristics in order to hide his homosexuality. Also significant is the fact that while McCarthy was only rumored to be a homosexual, there is no doubt that Cohn actually engaged in gay sexual activities, though he never admitted it publicly. Cohn denied charges of homosexuality on the basis that such a classification was incompatible with his aggressive personality and the amount of personal, political, and professional power he enjoyed.17 This was not a nuanced, liberal response based on general troubles with categorizing an individual’s sexual identity; it was a rejection of a term Cohn considered a slur.

Adding to Cohn’s value as a vehicle for exploring these questions is the fact that he was attempting to hide his homosexuality though an overt display of traditional masculinity during an era that was incredibly focused on the reassertion of traditional gender roles. Cohn experienced puberty and formed many of his opinions about manhood during one of the most hyper-masculine moments in American history, World War II. He

17 Cohn made a strong statement on this issue in a 1970s interview with journalist Ken Auletta, claiming that “Anyone who knows me and knows anything about me or who knows the way my mind works or knows the way I function… would have an awfully hard time reconciling that with any kind of homosexuality. Every facet of my personality, of my aggressiveness, of my toughness, of everything along those lines, is just totally, I suppose, incompatible with anything like that…” (As quoted in Von Hoffman, Citizen Cohn, 132)
then performed his version of masculinity during the early 1950s, a moment that historian James Gilbert has shown to be “unusual (although not unique) for [its] relentless and self-conscious preoccupation with masculinity.” His downfall came as Americans engaged in a national discussion about the presence of a “male panic” that was seemingly undermining traditional masculinity in the United States. The saga surrounding Cohn’s experience working for McCarthy could only have taken place in the decade following the conclusion of the Second World War.

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To this point, the vast majority of material published about Roy Cohn has centered on his connections to celebrity and the dubious intersection of his personal and professional morality. The only significant biography of Cohn, Nicholas von Hoffman’s *Citizen Cohn: The Life and Times of Roy Cohn*, is a valuable, gossipy treatise that presents Cohn as representative of a conniving class of conservative political operative, one who will tell any tale and spread any lie in the interest of political gain and personal power. To construct this argument, the book largely relies on media reports about Cohn and hundreds of interviews von Hoffman conducted with Cohn’s family, friends, acquaintances, and rivals. It delves deeply into Cohn’s personal life and legal troubles, reporting sensational stories that Cohn would certainly deny. There is little doubt that if

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18 James Gilbert. *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. 2. Gilbert goes on to justify this reasoning “in part because the period followed wartime self-confidence based upon the sacrifice and heroism of ordinary men. Historians have found concern and even the evidences of a ‘male panic’ – intense uncertainties about masculine identity – in almost every era of American history. But the 1950s appear to hold a special place in this ongoing discussion largely because sociologists and historians began at that moment to define the basic notions of social character and to isolate masculinity as a subject for contemporary study within this new category. To them, history appeared to be a process of evolving psychological states and character types. Thus increased attention to the history of social character occurred in a context of considerable flux and concern about problems of gender identity.” (2-3).
Cohn had still been living upon the book’s publication, von Hoffman would have been sued for libel.

The only other book-length work solely dedicated to Cohn is his autobiography, also published in 1988 and co-authored with journalist, novelist, lawyer, and friend Sidney Zion. Cohn and Zion’s arrangement was similar to that between Malcolm X and Alex Haley; Zion conducted a number of interviews with Cohn, recording most of them, and then organized Cohn’s reminiscences into a chronologically-ordered memoir. The only discussion of Cohn’s homosexuality and AIDS diagnosis comes via Zion’s introduction and epilogue. Cohn even refused to confirm his AIDS diagnosis in private, off-the-record meetings with his co-author, always claiming (as he did publicly) that he was stricken with liver cancer. From Cohn’s perspective, the book was an opportunity to “set the record straight” and fire a final series of volleys at old adversaries from his death bed. In actuality, the Autobiography is Cohn’s most complete performance, an opportunity for him to construct the tough, uncompromising, idealistic, masculine version of himself that he so wanted the world to see. Despite Cohn’s penchant for self-aggrandizement, the book remains valuable because it presents Cohn’s take on the Army-McCarthy hearings and a number of other significant points in his career. It also deftly illustrates how tenaciously Cohn attacked his enemies, even during the last stage of his life.\(^\text{19}\)

In most other works, Cohn has been presented as a supporting character in the American tragedy of McCarthyism. Few, if any, commentators have returned to the

period to examine how Cohn’s now-confirmed homosexuality played during the Red and Lavender Scares. If historians do entertain a discussion of Cohn’s homosexuality, it is commonly only to inform reports of McCarthy’s own probable queerness and a possible love triangle between Cohn, McCarthy, and David Schine. Cohn did make headlines in the early 1990s when Anthony Summers’ biography of J. Edgar Hoover first published the now oft-repeated tale of Hoover dressing in drag for an orgy with Cohn, businessman Lewis Rosenstiel, and two blonde boys, but again the primary interest in the story was predicated on Hoover’s involvement, not Cohn’s. Popular depictions of Cohn are most interested in his later life and how his contraction of AIDS must have made the man reflect on his past misdeeds. As a means of illustrating this push to repent, no fewer than three dramatizations of Cohn’s life feature the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, whom he happily helped sentence to death, visiting Cohn in his hospital room.

This thesis is a direct attempt to inform popular interest in Cohn’s celebrity and sexual morality by placing his experience working for Joseph McCarthy in a deeper historical and analytical context. It seeks to accomplish this goal by critically reading a variety of primary and secondary sources through the lenses of queer theory, masculine studies, cultural studies, and the history of homosexuality in America. Though the primary source material is not extraordinarily varied, it is quite deep. The FBI’s four-thousand page file on Cohn largely focuses on the years 1960-85, but remains helpful in building an understanding of the man and his worldview. The file includes early background checks on Cohn when he was first hired to work for the federal government, the records of investigations into his role in alleged jury tampering and insurance fraud, and off-the-record communications between FBI agents and members of the media about
Cohn. It is also particularly helpful in examining the complex relationship between Cohn and J. Edgar Hoover.

Because this work also deals with Cohn’s relationship with the media, numerous contemporary newspapers and magazines are important primary sources. Part of Cohn’s role for McCarthy centered on his offstage attempts to manage the media portrayal of his boss, a goal he accomplished by fostering friendships with a number of powerful radio- and newspapermen, including Walter Winchell and George Sokolsky. While periodicals are helpful in establishing a historical context, their true value is as artifacts themselves; the diction, syntax, and tenor employed by reporters and columnists writing about the Army-McCarthy hearings are just as important as the content they chose to include.

The same analytical approach illuminates this work’s most important primary document, the hearings themselves. The 188 hours of video and thousands of pages of transcribed testimony resulting from the hearings include similar hints in the tone and word selection utilized by participants. These markers serve to elucidate the complex web of relationships, interests, and egos on display in the Caucus Room, particularly when participants were referencing topics about which they had to be opaque, such as rumors of private misdeeds.

Such complexity is an appropriate backdrop for a discussion of Roy Cohn. Rarely in American political history has the story of one individual so completely blended the contradictory forces of public virtue and private vice. In the end, an exploration of the dualistic elements of Cohn himself, the events that made him famous, and the era in which he lived can inform not only our understanding of power and masculinity in the early years of the Cold War, but the way by which any individual has to alter their
identity in order to attain success. As Cohn’s friend and coauthor Sidney Zion concluded, “Roy lived in a closet that was the oddest in history – a closet with neon lights – but he maintained it fiercely.”

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Chapter One

As a toddler, Roy Cohn was given a rhinoplasty. The purely aesthetic procedure was performed at the insistence of his mother, Dora. A small bump on the ridge of Roy’s nose had bothered her since the day of his birth in February, 1927, and though nobody else in the family – including Roy’s father – saw a problem with it, Dora insisted on having it surgically removed. The resulting operation was bungled by the Manhattan surgeon who performed it, and as a consequence Roy had a scar on his nose for the rest of his life.¹

He would carry other marks of his parents’ influence to adulthood as well. Dora and Al Cohn created a son in their own image, one obsessed with outward appearances, drawn to power, extraordinarily class-conscious, shot-through with ambition, and masterful at political deal-making. These personal qualities enabled Roy to deftly manage Washington power politics, even in his mid-twenties. They also fostered a sense of entitlement that inspired the hatred of his rivals, who eventually came to regard Roy’s background as noteworthy not for its record of youthful achievement but for its degree of absurdity and commonly invoked it to explain later developments in his life, including his sexual preferences.

¹ Von Hoffman, Citizen Cohn, 52. Cohn’s obsession with his appearance and how others perceived him, passed down from his mother, would also remain a constant in his life. During the 1960s and 70s he had numerous facelifts and other cosmetic procedures, commonly arriving to social engagements and court dates with the stitches in his face still visible. See: Walters, Barbara. Audition: A Memoir. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. 114-15.
Roy’s blunt worldview was appropriate for the product of a mutually-exploitive marriage. Albert Cohn, an assistant district attorney in the Bronx, needed to expand his personal fortune and monetary ties to the Democratic Party in order to be named a judge. Dorothy Marcus, the daughter of the politically-connected president of the Bank of United States, was quickly approaching spinsterhood and the social irrelevance that accompanied it. The pair’s January 11, 1924 wedding was a calculated attempt by both parties to solve their problems: Al gained access to Dora’s family money while Dora cemented her social status by marrying a well-known lawyer with a promising career ahead of him. The couple’s five-week honeymoon in Europe was not a lovers’ escape but a fulfillment of the expectations of the class to which they firmly felt they belonged.²

Unsurprisingly, the Cohns’ arrangement of marriage-as-business-transaction did not bring happiness. One of Al’s coworkers later recalled the pairing as “the most miserable marriage I’ve ever known,” adding that Al and Dora “hated each other. Absolutely hated each other.”³ Roy’s domestic model was a far cry from Father Knows Best.

As loveless as the relationship was, Al Cohn’s newly-improved financial situation did allow him to become a county judge shortly following his wedding. His loyalty to his political allies served him well and his career progressed steadily. In 1929 he was appointed to Part III of the State Supreme Court by Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt. He joined the State Supreme Court’s Appellate Division eight years later and held that position until his death in 1959.⁴

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³ Von Hoffman, Citizen Cohn, 50.
What fueled Al’s rise was his role as a central cog in the Bronx’s Democratic Party machine. When the Party needed Al to rule a certain way for reasons political or personal, he followed through. When they needed his support for a specific candidate, he gave it. When the son of a friend and fellow Democratic operative killed a young woman in an automobile accident, Al made a late-night visit to the police station and “straightened it out.”

As Roy remembers it, Al was the “chief lieutenant” for Edward J. Flynn, Democratic Party operative, New York’s Secretary of State from 1929 until 1939, and chairman of the Democratic National Committee from 1940 until 1943. With the death of Tom Pendergrast, Flynn became “the most powerful political boss in the country” and was “a devoted friend of Franklin Roosevelt [whose] influence on Roosevelt on political matters exceeded that of anyone inside or out of the administration.” Flynn was instrumental in convincing Roosevelt to select Harry S. Truman as a running mate in 1944 and in quarterbacking Truman’s surprise victory in the 1948 presidential election. And it was Flynn who convinced then-Governor Roosevelt to appoint Al Cohn to a judgeship in 1929.

The favors Al performed for Ed Flynn and the Democratic Party were not confined to his judge’s chambers. The Cohn family apartment at 975 Walton Avenue in the South Bronx became a meeting-place for members of the borough’s Democratic machine. Roy remembers his address as “the building, where everyone lived. The district attorney, the most influential judges, the postmaster, the top businessmen.” As a result,

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7 McCullough, *Truman*, 403, 779.
Roy was raised in an environment that intertwined the political with the domestic. Al may have not appeared in the newspapers or on the radio every day, but his son still recognized that his father was highly influential. While publicity was nice, a man did not have to be in the public eye to hold significant sway; major deals could be struck in the linoleum-floored kitchen of a Bronx apartment building.

The only time Roy witnessed his father abandon his loyalty to Ed Flynn was in 1937, when Flynn proposed naming a Judge Callahan to a position on the State Appellate Court which Al coveted. Telling a ten-year-old Roy that he’d been passed over for the judgeship because he was not Irish, Al enlisted a pair of friends with influence over current governor Herbert Lehman to collect signatures supporting his appointment. The tactic worked and Al joined the appellate court on April 27, 1937. Personal loyalty was important, but not so much that it should hinder professional gain.\(^9\)

Roy quickly learned to trade on his father’s power and name. Surrounded by New York City’s royalty at the Horace Mann School for Boys in the Bronx (including Gene Pope, the son of an industrial magnate and eventual founder of the *National Enquirer*; Anthony Lewis, the future *New York Times* columnist; and Si Newhouse, the heir to the *Condé Nast* fortune and later the company’s CEO), Roy was sure to let his peers know that his family wielded their share of power. As a teenager, “Roy would amaze his friends by putting in a spur-of-the-moment telephone call to the mayor’s office and talking briefly to [New York City mayor] ‘Bill’ O’Dwyer.”\(^{10}\) He did not limit this demonstration of power and connections to his private circle of friends:

A schoolmate of Roy’s remembers Roy, age sixteen or seventeen, walking into a meeting where some of the younger boys were talking to an administrator. Roy

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said hello and went and picked up a telephone. The adult in charge asked, “Roy, what are you doing?” Roy replied, “I have to make this call. I’ll only be a minute.” The call went through and the other boys heard Roy say, “Is this the Twelfth Precinct? I want to talk to the officer in charge... which lieutenant?... Lieutenant O’Malley, my name is Roy Cohn. I’m the son of Judge Cohn. I’m sure you know who my rather is. If you don’t now, you certainly will. One of your officers [Roy gave the name and badge number] gave a traffic ticket to one of my teachers on the West Side Highway. My teacher was going forty-two miles an hour in a forty-mile-an-hour speed zone and that ticket has got to be quashed, torn up, and thrown away. Nothing less will do. He will not come down to your precinct. I don’t want him to be disturbed. That’s all there is to it.” The schoolmate remembers, “Then he said call me when it was done or I will call you. Roy did not have a smile on his face, no expression of triumph, just all in a day’s work at the age of sixteen or something.”

Beyond what this tale suggests about teenage Roy’s sense of entitlement, it is noteworthy that he did not choose to make the call from a more private location (such as a different office in the school, his family’s apartment, or a nearby telephone booth) but did so in front of an audience that was sure to spread word of what they had witnessed throughout the school. In addition to expressing his power to the officer at the other end of the line, Roy wanted his schoolmates to be aware of his influence, even if his family name did not enjoy international recognition. Additionally, there is little doubt that Roy learned this method of fixing problems through backchannels from his father and his father’s friends in the Democratic Party. There were few issues that could not be solved by exerting influence via a properly-placed phone call.

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For all his father’s influence, Roy was truly a product of his mother. From her son’s birth, Dora made it clear to her husband that she would be the one to mold Roy’s childhood, reportedly telling him that the child was hers and Al would have no role in

11 Von Hoffman, Citizen Cohn, 57-58.
raising him.\textsuperscript{12} Dora stayed true to her word. Family members remember little contact between Roy and his father. Dora did everything in her power to ensure her son was more in touch with his maternal roots than his paternal ones and would share her opinions on the family’s entitled social status, the importance of outward appearances, and the value of well-placed social connections.

Dora Marcus Cohn had been born into wealth. Her father, Joseph S. Marcus, had chartered the Bank of United States – a private institution, despite its name – in 1913 with $100,000. The bank grew rapidly, filling a niche by catering to New York’s sizable immigrant population and the city’s Jewish community in particular. Immediately preceding the 1929 stock market crash, the bank had expanded to encompass 59 branches across New York City, had $25,250,000 in capital, and was led by Dora’s brother, Bernie.\textsuperscript{13}

This success ended in December, 1930, when rumors of the bank’s troubles following a failed merger led to a run on a number of its branches, beginning with the Bronx location. Though bank officials tried to calm depositors, New York State auditors formally shuttered the Bank of United States on December 11, 1930. To that date, it was the largest bank failure in American history; the debacle is now credited as the beginning of the national panic that would force the closure of hundreds of banks between December 1930 and March 1933. Six months after the bank’s closing, Bernie and two partners were found guilty of misappropriating bank funds. Sentenced to three-to-six

\textsuperscript{12} Von Hoffman, \textit{Citizen Cohn}, 51.

years in prison, Bernie was pardoned by Governor Lehman after serving twenty-seven months in Sing-Sing, a favor called in by his brother-in-law Al.\textsuperscript{14}

Regardless of the pardon, the scandal made the entire Marcus family \textit{persona non grata} in New York’s Jewish community. But Dora remained an adamant defender of the family’s position and good name, professing Bernie’s innocence to anyone who would listen. She taught her son that his uncle was the scapegoated victim of an anti-Semitic conspiracy, a reading of the events that Roy believed to his dying day. Even the loyalty of a community based on ethnic ties, shared memories of religious persecution, and cross-generational business relationships was not enough to insulate an individual from the cutthroat realities of power politics.\textsuperscript{15}

Dora raised her son to act in a manner she thought appropriate to his station as a Marcus. She allowed him to treat his babysitters like servants and encouraged him to send back meals at expensive restaurants that were not completely to his liking. As a boy, Roy dressed like a middle-aged businessman. His 1940 bar-mitzvah was held at the Waldorf-Astoria on Park Avenue. To Dora, a family member recalls, Roy “wasn’t her son. He was her crown prince and she was the queen.”\textsuperscript{16}

In this royal family, there was little room for a king. Due to her privileged upbringing, Dora always felt she had married a man who was beneath her in class and title, regardless of his political connections. Though she publicly traded on Al’s prestige after her own family lost its power, Dora still regarded her husband as little more than an

\textsuperscript{15}Roy Cohn as quoted in Zion, \textit{The Autobiography of Roy Cohn}, 24-25.
afterthought and treated him thusly. Realizing who held the real power in the family, young Roy began to mirror his mother’s contempt for his father. Even as he relied on the Cohn family name to open doors throughout New York City, Roy lost respect for his father due to Al’s inability to exert the same degree of control over events at home as he did at work.

Nor were these two worlds – the domestic and the professional – practically separate. The one person who could halt Al’s rise through the Democratic Party ranks was his wife. When Al was offered a major promotion to the State Court of Appeals, Dora refused to move to Albany, where the court sat. When Dora decided she was too good for the Bronx, she lobbied Al to move the family to a Manhattan address that better illustrated the family’s social stature. When he resisted, she moved anyway; Al came home from work one day to find a note taped to the family’s door in the Bronx: “Dear Al: I have moved to 1165 Park Avenue. Your furniture is there. Your supper is there. If you want to eat, go there tonight.”

Roy’s formal education in New York’s elite private schools reaffirmed this sense of entitlement. The Cohns first enrolled their son in the Fieldston Lower School in the Riverdale section of the Bronx at the suggestion of a family friend. However, they soon found fault with Fieldston’s curriculum and transferred Roy to the Horace Mann School for Boys. He was an outstanding student who teachers remembered for his exceptional intelligence, though they mentioned that he did not participate in any extra-curricular activities. Peers noted his dutiful holding of the liberal Democratic line his father espoused and recalled him boldly taking on a history teacher’s anti-Semitism. As a

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17 Von Hoffman, *Citizen Cohn*, 55.
18 “Character Investigation on Cohn, Roy M.” Cohn FBI File. Box 23, Pages 11-22.
classmate remembers, “the only student who ever argued with [Mr. Martin] about his
prejudices was Roy. Roy disagreed with just about every opinion that Mr. Martin had on
the subject of race, religion, and native Americanism. As the son of a liberal Democratic
politician, Roy did his family proud.”

Such precociousness led Roy to claim that, as a high school junior he “had gotten
all there was for me to get out of Horace Mann.”

Taking to heart his mother’s class-
based sense of entitlement and his father’s penchant for fixing problems with face-to-face
meetings, Roy met with Horace Mann’s headmaster and convinced him allow Roy to skip
his senior year of high school. He enrolled in Columbia University in January 1944, just
before his seventeenth birthday. Through a combination of his own brilliance,
Columbia’s lenient wartime requirements, and family connections, Roy was able to skip a
number of classes and graduate from Columbia with both bachelor’s and law degrees
within three years. Not yet twenty-one, Roy had to wait nearly a year before being
eligible to take the bar exam.

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Hidden behind this youthful record of success remained the elemental friction
between Cohn’s meteoric rise as a person of power and his privately expressed sexuality.
While learning how to be accepted into the dual, often-overlapping worlds of social
significance and political power, Roy also displayed personal characteristics that were
antithetical to his membership in both clubs, particularly his burgeoning queerness.

There is no definitive answer as to when Roy discovered his sexual attraction to
men. While there is little doubt that Roy spent time at Washington’s gay bars in the early

19 Horace Mann classmate of Roy Cohn’s as quoted in von Hoffman, Citizen Cohn, 62-63.
20 Roy Cohn as quoted in Zion, The Autobiography of Roy Cohn, 35-36.
21 Von Hoffman, Citizen Cohn, 75.
1950s, his continual denial of his homosexuality makes it almost impossible to pinpoint when Roy first engaged in gay sex. What is known from biographical details of Roy’s youth suggests that his parents were worried about their son’s gender identity from a relatively early age. According to Roy, his parents removed him from Fieldston, the first private grammar school he attended, because they agreed the school’s curriculum was too non-traditional and effete after seeing their son partake in a sewing class during a Parents’ Day visit. Agreeing with his parents’ assessment, Roy claims that he was thankful that “my father caught me doing knit-one, pearl two,” noting without a hint of irony that if the school “didn’t have Parents’ Day, who knows how I might have turned out?”

The decision, however, seems to not have been that clear-cut. FBI files show that Roy attended Fieldston for a full five years (from 1933-38), and was only withdrawn after having completed the sixth grade. Roy’s parents certainly were aware of the school’s curriculum earlier than that period; the school, founded by social reformer Felix Adler, has an extremely liberal reputation and adheres to a progressive educational platform to this day. Perhaps Al and Dora started to worry about how the school’s curriculum had effected their pubescent son when he failed to participate in classically masculine extra-curricular activities, particularly sports, and began to display other effete tendencies. An anecdote recalled by Roy’s cousin Eugene Marcus from around the time his aunt and uncle pulled Roy from Fieldston recalls some of what may have sparked the Cohns’ concern about their son:

Roy was about thirteen… it was a lovely spring day. Al took his jacket off, rolled up shirt-sleeves... He said, “Come on, Roy.” I can remember it so clearly: “Put

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your jacket inside and come out on the driveway. I want to play catch with
you.”… But Roy was really annoyed. “All right,” he said. “You know how you
throw to a little girl?” That’s how Al threw it to him. Roy muffed it by a mile, and
then he just stood there and Al said, “Well, go after it. You didn’t catch it. The
least you can do is chase it.” Well then, Dora, who was watching this exhibition,
turned on Al and she said, “You have him running out into the road? There are
cars [that] come by the road. You get the ball!” This was a quiet little street where
cars come every half an hour. Al gave her one of those shrugs of his and he did.
He got the ball. And Roy disappeared.24

This Cohn family pastiche of a classically American scene speaks to Roy’s lack of
exposure to what American society considers even the most rudimentary modes of
masculinity. That Roy recognized his inability to fill this expected masculine role is
illustrated by the boy himself when he asks his father to use a soft, underhand motion
when throwing the ball to him. This moment is made more significant by Roy’s age; he is
not six, but thirteen, a point in his life when he was expected to make the transition from
boy to man, publicly expressing and affirming his burgeoning manhood through his
attire, interests, attraction to the opposite sex, and athletic ability.

Roy’s lack of masculine role models was not only due to his father’s absence, but
his mother’s proactive efforts to mold her son into the person she wanted him to become.
Numerous aspects of Roy’s personality can be directly attributed to his mother’s
influence, including his aloofness about monetary matters, obsession with aesthetics
(both literally and how things appeared to others), general sense of entitlement, and poor
treatment of those he regarded as belonging to a lower social class than he.

This mother-son relationship, particularly Roy’s attachment to his mother and
Dora’s coddling of her “prince,” would come to be regarded by many of Roy’s
contemporaries through the lens of “momism,” a term coined by the social critic Philip
Wylie in 1942’s Generation of Vipers. Wylie held that modern mothers, freed from their

24 Eugene Marcus as quoted in von Hoffman, Citizen Cohn, 53-54.
traditional domestic duties by technological advancement and changing social mores, held an inordinate amount of influence over their sons. This overprotective attitude meant that the son was “shielded from his logical development through his barbaric period, or childhood… [and] cushioned against any major step in his progress toward maturity.” Thereby, any sympathy the son would have for others was transmuted by the mother “into sentimentality for herself.” Whether or not Wylie’s extreme commentary applies to the Cohn family, there is little doubt that Roy’s relationship with his mother fit into a stereotype that had gained significant national traction during the period of his adolescence and was perceived through that lens. Cohn’s relationship with his mother (particularly his decision to live with her through adulthood) was cited by enemies and allies alike to explain his seemingly effete behavior as an adult. Realizing this prominence of this conception, Roy Cohn strove particularly hard to counter it by publicly expressing his masculinity. Until the walls fell down around him, his public exposure as Joe McCarthy’s right hand proved to be the perfect stage upon which to perform this reaffirmation.

The most important element of any discussion about Roy’s gender identity as a youth must be the fact that Roy himself recognized that he did not fulfill society’s expectations about masculinity. These expectations were made more explicit to Roy

26 Even as critics termed Wylie’s commentary excessive and misogynistic, *Generation of Vipers* flew off bookstore shelves, “momism” found its way into the Oxford English Dictionary, and the fear of excessive mothering spread throughout America. For the book’s twentieth edition in 1955, Wylie produced a new preface and annotated the essays contained within. He notably tied his thirteen-year-old comments on mothering to the moment’s biggest news story: “Today, as news photos abundantly make plain, mom composes the majority of Senator McCarthy’s shock troops – paying blind tribute to a blind authoritarianism like her own… The tragic Senator stalks smiling to the podium and leads the litany of panic, the rituals of logic perverted, the induced madness of those the gods have marked for destruction. “McCarthyism,” the rule of unreason, is one with momism: a noble end aborted by sick-minded means, a righteous intent – in terrorism fouled and tyranny foundered.” (196n)
because he grew up in a home where gender norms were fluid and came of age while attending an all-boys prep school during World War II, one of the most hyper-masculine eras of the twentieth century. Because of their somewhat-transposed gender roles as a couple and as parents, Al and Dora demonstrated to Roy a model of domesticity and romantic relationships was in direct opposition to the prevailing expectations of the era. It was only through popular culture and his experiences outside the home that Roy was able to learn how most American families were expected to operate. Additionally, it should not be forgotten that the Cohns’ decision to transfer Roy from Fieldston to Horace Mann was also a decision to move their son from a coeducational environment to an all-male institution. While this move possibly was an attempt by the Cohns to toughen their son, that plan may have backfired by keeping Roy from coed interactions; numerous friends of Roy would later comment on his awkwardness around and outright hatred of women.27

The natural machismo on display during Roy’s time at Horace Mann was intensified due to world events; Roy entered high school about fourteen months before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Like all Americans during this period, the young men of Horace Mann were surrounded by depictions of a hypermasculine fighting force. As historian Joseph A. Nye has noted, “By World War II, following the twentieth-century evolution of ideal male body types, the soldier in the United States and elsewhere was portrayed as more physical, sculpted, and aggressively masculine than in previous wars.”28 Christina S. Jarvis has shown that these images filtered into everyday life in

27 Von Hoffman, Citizen Cohn, 364, 438.
1940s America through popular culture, government recruiting posters, newsreels, and general government propaganda.\textsuperscript{29}

Coming of age in such environs caused Roy Cohn to fully subscribe to the belief that American men had to demonstrate their ability to fulfill traditional male roles before being placed in positions of power by their fellow citizens. Despite any internal questions he may have had about his sexuality and his ability to comply with traditional gender norms, Roy knew that he had to act a certain way to achieve the lofty goals his upbringing had placed before him. Even during his earliest days as a young lawyer, he set out to perform the touchstones of masculinity that were demanded by the life to which he aspired.

Chapter Two

Immediately after Roy passed the bar exam, Al used his connections to secure his son a position as an assistant to Irving H. Saypol, United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York.¹ The young Cohn’s career progressed rapidly and in the fall of 1952 he was promoted to a job with the Justice Department in Washington, D.C. Using his father’s connections and relying on the personality instilled in him by his mother, Roy Cohn spent his early professional career in New York and Washington expanding his rolodex and implementing a series of personal skills that would ensure his position as one of the nation’s power elite. Between the time he began working as a federal prosecutor in early 1948 and left that position to work for Senator Joseph McCarthy in early 1953, Cohn demonstrated his penchant for managing the press, his talent for hunting communists, and, most importantly, his ability to integrate himself into the hyper-masculine world of 1950s power politics.

Not long after being named assistant United States attorney Cohn was forced to anchor the office on a Saturday, a tedious duty that fell to the staff’s youngest members. As the only attorney working that weekend, it was Cohn’s responsibility to handle any

¹ Zion, Autobiography of Roy Cohn, 40-41. Saypol was a family friend the Cohns knew through Manhattan’s Jewish social circles. He is credited by Nicolas von Hoffman and others with helping Roy Cohn dodge the draft and lighten his military service. Specifically, the Scripps-Howard news service reported that Cohn had skipped 44% of his physical drills while fulfilling his service requirement through the National Guard and that Saypol had signed “many of the excuses [Cohn] had submitted.” See: von Hoffman, Citizen Cohn, 73-74. For his part, Cohn claims he was instrumental in getting Saypol his position as U.S. attorney by vouching for him in front of National Enquirer founder Generoso Pope, who in turn recommended Saypol to local powerbrokers including Al Cohn’s friend Ed Flynn and mobsters Frank Costello and Gaetano Lucchese. See: Zion, The Autobiography of Roy Cohn, 60-65.
case that came across the office’s desk. During that Saturday shift on February 19, 1949, Cohn received word that the Secret Service had arrested a man holding $10,000 in counterfeit money. At the arraignment, Cohn was questioned by a reporter who had also been forced into weekend duties. When the reporter asked whether the money seized by the Secret Service was part of a national counterfeiting ring, Cohn quickly responded that it was, though he knew no such thing. The resulting article was printed on the front page of that evening’s *New York World-Telegram*, reporting that “Assistant U.S. Attorney Roy M. Cohn said today that the arrest of three men last night by two city detectives… ‘will lead us to some of the higher-ups in the national counterfeiting ring. Further investigation is being pursued vigorously and we expect further developments.’”

Born from a white lie, this publicity began to get Cohn recognized around town in his own right rather than for being his father’s son. While Cohn had become aware of the power of the press from a young age (he began writing a gossip column for a local newspaper at age thirteen), the counterfeiting case was the first time he had seen his name so prominently in print. He liked the exposure and the feeling of power that accompanied it; a fellow assistant attorney noted that for each indictment included in Cohn’s case files, there was always an accompanying press release and that oftentimes the accused were indicted more than once so that Cohn could send additional accounts to the press. The same attorney noted that Roy “was responsible for a hell of a lot of indictments that never went anywhere… Roy was the object of derision in the office as a publicity hound and someone who would indict anyone.”

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3 *Citizen Cohn*, 76.
4 *Citizen Cohn*, 77-78.
5 Anonymous co-worker of Roy Cohn’s as quoted in *Citizen Cohn*, 78.
Cohn’s obsession with how he appeared in media reports, and with press releases specifically, remained throughout his career. In September 1952 he was elevated to a position as a special assistant to Attorney General James P. McGranery. Not surprisingly, news of the promotion was “leaked” to a number of major newspapers, most likely by Cohn himself. On the day his new position with the Justice Department began, Roy happened to review the official press release announcing his promotion as he waited to be sworn-in (a procedure that was legally superfluous and occurring at the demand of Cohn himself). Upon realizing that it did not include the “special assistant” portion of his new title, Cohn walked out of the ceremony and demanded the press release be rewritten. As Cohn’s parents waited with the Attorney General in his private office, the corrections were made and the unnecessary swearing-in resumed.

Clearly aware of the king-making powers of the press, Cohn began to surround himself with influential reporters. These connections began with Leonard Lyons, a New York-based columnist who became nationally syndicated in the 1940s and had taken a teenaged Roy under his wing as a favor to Al. Lyons introduced Cohn to the chatty style of political reporting that centered around nightclubs as much as government buildings and to Walter Winchell, possibly the 20th century’s most important gossip columnist. Winchell, along with conservative columnists Westbrook Pegler and George Sokolsky, would become one of Cohn’s strongest cheerleaders and an essential figure in shaping the public’s perception of Cohn. It was Winchell who popularized Cohn as a relentless

7 *Citizen Cohn*, 133; *The Autobiography of Roy Cohn*, 85-86. Also: “The Self-Inflated Target.” *Time* 63.13 (March 22, 1954): 25. As a *Time* reconstruction of the event notes, Cohn’s “first day on the job was memorable because: 1) he was ceremoniously sworn in right in the Attorney General’s private office (actually no new oath was necessary); 2) after one departmental press release announced his coming but neglected to mention his title, a second was issued to correct the oversight; 3) three Department of Justice juniors were evicted from their office so it could become Roy’s private office; 4) he demanded a private cable address (denied) and a private telephone line to his old office in New York (also denied).”
protector of American freedom, a wunderkind intent on “Trapping Reds Coast-to-Coast.”

Such hyperbole was exactly the kind of press Cohn loved to see about himself. During his relatively brief period working as a federal prosecutor, he consciously cultivated a reputation for being a virulent anticommunist. Though his political roots were decidedly liberal, Cohn forcefully rejected his familial pedigree and aligned himself with the conservative, anticommunist cabal, knowing such a reputation would facilitate his professional advancement and power grabs. “Red hunting in America,” Edward T. Folliard of The Washington Post wrote in 1954, “has become an almost sure-fire way of rising from obscurity to headline prominence.”

Being an anticommunist also offered the opportunity to participate in a movement regarded as quintessentially masculine. Exploring the postwar red scare in 1955, sociologist Daniel Bell wrote that “in these strange times, new polar terms have been introduced into political discourse, but sure none so strange as the division into ‘hard’ and ‘soft’… Presumably one is ‘soft’ if one insists that the danger from domestic communists is small, [while] the ‘hard’ anti-communists insist that no distinction can be made between international and domestic communism.” For numerous reasons, Roy Cohn wanted to be considered as “hard” as possible.

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11 The outside possibility that Cohn actually experienced a significant change in his political outlook at that juncture should also be mentioned. He notes the Alger Hiss trial, specifically a meeting with some FBI agents who present him with evidence of a vast communist conspiracy (as discussed below), as a major
Following the arc of the postwar red scare, Cohn’s career as an anticommunist began with the case of Alger Hiss. While he had already broadened his notoriety through the counterfeiting case and a string of others that were brought to public attention via press release, it was Cohn’s time prosecuting communists that placed him on the national stage.

In testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1948, current *Time* editor and former communist spy Whittaker Chambers charged a number of government officials with having communist ties. Included in that list was Alger Hiss, a lawyer who had served the State Department during the administrations of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman (and enjoyed personal relationships with both presidents, including accompanying FDR to the Yalta Conference in 1945). When he was officially charged with perjury, Hiss’ case became a national cause célèbre. In his autobiography, Cohn claims that he originally thought Hiss was the victim of a “HUAC witch-hunt,” but quickly changed his mind after seeing the evidence against Hiss during a lunch with a number of FBI agents. In Cohn’s own estimation, he was a dedicated anticommunist from that moment forward.

portion of the momentum that caused his personal pendulum to swing from left to right. Though he died a registered Democrat, Cohn often bragged that he never voted for a Democratic candidate for president and actually claimed to be a mole in the Democratic party during the 1972 presidential campaign, doing what he could to assure Richard Nixon’s re-election (see: *Citizen Cohn*, 175, 407; *Autobiography*). He also served as an inspiration and role model for numerous Republican operatives and leaders (see: Jeffrey Toobin. “The Dirty Trickster.” *The New Yorker*. 2 June 2008). That said, Cohn never seemed driven by ideology, a fact that becomes particularly apparent when one juxtaposes his public comments and his private life. Instead, this turn to the right is better explained by the simple fact that the Republican Party was where the opportunity for career advancement and increased power was in early 1950s America.

This powerful committee, also responsible for blacklisting the “Hollywood Ten,” featured a young congressman from California named Richard M. Nixon.

Hiss was charged with perjury rather than treason because the statute of limitations on espionage had already expired (see: Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 32).

Despite this claim of an ideologically-based shift, the Hiss case also made apparent how the communist menace could help propel Cohn to a higher position of power. Though his role in the actual case was minor and largely consisted of writing legal memos, it gave him a front-row seat to the trial as it became the news story of the moment and dominated the front pages of major American newspapers and airtime on radio’s most popular news programs.\textsuperscript{15} If Cohn was searching for increased public exposure, chasing communists presented a unique opportunity.

In addition to clearly illustrating the degree to which the communist menace and those fighting it garnered the attention of the American people, the Hiss case also delineated to Cohn the unmistakable correlation between communism and homosexuality in the American public imagination. Playing into stereotypes, Chambers had preemptively admitted in a sealed letter to the FBI that he had engaged in homosexual activity while working as a Soviet spy. As David K. Johnson notes, “Though not publicly disclosed at the time, the rumor and innuendo surrounding the Hiss-Chambers controversy not only associated the State Department with homosexuality but linked communism and homosexuality in the minds of may public officials, security officials, and opinion leaders.”\textsuperscript{16} Inevitably, the judgments of these leading voices eventually filtered down to the general public. Throughout Hiss’ two trials, rumors swirled that “the Hiss-Chambers relationship involved at least sexual jealousy if not behavior… Though never discussed explicitly in court, hints of homosexuality surrounded the trial.”\textsuperscript{17}


\textsuperscript{16} Johnson, \textit{The Lavender Scare}, 33.

\textsuperscript{17} Johnson, \textit{The Lavender Scare}, 32.
Following Hiss’ conviction, Cohn worked with Irving Saypol on the prosecution of William Remington, an economist for the U.S. government who was accused of passing sensitive information to a Soviet spy. The wealthy, Ivy-League educated, handsome, overachieving Remington was a perfect representative of the east coast establishment for which Cohn – and Joseph McCarthy – expressed disdain (even as he tried to join its ranks). Cohn’s responsibilities in the case were drastically expanded compared to his role during the Hiss trial. He helped develop the list of witnesses, prepared them for trial, and led the in-court questioning. The Remington trial cemented Cohn’s reputation as an anticommunist among the east coast establishment while also demonstrating that the young prosecutor would use any means at his disposal to achieve his desired result.\(^\text{18}\)

The first such tactic was coaching witnesses to provide misleading or false testimony. During the trial, Roscoe C. Giles, a college acquaintance of Remington’s at Dartmouth, testified that they had attended Young Communist League (YCL) meetings together while undergraduates. The following day’s newspapers headlined that Remington was “Linked to Red Recruiting.”\(^\text{19}\) The problem with this development was that Giles’ earlier statements had not conclusively identified Remington as a member of the YCL and that Giles had denied any involvement with the YCL himself. Historian Gary May posits that Giles’ testimony had been coached by the prosecutor assigned to prepare Giles for the trial, Roy Cohn. “In its zeal to convict Remington,” May writes, “the government allowed a witness to deliver mistaken, or deliberately false,


testimony.”20 Though Giles’ statements were later stricken from the record for having no probative value, the damage was already done.

Another way Cohn tried to help the case against Remington was by using familial and social connections. When he learned that Bill Goodman, an early witness for the defense, was married to a woman whose family was friendly with Cohn’s parents and that Goodman’s brother-in-law was Frank Karelsen, a former classmate, Cohn called Karelsen and informed him, “You better tell Bill Goodman not to testify, or we’ll get him!”21 When the prosecution’s key witness was detained for fleeing the scene of an accident, Cohn, echoing his father’s actions from years earlier, telephoned the commissioner of the Connecticut State Police and “informed him they were holding an important witness in the Remington trial and demanded her immediate release. By 5:00 P.M., she was free without bond and back on the road.”22

This is not to say that all of Cohn’s achievements during the Remington trial were the result of dishonestly. True to his reputation, Cohn performed with an adept tenacity inside the courtroom, using his vast knowledge of politics, culture, and law to his advantage.23 Prodded by the young assistant U.S. Attorney’s ruthless presentation, the jury returned a guilty verdict on Remington after only four-and-a-half hours of deliberation. Remington received the maximum sentence of five years imprisonment and a $2,000 fine, lost his appeal, and was eventually given more time for perjury.24 On November 22, 1954 he was attacked by three other inmates who bludgeoned his head

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21 Ibid., 196. Seemingly unafraid, Goodman testified anyway.
22 Ibid., 282.
23 Ibid., 284.
24 Ibid., 264-65.
with a brick. The acting warden told Remington’s wife that “it was not a personal attack… but just the actions of a couple of hoodlums who got all worked up by… the publicity about communists.”

Remington died of his injuries two days later, one of a few murders that can be at least partially blamed on McCarthyism.

If Cohn ever displayed remorse over Remington’s demise, there is no record of it. Fascinatingly, Cohn claimed in his autobiography that Remington’s killing was not politically motivated, but the result of “a turgid sexually motivated murder.”

Given the lack of historical evidence supporting this explanation, perhaps Cohn was seeking to exonerate himself from any blame by pigeonholing Remington as the worst kind of traitor, both a communist and sexual deviant.

Despite his major role in the Remington case, what cemented Roy Cohn’s public reputation as one of the nation’s foremost anticommunists was the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a Jewish couple from New York who were accused of passing nuclear secrets to the Soviet Union. The notoriety Cohn earned was not undeserved. Once again, he used all his cunning and expertise to earn a guilty verdict, including fabricating testimony and striking backroom deals. Writer and investigative journalist John Wexley noted his “firm conviction that it was Roy Cohn who was one of those most responsible for that mockery of justice called the trial of the People of the United States versus Julius

25 Ibid., 308.
26 Ibid., 310. Also see: Ellen Schreker. Many are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America (Boston: Little, Brown: 1998), 361. In addition to “a few murders,” including Remington’s, Schreker connects approximately a dozen suicides to the red scare and McCarthyism, including those of Abraham Feller (discussed below), Stanford University biologist William Sherwood, and blacklisted actor Philip Loeb. Much of Schreker’s overall argument centers on the degree to which McCarthyism inflicted trauma on American individuals, groups, and ideals.
27 Zion, The Autobiography of Roy Cohn, 57.
Rosenberg, et al.” Whether the trial was a mockery or not, the publicity surrounding it allowed Cohn to position himself as a crusader for justice, the lone ranger who would stop at nothing to capture those who threatened the United States. In Cohn’s words, “The Rosenberg case thrust me onto center stage for keeps.” It would also help lead to his employment with Senator Joseph McCarthy.

During the Rosenberg trial, the twenty-three year old Cohn once again served as the primary assistant to U.S. Attorney Irving Saypol. Even at that young age he adopted extraordinarily brash positions, such as suggesting that Saypol pursue a broader line of questioning for expert witnesses even if those questions risked exposing material the Atomic Energy Commission considered sensitive. Though opposed by AEC leaders – who considered Cohn reckless even as they noted that he was admittedly “a very bright fellow – one of the smartest to come down the pike in a long time” – the broader questions were asked of some witnesses. It has also been charged that Cohn prefabricated testimony for government witness and former communist Harvey Matusow to use on the stand.

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28 John Wexley. *The Judgment of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg*. Revised and updated edition. New York: Ballantine Books, 1977. The first (1955) printing of Wexley’s book was extremely critical of the government’s case against the Rosenbergs and drew the ire of the Justice Department, which convened a panel headed by Benjamin F. Pollock to secretly critique Wexley and his work. The 1977 re-printing is noteworthy as being one of the first to fully utilize a number of documents the government released in response to Freedom of Information Act requests, including the so-called “Pollock Report.”


Where Cohn made his greatest mark on the Rosenberg case was in regards to his relationship with the trial’s judge, Irving Kaufman. In his 1988 autobiography, Cohn writes that his father Al was “instrumental in getting Irving Kaufman his federal judgeship [and] I was instrumental in getting Irving Kaufman assigned to the Rosenberg case.” As with many of Cohn’s assertions, there is little evidence to support this claim, but it does illustrate Cohn’s desire to be seen as the ultimate insider even in the face of charges of ethical misconduct.

Even some of those historians who agree with the case’s outcome have charged that Cohn improperly colluded with Kaufman during the trial and may have even convinced the judge to impose a death sentence on the Rosenbergs. Whispers of these improprieties grew so loud that the American Bar Association was forced to investigate the charges in 1977, after which they cleared both men of any wrongdoing. Cohn vigorously denied the charges until his death, only admitting his guilt through his posthumously-released autobiography, in which he wrote that “Before, during, and after the trial, the prosecution team – particularly Irving Saypol and I – were in constant communication with Judge Kaufman. I mean private, or what the lawyers call ex parte communication, without the presence of the defense lawyers.” During these secret conferences, Cohn gauged Kaufman’s opinion on various aspects of the case and worked

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33 Zion, Autobiography of Roy Cohn, 65.
34 Other historians have posited that Kaufman, a Jew, was chosen to insulate the U.S. government from charges of anti-Semitism during their prosecution of the Jewish Rosenbergs. This explanation mirrors one of the reasons Joseph McCarthy would choose to hire Cohn as a special assistant two years after the Rosenberg trial began.
35 Von Hoffman, Citizen Cohn, 101.
36 Zion, Autobiography of Roy Cohn, 68. Cohn justifies this behavior by explaining that in nearly every case the prosecution communicated directly with the assigned judge assigned. This practice only ceased, he claims, following the Watergate scandal, when “everybody and his brother became sensitive to the Canon of Ethics.”
to ensure the judge would impose the death penalty.\textsuperscript{37} Cohn even went behind his boss’ back and warned Kaufman that an overzealous Saypol was planning to use a tactic that would have resulted in a mistrial. Rescuing the U.S. Attorney from himself, Kaufman heeded Cohn’s warnings and preemptively disallowed the evidence Saypol had brought to the courtroom, saving the government’s case in the process.\textsuperscript{38}

In the end, the Rosenberg saga would stand as one of Cohn’s proudest moments. For the remainder of his life, Cohn would seize any opportunity to highlight his role in convicting the Rosenbergs. His performance during the trial cemented his reputation as a tenacious anticommitst among America’s power elite. It also ensured that his first widespread exposure to the American public came via a role that emphasized his moral strength, intellectual fortitude, and patriotic dedication to the nation. As the rumors of the government’s use of improper tactics remained unknown – they would not be widely reported until early 1955 – Cohn found a place in the national conscious as one of the men who helped bring down the most infamous spies in 20\textsuperscript{th} century American history.

He was also successful in convincing Judge Kaufman to send both Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to the electric chair. During sentencing, Kaufman placed blame for the Korean War on the Rosenbergs and termed their crime “worse than murder.”\textsuperscript{39} After an extended appeal process, they were executed just after 8:00 PM on June 19, 1953.

On the heels of his success during the Rosenberg trial, Cohn was transferred to the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. In his early days working for the Attorney General he continued his anti-red crusade by heading a grand jury investigating the presence of communists among the nearly two thousand Americans employed by the

\textsuperscript{38} Radosh and Milton, \textit{The Rosenberg File}, 536-37n.
\textsuperscript{39} Radosh and Milson, \textit{The Rosenberg File}, 3-4.
United Nations.\textsuperscript{40} Once again, incontrovertible evidence linking individuals to communist or so-called “un-American” activities was difficult to obtain. And once again, just the insinuation of communist sympathies was enough to ruin lives and careers. In May, 1952, six employees of the U.N. were fired after being “investigated as security risks” by Cohn’s grand jury, their contracts terminated even though they were charged with no crime.\textsuperscript{41} When the general counsel to the U.N., an American named Abraham Feller, committed suicide by jumping from a window in his twelfth-story apartment building in the midst of the investigation, U.N. Secretary General Trygve Lie blamed his suicide on the stress involved in “defending United States members of the Secretariat ‘against indiscriminate smears and exaggerated charges,’” a clear reference to the grand jury.\textsuperscript{42} Undeterred by such allegations, even as they caused schisms within the Justice Department, Cohn pressed on with his investigation.

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As he built press contacts and zealously hunted communists, Roy Cohn was also intently constructing a professional and public persona that would make him acceptable to the east coast power elite and the general public. He accomplished this task through a daily performance that hid his queerness by emphasizing a traditional, heterosexual

\textsuperscript{40} These inquiries ran concurrent to (and oftentimes had the backing of) a similar investigation by the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Internal Security, then headed by Patrick McCarran of Nevada. For a more extensive discussion of this period at the United Nations, see: Barros, James. \textit{Trygve Lie and the Cold War: The UN Secretary-General Pursues Peace, 1946-53}. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989; Von Hoffman, \textit{Citizen Cohn}, 114-122. The “nearly two thousand” figure comes from “Bunche Denounces ‘Pressures’ on U.N.” \textit{The New York Times} 14 Nov. 1952: 4.


masculinity. As historian K. A. Cuordileone has argued, “in the name of combating an implacable, expansionist communist enemy,” political culture in the 1950s “put a new premium on hard masculine toughness and rendered anything less than that soft, timid, [and] feminine, and as such a real or potential threat to the security of the nation.” As a result, Cohn had to both hide his femininity and pretend to possess an extreme amount of machismo in order to be accepted.

One of the primary components of this performance was Roy’s demonstration to his fellow lawyers that he was just like them outside the office. He dressed like his peers, slicking back his black hair and sporting traditional grey flannel suits that hid his exceptionally gaudy personal style (one that he would eventually express publicly in the late 1960s). He partook in expensive, multi-course dinners at Manhattan’s finest restaurants, unwinding after work with a drink and bawdy conversation. On those nights out he would demonstrate a penchant for chasing women that was as strong as that of any of his coworkers. As one peer recalled years later, “Roy Cohn was a heterosexual then. I know that. I know that as a fact, he was a heterosexual.”

Fascinatingly, critics including Barbara Ehrenreich have read this masculine need to conform as rhyming with traits that were seen as essentially feminine by 1950s psychologists: “In his need for ‘belongingness,’ in his deference to the group, in his acceptance of the therapeutic ideals of cooperation and conflict resolution, the organization man looked remarkably feminine in psychological disposition.” K. A. Cuordileone. *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*. New York: Routledge, 2005: 119. See also: Barbara Ehrenreich. *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*. New York: Doubleday, 1983: 32-35.

Cuordileone, K. A. *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*. New York: Routledge, 2005. viii. Cuordileone continues: “The power of the hard/soft dualism in cold war political discourse lay here, in the gendered, symbolic baggage that gave such imagery its meaning. In the overheated political climate of the time, that discourse grew shrill on both sides of the partisan divide. The hard/soft imagery that pervaded cold war discourse speaks not only to the pressures of the cold war but also to the apprehensions and idiosyncrasies of the culture from which it was born, and its resonance in the political arena – as well as the entire obsession with “hard” virility that emerged in political life – is intelligible only within the context of the multiple anxieties and uncertainties of the era…”

Among other flamboyant fashion choices, Cohn made an appearance on *60 Minutes* dressed in an orange plaid dinner jacket. Von Hoffman, *Citizen Cohn*, 22.

Von Hoffman, *Citizen Cohn*, 78.
the U.S. Attorney’s Office in New York City added that Cohn was patronizing female
prostitutes at the time, and “may have had trouble being with women who weren’t
[prostitutes].” As his fame grew and he began to appear in gossip columns, Cohn
embraced every opportunity to be photographed on dates with women (in groups or
alone) at elite nightlife hotspots such as the Stork Club’s Cub Room.

The essentiality of female companionship as an element to Cohn’s masculine
performance did not preclude him from developing a strong distaste for women, an
element of his personality that was remembered by many friends and often (perhaps
stereotypically) attributed to Cohn’s complex relationship with his mother. Revealing his
own prejudices about gender, Cohn once told a female acquaintance that he liked her
because “you’re tough and you’re very smart. Most women are weak and they cry, blah,
blah, blah…” It is also conceivable that Cohn’s attitude toward women, namely his
hatred of their intellectual company but concurrent use of their physical companionship,
endeared him to his coworkers and the hypermasculine circles in which they operated
during the early 1950s.

Though his ego may have angered many of Cohn’s coworkers, his ruthlessness as
an anticommmunist prosecutor impressed them. This no-holds-barred approach to
communist hunting strengthened Cohn’s masculine performance by demonstrating that
he would go to any lengths – even illegal ones – in his anti-red quest, a method that
allowed Cohn to position himself like a matinee cowboy with a vendetta against the
Apaches. Such extremism was excused, even encouraged, because communists had

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47 Ibid., 79. Cohn’s experiences with female prostitutes apparently continued into the late 1950s and into
the early 1960s. He would even sometimes brag to his friends about his bedroom talents after he had
finished a meeting with a prostitute. See: Citizen Cohn, 143, 310.
48 Roy Cohn as quoted in Citizen Cohn, 364.
replaced Nazis and fascists as America’s most threatening enemy. While Cohn’s radical tactics probably grew from his desire for power as much as his need to be considered masculine, we must recognize that they conveniently helped him achieve both goals.

In the portion of his autobiography describing his early years as a prosecutor, Cohn emphasizes the mettle he displayed while navigating the challenges put to him by his older, gruffer bosses. Regardless of how many times an early boss had him rewrite legal briefs – “[he was] as tough a taskmaster as any marine drill instructor in Parris Island” – Cohn endured until his ability to write briefs was solidified.49 Further membership into the brotherhood was confirmed by superiors who would take his youthful arrogance with a wink and nod, such as the judge who reported, “Mr. Cohn, your [closing statement] was almost as good as you think it was.”50 Each anecdote seems to carry the same message; Cohn felt he paid his dues in order to become a member of the club. With a certain number of dress rehearsals under his belt, Cohn seemed ready to perform on what would arguably become the nation’s largest stage when he accepted a job as Senator Joseph McCarthy’s assistant.

49 Zion, The Autobiography of Roy Cohn, 41
50 Ibid., 44.
Chapter Three

At the age of twenty-seven, Roy Cohn was thrust into the most significant, most pressure-filled moment of his career. The Army-McCarthy hearings allowed Cohn to perform on a stage that was larger than any ever afforded to a bureaucrat of his stature. The hearings were unlike anything the American public had ever witnessed. Over twenty million people tuned in to the broadcast each day, making it the most-watched live event in television history. The hearings were front-page news for their duration and newspapers commonly included transcripts of the previous day’s testimony. They also placed an extraordinary amount of pressure on the participants, particularly Cohn. The only reason he was the focus of such a momentous pageant, after all, was because his reputation was under siege.

But the hearings went beyond an inquiry into Cohn’s conduct during his quarrel with the Army. They essentially became a critique of the character Cohn had molded during his meteoric rise to the top of the American political stage, the primary question being whether Cohn actually was the honest, hardworking, traditionalist, masculine individual he purported to be. This critique of Cohn’s integrity and personal makeup was being forwarded while he concurrently attempted to refine that character and adjust to the evolving situation the hearings created.

Though Cohn was privately being bombarded with criticism from his peers, congressmen, and members of the Eisenhower Administration, his position of power was
tenable so long as he retained the support of the general public. The problem with this reliance on public support was that such support was predicated on an image of him that was almost totally false. Once the public began to realize the inaccuracy of that image, Cohn’s career began to crumble rapidly, culminating in the disaster that was the Army-McCarthy hearings.

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Possibly the most constant theme in the life of Roy Marcus Cohn was the man’s relentless pursuit of power. In this chase, Cohn used any and all weapons at his disposal, including his stunning intelligence, his incomparable ambition, his voluminous rolodex, and his willingness to use extralegal means to overcome obstacles in his path. Most important was his ability to surround himself with influential people who could grant him access to America’s halls of power. And at the end of 1952, few people in America were more powerful than Senator Joseph R. McCarthy.

Two decades Cohn’s senior, McCarthy had been originally elected to the Senate as a Republican from Wisconsin in 1946. Four years later, his career had stalled and his chances for re-election looked slim until he addressed a gathering in Wheeling, West Virginia in February 1950 and charged the State Department with knowingly employing communists.¹ Almost immediately, he began to gain publicity. Though the specifics changed, McCarthy kept repeating his charges that communists had infiltrated the American government, dominating the front pages of American newspapers over the next couple of years and building popularity among a base largely consisting of working-class Irish Catholics. According to Cohn himself, following the November, 1952 vote in which

¹ During McCarthy’s first term, a poll of the U.S. Senate Press Corps found that he was considered by that body to be the worst current member of the Senate. Herman, Arthur. Joseph McCarthy: Re-Examining the Life and Legacy of America’s Most Hated Senator. New York: Free Press, 2000. 51.
Dwight Eisenhower was elected president and the Republican party gained control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives, “Except for Ike, no politician stood taller than McCarthy, and even more than Eisenhower it was McCarthy who [had] swung the Senate to the G.O.P.”\(^2\)

Still employed by the Justice Department but seeing an opportunity for increased power, Cohn asked a mutual friend to introduce him to McCarthy in December 1952. Knowing that McCarthy had recently been appointed chairman of the Senate Committee on Government Operations (CGO), Cohn hoped to convince McCarthy to hire him as general counsel for CGO’s most significant subcommittee, the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. Though Cohn regarded the pair’s first meeting at the Hotel Astor in New York City’s Times Square as a failure, McCarthy eventually hired Cohn, who moved to his new position in January 1953.\(^3\)

The reasons McCarthy decided to hire Cohn illustrate McCarthy’s priorities, Cohn’s talents, and how the two intersected. Most immediately, McCarthy had built a reputation as a hunter of communists but lacked the field experience and legal skill necessary for the investigations themselves. Cohn had both; he was probably the most experienced anticommunist litigator in the United States and by all accounts possessed an incredibly astute legal mind.

A number of personal factors also helped Cohn win the position. Despite his relatively privileged background, Cohn was able to convince McCarthy that he shared the Senator’s well-publicized distaste for the establishment elite that dominated

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\(^3\) Ibid., 81-84.
While Cohn had attended one of New York’s best prep schools and an Ivy League university, his background was a far cry from the Andover/Exeter, Yale/Harvard pipeline of Washington’s old boys’ club. Cohn’s Judaism also played a factor, as hiring Cohn insulated McCarthy from charges of anti-Semitism, which the Senator had been battling since the early 1950s. Aware of his value in this regard, Cohn commonly referenced his own Judaism in order to refute charges against McCarthy. For his own part, McCarthy was so sensitive to the oft-repeated accusation of anti-Semitism that he refrained from mentioning Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in his public comments, despite the fact that the couple was the most famous communist subversives of the period. Perhaps most importantly, Cohn also made political sense because he had the backing of two extremely powerful McCarthy supporters, the columnist George Sokolsky and Hearst Corporation CEO Richard E. Berlin.

In another ripple, Cohn’s primary competition for the position was Robert F. Kennedy, a recent graduate of the University of Virginia Law School who had held a position in the Department of Justice before leaving to manage his brother’s 1952 Senate

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4 A clear example of McCarthy’s prejudice emerged during Cohn and Schine’s investigation of the State Department’s overseas activities, during which McCarthy attacked the Fulbright international cultural exchange program as “the half-bright program” and attributed its continued existence to “a group of the old Acheson braintrusters.” See: Reeves, The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy, 491.


6 Reeves, The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy, 465. These charges gained plausibility because of the somewhat-accurate stereotype that the American left (and thus numerous communist and socialist organizations) was dominated by an immigrant Jewry with Eastern European roots. The advantage of having a Jew on his staff was actually something Cohn stressed in his pitch to McCarthy. During Cohn’s period working for the Senator, McCarthy commonly used his young assistant’s Jewish background as a shield against accusations of anti-Semitism. See: Pearson, Drew. “The Washington Merry-Go-Round: McCarthy, Cohn Visit Baruch.” The Washington Post and Times Herald. 27 Mar., 1954: 47.

7 Ellen Schreker. Many are the Crimes, 256; Zion, The Autobiography of Roy Cohn, 83. Sokolsky was such an important figure in Cohn’s life that Cohn dedicated his 1968 biography of Joseph McCarthy to Sokolsky, along with his parents: “To my mother and father, Dora Marcus Cohn and Albert Cohn; and to George E. Sokolsky, who often served in loco parentis.” (Cohn, Roy. McCarthy. New York: New American Library, 1968. v.)
While Robert’s father Joseph, the former American ambassador to the United Kingdom and a major player in Washington politics, had long been a McCarthy backer, McCarthy clearly felt that Cohn was the best fit for the job, and not only because a McCarthy-Kennedy team could easily be painted by their opponents as a pair of Irishmen with a vendetta against Jews and raise questions about a Republican senator hiring a chief counsel from a staunchly Democratic family. While Joseph Kennedy could probably have used his political clout to secure the job for his second-youngest son, he had already spent most of the political capital he had with McCarthy during the 1952 Senatorial campaign of Robert’s older brother, John. McCarthy had already done the Kennedy family a favor by not coming to Massachusetts to campaign on behalf of John F. Kennedy’s opponent, Republican incumbent Henry Cabot Lodge. By not rousing his urban, Irish Catholic base to support Lodge, McCarthy helped secure victory for John F. Kennedy in what proved to be an extremely close race. Knowing McCarthy had already helped one of his sons secure additional power in Washington, Joseph Kennedy did not push the Senator to hire Robert, and the title of chief counsel went to Cohn. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, Vice President Richard Nixon, and twenty senators attended a private party celebrating Cohn’s hiring.

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9 Zion, The Autobiography of Roy Cohn, 87; Reeves, The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy, 442. Robert Kennedy did end up securing the (lesser) position of assistant counsel with the McCarthy Committee. This episode began a life-long shared hatred between Robert Kennedy and Roy Cohn. Cohn claimed that Frip Flanagan, general counsel to the McCarthy committee, told him that Kennedy didn’t like Cohn because, “First of all, [RFK] isn’t crazy about Jews. Second, you’re not exactly a member of the Palm Beach polo set. And thirdly, you’ve got the job he wanted.” (Cohn as quoted in Zion, The Autobiography of Roy Cohn, 88) Kennedy ended up leaving the McCarthy Committee in July, 1953, only to return to help represent the committee itself during the Army-McCarthy hearings. (Zion, The Autobiography of Roy Cohn, 90).
10 Reeves, The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy, 464, per an interview with J. Edgar Hoover’s assistant Lou Nichols. Some theories have held that McCarthy may have hired Cohn because he recognized him as a fellow homosexual (colloquially: a “fellow traveler”). As tempting as this conclusion may be given the scope of this work, there does not seem to be any solid evidence to support it.
Almost immediately upon assuming his new position, Cohn became McCarthy’s right hand. “The union of McCarthy and Cohn was the partnership of kindred souls,” journalist Fred J. Cook wrote, “each fueling the excesses in the other.”\textsuperscript{11} Cohn’s immediate responsibilities included collecting informants, organizing depositions, preparing witness examinations, and managing the ever-present media. “He’s a brilliant young fellow,” McCarthy said of Cohn. “He works his butt off and he’s loyal to me. I don’t think I could make it without him.”\textsuperscript{12} Some of the most enduring images of the McCarthy hearings would be the innumerable moments when McCarthy covered the microphone in front of him and leaned toward Cohn, nodding as his young assistant whispered advice in his ear. Reporters quickly recognized Cohn’s importance and wrote about him as the brains of the operation, not only in regards to legal matters but in the entire structuring of the pair’s anticommunist campaign.\textsuperscript{13} Nominally McCarthy’s assistant, Cohn fast became the Senator’s secretary, legal counsel, stand-in, press liaison, business partner, organizer, adviser, travel agent, and confidante rolled into one person.

One of the reasons the two men paired so well was because they found a common goal in self-promotion. In \textit{The Politics of Fear}, his expose of McCarthyism, historian Robert Griffith rightfully claims that McCarthy’s “declared purpose was to ‘expose communists.’” His unstated objective was to garner publicity and to reaffirm the myth of ‘Joe McCarthy’s fight against communism.’”\textsuperscript{14} This outlook led to a number of inquiries that were strongly publicized by Cohn and McCarthy but had little chance of netting

\textsuperscript{11} Fred J. Cook. \textit{The Nightmare Decade}, 398.
\textsuperscript{12} Joe McCarthy as quoted in Schrecker, \textit{Many are the Crimes}, 256.
\textsuperscript{14} Griffith, \textit{The Politics of Fear}, 213.
actual communists. In fact, many of the investigations that Cohn undertook on McCarthy’s behalf were not groundbreaking at all and were actually situations the FBI had previously been monitoring, albeit quietly.\(^\text{15}\)

Shortly after being hired by McCarthy, Cohn suggested that the Senator add to his staff by enlisting G. David Schine as an unpaid consultant. Schine was a young, handsome Harvard graduate and hotel heir that Cohn had met in late 1952 through either George Sokolsky or old friend (and Rosenberg trial judge) Irving Saypol.\(^\text{16}\) Nominally, Schine was hired as an expert on anticommunism. He had written a six-page pamphlet on the topic that was placed next to the Gideon Bibles in each Schine-owned hotel and Cohn erroneously claimed that Schine had created a “psychological warfare program at present in use by the United States Navy.”\(^\text{17}\)

In actuality, the pamphlet and its author were widely regarded as farcical. At Harvard, Schine had hired a secretary to attend his classes for him and was shuttled around campus in a chauffeured limousine. In social circles he was best known for having what was perhaps the world’s largest private collection of cigars.\(^\text{18}\) As for the infamous pamphlet that supposedly inspired Cohn to recommend Schine to the McCarthy Committee, journalist Richard Rovere noted that “it puts the Russian Revolution, the founding of the Communist Party, and the start of the First Five Year Plan in years when


\(^{16}\) The story of exactly how Cohn and Schine first met is unclear and there are numerous conflicting accounts of how the introduction was made, but the most significant takeaway from each is that the duo probably met through shared political and social connections in New York or Washington. Cook, *Nightmare Decade*, 409; Reeves, *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy*, 465; Von Hoffman, *Citizen Cohn*, 142.

\(^{17}\) Nat McKitterick, “Covered Like an Election: Mr. Cohn and Mr. Schine Needed No Press Agent.” *The Washington Post* 26 Apr., 1953: B3.

these things did not happen. It gives Lenin the wrong first name. It confuses Stalin with Trotsky. It confuses Marx with Lenin.”

So why did Cohn ask McCarthy to hire Schine? This question becomes more intriguing when one realizes Schine was a near-perfect embodiment of the establishment elite that Cohn and McCarthy supposedly detested. Though numerous journalists and historians have opined that Cohn may have pushed for the hiring due to a sexual attraction toward Schine (or even because the pair were already engaged in a romantic relationship), the most likely scenario was that Cohn and McCarthy used Schine to gain access to his family’s wealth and connections. While Cohn was probably sexually attracted to Schine, their business partnership was primarily predicated on Cohn’s desire to utilize the Schine family’s social and media contacts to gain more publicity.

One of Cohn and Schine’s earliest tasks was to investigate the International Information Administration (IIA), an arm of the State Department that was charged with providing information about the United States to foreign audiences through libraries, print publications, and radio. The State Department had fast become a favorite target of both McCarthy’s and Cohn’s because it already had a national reputation as being effete – thus suggesting the masculinity of any individual who stood opposed to the institution – and was a traditional posting for members of the establishment elite that Cohn and McCarthy disliked. Operating out of the Schine family’s private suite at the Waldorf

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20 On the debate over a Cohn-Schine romantic relationship, see von Hoffman, *Citizen Cohn*, 188-90, 202, 226, 230-31. Despite the opinion of most historians that Cohn and Schine did not engage in a physical romantic relationship, rumors of such a coupling were strong enough to queer both men in the public imagination (see discussion below) and firmly ground the relationship in popular culture. In Tony Kushner’s 1996 one-act play “G. David Schine in Hell,” the character Roy Cohn refers to Schine as a modern-day Helen of Troy, calling him “the face that launched a thousand slips.” See: Tony Kushner. “G. David Schine in Hell.” *Death & Taxes: Hydrioptaphia & Other Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000. 234.
Towers in New York City, Cohn and Schine interviewed dozens of IIA employees in a search for communist agents or evidence that their publications had been infiltrated by such sympathies. These interviews – which failed to produce any evidence of conspiracy – afforded Cohn and McCarthy the opportunity to once again create publicity for themselves while causing further headaches for the State Department.

The inquiry expanded in the spring of 1953 when Cohn and Schine were sent to investigate the IIA’s operations in western Europe. The precise goal of the trip was somewhat of a mystery, seemingly even to Cohn and Schine. In early comments to the press, Cohn claimed that purpose of the trip was “to collect evidence in the form of statements or of affidavits which would help the Senate committee to save the United States taxpayers money and to make the United States Information Service more effective.” However, he would later claim that he and Schine were “looking into the information program and the people who work for it” and continually cited his and Schine’s anticommunist credentials as evidence they were qualified for the job.

In truth, the trip was another press stunt. Over eighteen days, the pair visited Paris, Bonn, Berlin, Munich, Vienna, Belgrade, Athens, Rome, Paris (again), and London in succession, rarely spending more than a dozen waking hours in each city. Though their inquiries were criticized for being notably brief – it took them a half-hour to determine that the 1,200 employees of Munich’s Radio Free Europe were not communists – Cohn and Schine “found time to call a press conference in almost every city.”

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21 Reeves, *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy*, 480.
young men,” Robert Griffith wrote, “left Americans abroad alternatively laughing and
grinding their teeth.”

State Department officials posted in Europe were not the only ones nonplussed by
Cohn and Schine’s visit. In increasingly caustic reports, the European press dubbed the
two Americans “scummy snoopers,” “distempered jackals,” and practitioners of “latter-
day fascism.” After the pair’s appearance in Rome, the Manchester (England) Guardian
opined that “their limited vocabulary, their self-complacency, and their paucity of ideas,
coupled with the immense power they wield, had the effect of drawing sympathy for all
ranks of the United States diplomatic service who had to submit to this sort of thing.”

When Cohn and Schine finally left England, The London Evening News published a nose-
thumbing farewell to the pair in the form of a snarky poem based on an old vaudeville
routine.

Regardless of how Cohn and Schine were treated by the European press, they still
had supporters in the United States who viewed the pair as noble crusaders against
communism. The end result of the trip was that “throughout the spring, the [Eisenhower]
Administration fired hundreds of International Information Administration employees,
eliminated some of the Voice of America’s foreign-language programs, and closed
several overseas libraries.” Bending to public pressure in the United States, Eisenhower
also proposed a reorganization of the country’s international information services that
took the oversight of such programs away from the State Department. Despite these

27 Manchester Guardian as quoted in Reeves, The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy, 489.
29 Reeves, The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy, 491.
“successes,” Cohn still referred to the trip as one of his major regrets in his 1988 autobiography, once again revealing that he cared more about how he was presented in the media than the job he was supposedly obsessed with completing.\(^30\)

In the final analysis, Cohn was correct in viewing the trip as a failure. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the European trip was the way his relationship with Schine was portrayed. Descriptions of the pair found in European newspapers alternated between portrayals of unsupervised boy scouts and bumbling honeymooners. When checking into numerous hotels, the pair asked for rooms that were adjoining but separate, going out of their way to loudly emphasize to all within earshot that they “don’t work for the State Department,” a reference to State’s reputation as a haven for homosexuals.\(^31\) There was also much discussion of an incident during which Cohn and Schine had a spat in a German hotel lobby. As reported by the *Frankfurt Abendpost*:

Then the event occurred which still is a main topic of conversation. At 12:30, Mr. Schine announced that he put on the wrong trousers. A driver was sent to the hotel in order to pick up the right ones. Mr. Schine put them on and then discovered that his notebook was missing. He rushed back to the hotel with Mr. Cohn in order to look for it. In the hotel lobby, it was observed that Mr. Schine batted Mr. Cohn over the head with a rolled-up magazine. Then both disappeared into Mr. Schine’s room for five minutes. Later the chambermaid found ash trays and their contents strewn throughout the room. The furniture was completely overturned.\(^32\)

The undertone in these reports suggested a “lover’s quarrel,” which seems to be precisely the impression the European reporters intended. One London-based newspaper went so far as to title a story on the pair, “Cohn and Schine, the Two London Lovers.”\(^33\) The American news media, largely reliant on their European counterparts for reporting from

\(^{31}\) Roy Cohn and G. David Schine as quoted in Cook, *The Nightmare Decade*, 412.
across the Atlantic, published many of these anecdotes verbatim. Some American newspapers – particularly those opposed to McCarthyism – began to employ language suggesting that Cohn and Schine’s relationship went beyond friendship and employed numerous forms of innuendo in doing so, some more subtle than others. As a result, American audiences were exposed to the suggestion that Messrs. Cohn and Schine were not as masculine as the pair, particularly Cohn, wanted the general public to believe. The public queering of Roy Cohn – a process that would climax during the Army-McCarthy hearings – had begun.

One of Cohn and McCarthy’s most vociferous opponents was Drew Pearson, whose muckraking column “The Washington Merry-Go-Round” appeared in over 650 American newspapers.34 Using coded language, Pearson continually hinted at a romantic relationship between Cohn and Schine. In July 1953 Pearson presented the pair as “a ‘vaudeville’ team… two slapdash young men… who zoomed across Europe last winter [sic] exuding drama and headlines at every stop,” making a point of noting that each man was single. He also described Schine as “a handsome, haughty 25-year-old kid with a dreamy look in his eye, who sometimes slaps Cohn around as if they were dormitory roommates.”35 In March, 1954, on the eve of the Army-McCarthy hearings, Pearson again recounted the Cohn-Schine spat in Frankfurt and asked, “Question: Why the

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34 “Columnists: The Tenacious Muckraker.” *Time* 23 Sep., 1969. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,901423,00.html>. This *Time* obituary for Pearson notes that he was America’s best-known columnist at the time of his death. He was also the first columnist to report the infamous “slapping” incident involving General George S. Patton in 1943. The hatred between McCarthy and Pearson is well-documented and preceded Cohn’s joining of McCarthy’s staff. During a December, 1952 cocktail party held at the house of socialite and newspaper heiress Louise Tinsley Steinman, McCarthy and Pearson engaged in a physical quarrel during which McCarthy “pinned back Pearson’s arms, kneed him twice in the groin, and took a swing at him.” See: Reeves, *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy*, 348-350.

persistent attachment of Cohn for Schine? Why was he almost savage in his demands that Schine be transferred back to New York? Answer: The two have been inseparable friends for some time.”36 By using the term “for” to describe Cohn’s feelings for Schine (rather than the more grammatically-appropriate “to”), Pearson implicitly suggested a borderline-obsessive dependence. While the language Pearson employed was certainly not explicit, his passing suggestions had more weight because of his reputation as the quintessential muckraker; readers expected to find gossip of the most personal sort in Pearson’s columns.

The rumors also gained traction because of Cohn and Schine’s association with the federal bureaucracy in Washington, D.C. Since the beginning of the 1930s, Washington had become known nationally as a locale that attracted an unusually high number of homosexuals. A number of Senators charged that the federal “bureaucracy was honeycombed with homosexuals,” charges that were “not without merit,” notes David K. Johnson in *The Lavender Scare*.37 As the New Deal caused the federal bureaucracy to grow exponentially, thousands of single men and women moved to Washington to take advantage of clerical jobs. The freedom and attainability of these jobs attracted numerous homosexuals to Washington and certain neighborhoods, including the area surrounding Lafayette Park, became noticeably gay.38 In March 1950, the Washington Police estimated that there were 5,000 homosexuals living in Washington, 75% of which were working for the federal government.39

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38 Ibid., 44, 49-50.
39 Ibid., 78.
Most government agencies turned a blind eye to homosexuals in their employ until the beginning of the lavender scare in the late 1940s. To a degree, this shift can be attributed to the rising popularity of gossip columns (such as those penned by Drew Pearson) that explored the personal lives of public figures. Rumors printed by gossip columnists seemed to be confirmed by the 1950 firing of 91 homosexuals at the State Department. The following year, the publication of the bestseller *Washington Confidential* by Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer confirmed that the entire federal bureaucracy, and not just the State Department, was overrun by homosexuals. Lait and Mortimer’s book portrayed the nation’s capital as city full of “deviates,” where “public places are becoming cesspools of perversion.” Going beyond the estimates of the Washington Police, Lait and Mortimer quoted a psychiatrist who numbered Washington’s homosexual population “in the tens of thousands.” The book’s popularity attests to the American public’s awareness of such characterizations. Though Cohn and Schine tried mightily to distance themselves from these stereotypes, the pair still occupied that space in the public imagination.

Another factor helping to break down Cohn’s masculine image was his association with Joe McCarthy. Though McCarthy had been elected as a war hero and had been portrayed in numerous publications as one of the capitol’s most eligible bachelors, his opponents had slowly been attacking his masculinity and using coded language to queer him. In a May 1950 radio broadcast, Drew Pearson claimed that “a McCarthy staffer had been arrested for homosexual acts, and the senator had refused the

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man’s subsequent offer to resign.” Pearson also ominously predicted that “McCarthy’s criticisms of the employment of ‘sex perverts’ in the State Department were ‘about to backfire against him.” These rumors circulated for the next few years, coincidentally gaining traction when the relationship between Cohn and Schine became a topic of public discussion. When McCarthy married his secretary in 1953, Chicago Tribune writer Willard Edwards claimed that McCarthy had only consented to marriage “to quash stores that he was homosexual.” Historian Andrea Friedman has argued that the famous March 9, 1954 Edward R. Murrow report on McCarthy included sections that suggested the Senator was involved in homoerotic relationships. More direct was a series of Las Vegas Sun articles in which Sun editor, Pearson friend, and McCarthy target Hank Greenspun explicitly suggested McCarthy’s homosexuality, including one in which he wrote that “the plain unvarnished truth is that McCarthy, judged by the very standards by which he judges others, is a security risk on the grounds of homosexual associations” and another in which he claimed McCarthy engaged in “illicit acts” with a Republican Party official while appearing at an event in Wausau, Wisconsin. Though the Sun had a small circulation and Greenspun’s article did not become widely discussed among the American public, it was clear that rumors about McCarthy had begun to gain traction.

Given the ubiquity of similar rumors about Cohn and Schine’s relationship, it probably came as little surprise when the Army revealed that Cohn had employed

42 Ibid., 1110.
43 Reeves, The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy, 512.
44 Friedman, 1115-17.
45 Hank Greenspun. “The Secret Lives of Joe McCarthy.” Rave (June, 1954): 58-72. The Las Vegas Sun article was reprinted verbatim in the June, 1954 issue of Rave magazine, a 1950s “scandal sheet.” As quoted in Doherty, Cold War, Cool Medium, 228. Greenspun’s article was based on information leaked to him from Drew Pearson, who was too cautious to print such blunt accusations in his (much more popular) syndicated column. On the Wausau rumor, see: Von Hoffman, Citizen Cohn, 186.
46 McCarthy actually considered suing Greenspun but decided against it, reasoning that such a suit would only bring attention to the rumors. See: Von Hoffman, Citizen Cohn, 186-87.
extraordinary measures while trying to secure preferential treatment for his friend after Schine was drafted into the Army in mid-1953. This news only lent more credence to the rumors of a queer relationship between Cohn and Schine, a fact Pearson alluded to in his March, 1954 column on the eve of the Army-McCarran hearings. During the approximately nine months after Cohn learned Schine was to be drafted, Cohn lobbied Army higher-ups through 65 telephone calls and nineteen meetings in an effort to help Schine. Increasingly frustrated with the Army’s refusal to capitulate to his demands, Cohn resorted to vulgarly berating Army leaders, including Secretary of the Army Robert Stevens and Army General Counsel John G. Adams. Though McCarthy did not have a strong opinion about Schine either way, the Senator’s loyalty to Cohn led him to support his chief counsel, who did seem to be quite invested in retaining Schine’s services.

Angry with the treatment they had been forced to endure at the hands of Cohn, on March 11, 1954 the Army released to the press a dossier listing the attempts Cohn had made to secure preferential treatment for Schine, beginning in mid-July 1953. Most significantly, the report provided a number of choice quotes from those conversations which showed Cohn threatening the Army leadership. Originally 70 pages, the document was truncated to half that length when the Army decided to censor some of Cohn’s more vulgar language, deeming it inappropriate for the public record. The front page of the following day’s New York Times read, “ARMY CHARGES MCCARTHY AND COHN THREATENED IT IN TRYING TO OBTAIN PREFERRED

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47 Point of Order. Dir. Emile de Antonio. Point Films, 1964. DVD.
48 Schreker, Many are the Crimes, 263.
Quoting some of the report’s more damaging passages, the *Times* wrote that “the report quoted Mr. Cohn as threatening on one occasion to ‘wreck the Army’ and make certain that Robert T. Stevens was ‘through’ as the Secretary of the Army” and that “at another time… ‘Mr. Cohn stated to Mr. Adams that he would teach Mr. Adams what it meant to go over his head’” before finally concluding that “the report is expected to spur growing demands for Mr. Cohn’s ouster.”

While some have attributed Cohn’s attitude in his dealings with the Army to a romantic obsession with Schine, his actions can be better explained by the aggressive masculinity central to his performance as a power broker. By the middle of 1953, Cohn had achieved so much power that he was shocked when the Army refused to immediately buckle under his usual tactics of backroom horse-trading and outright bullying. While the resulting spat could have been the result of a simple power trip, it is noteworthy that Cohn used his most extreme tactics when faced with an adversary that represented the most masculine institution in America. Upon realizing the Army would not engage in a quid pro quo, Cohn immediately resorted to implementing violent language meant to demonstrate that he, McCarthy, and their allies held more power than the Army.

The day after the report was released, Cohn and McCarthy called a press conference to deny the Army’s claims. In addition, McCarthy “angrily charged the Army

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52 W.H. Lawrence. “Stevens a Target.” *The New York Times* 12 Mar., 1954: 1. To support this charge, Cohn and McCarthy drafted a series of false internal memos and backdated them so that they would appear to have emerged as responses to Army attempts at “blackmail,” then released the eleven memos to the press. These memos included records of fabricated conversations and false demands from numerous Army principals, including charging that Army counsel John G. Adams had blackmailed Cohn and McCarthy into securing him a $25,000-a-year position in a New York law firm. See: Reeves, *The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy*, 575-77.
with attempted blackmail in an effort to stop his exposure of communists.”

Concerned with the escalating tensions between the opposing parties, the other members of the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations called for a full inquiry into all charges and Cohn’s conduct in particular. Four days later, during a heated, closed-door meeting of the subcommittee, an agreement was reached. As the New York Times reported:

Senator Joseph R. McCarthy’s subcommittee voted today for a complete public exposition of his latest dispute with the Army. The Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations’ decision requires a full inquiry, with sworn testimony, into charges of possible perjury and other misconduct in the controversy. Senator Karl E. Mundt, South Dakota Republican who is up for re-election this year, reluctantly accepted the temporary chairmanship of the subcommittee. He will handle the investigation, which is to be completed before the group takes up any other issues.

Emphasizing to the press that he had voluntarily relinquished his position of chair, McCarthy seemed extraordinarily confident that he could quarterback the proceedings regardless of his title. The hearings were scheduled to begin on April 22.

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An undertone of cocksmanship ran through the hearings from their start. Appropriately, every primary participant and every witness was male. Painfully aware of their presence on television – sometimes literally, given the extraordinarily hot lights the networks used – each participant did his best to adopt a posture that would endear him to that audience and demonstrate his predisposition to leadership. In 1950s America, this meant displaying what were believed to be the clear markers of masculinity: confidence, boldness, aggressiveness, strength, preparedness, intelligence, stoicism, and wit.

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55 Reeves, The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy, 579-580.
The most apparent way the participants presented themselves as masculine figures was through their speech. The principals tried to speak in largely declarative statements, using language that was direct while also employing jargon in order to cement their “insider” status. The men commonly raised their voices, attempting to control the tone and direction of the hearings by shouting each other down with “points of order” and other elements of parliamentary procedure. While similar performances can be found in many courtrooms, the primary purpose of acting in such a manner during the hearings was not to simply appear confident in one’s case (though that motivation certainly did play a role), but to place oneself in a position to actually control the proceedings. While Senator Karl Mundt had been named as interim chair, his standing as leader was tenuous; each of the major players saw an opportunity to take de-facto control of the subcommittee and acted in a manner they thought would bring them that power.

This desire for hegemony led to innumerable tense moments in the Senate Caucus Room, as evidenced by this exchange between McCarthy and Army counsel Joseph Welch:

Mr. WELCH: Have you some private reservation when you take the oath that you will tell the whole truth that lest you be judge of what you will testify to? Senator McCARTHY: The answer is that there is no reservation about telling the truth.
Mr. WELCH: Thank you, sir. Then tell us who delivered the document to you! Senator McCARTHY: The answer is no. You will not get the information.
Mr. WELCH: You wish then to put our own interpretation on your oath and tell us less than the whole truth?
Senator McCARTHY: …You can go right ahead and try until doomsday. You will not get the names of any informants who rely upon me to protect them.56

This sort of verbal jousting was not uncommon, both in content and tone. Each side attempted to position itself as the ultimate guardian of the “truth” and other timeless

virtues while concurrently using absolutist language (i.e. “until doomsday”) to illustrate its assuredness. When not fortifying their own masculinity, each side was busy questioning the virility of their opponent. In one exchange, McCarthy repeatedly suggested to Stevens that he “plead fatigue” and ask for a recess in the hearings because he looked tired; not wanting to appear weak, Stevens firmly refused.\(^{57}\)

The hearings also featured numerous back-slapping asides that suggested a locker room atmosphere. On the second day of the hearings, Secretary of the Army Robert T. Stevens testified that McCarthy had once requested “a few weekends off for David Schine… perhaps for the purpose of taking care of Dave’s girl friends.”\(^ {58}\) At the winking double-entendre those present burst into laughter, including McCarthy and, a beat later, Cohn. On another occasion, when Army counsel John G. Adams testified that there were rumors of a “homosexual ring of generals” located on a base in an unnamed southern state, Senator John McClellan and subcommittee counsel Ray Jenkins interrupted Adams’ testimony to make the secretary confirm that the southern state in question was neither of their home states – Arkansas and Tennessee, respectively. After this interlude received a chuckle from the audience, Senator Mundt of South Dakota asked Adams to confirm that the base was not in his home state, joking that some may read the first half of the state’s name and mistakenly locate it in “the south.” Riotous laughter from all present, including McCarthy and Cohn, followed.\(^ {59}\)

Cohn did his best to continue his masculine performance during the hearings. He laughed at the appropriate times, attempted to demonstrate his intelligence, wit, and

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57 Cook, Nightmare Decade, 498.
58 Army-McCarthy Hearings, Part 3, Page 131. Note that the “girl friends” comment was originally made by McCarthy, perhaps in an attempt to find common ground with Stevens based on a shared masculinity.
59 Point of Order, DVD, 18:30-19:10.
strength, and tried mightily to dictate the tenor of his testimony. In private, he threatened Bobby Kennedy, then working as an assistant counsel representing the other members of the subcommittee, telling Kennedy that he planned to “get Jackson.”

Cohn also attempted to demonstrate his toughness by threatening Kennedy physically, and perhaps even getting into a scuffle with him outside the caucus room. However, due to the preconceived notions of the press and the public that had been established through the rumors about Cohn that had emerged while he had been working for McCarthy, Cohn’s masculine public persona was undermined during the hearings to the point of destruction.

This emasculation was apparent in the press’ portrayal of Cohn during the hearings. Previously depicted as a crusading white knight in the period before he went to work for McCarthy, media representations of Cohn gradually began to describe an irresponsible, vulgar twerp more interested in himself than anything else. Edward R. Murrow’s *See It Now* broadcasts – especially the infamous “Report on Senator Joseph McCarthy” from March 9, 1954 – emphasized Cohn’s “crude behavior and arrogance” and how the negative aspects of his personality had come to overshadow his intelligence and dedication.

For his part, Drew Pearson became bolder in his attempts to undercut Cohn’s masculine image. In a number of columns, Pearson highlighted both Cohn’s efforts to dodge military service, an element of Cohn’s biography that Cohn knew was extremely damaging and about which he had gone to great lengths to hide. In a May 4, 1954

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60 Griffith, *Politics of Fear*, 257.
61 Cook, *Nightmare Decade*, 513.
column, Pearson queered Cohn by tying him to Schine and harping on the fact that Schine “hired a fellow private to clean his rifle” while he was in the Army, an obvious double-entendre. On June 5, Pearson took his boldest shots yet, writing that during Cohn and Schine’s tour of Europe, “The two McCarthy gumshoes seemed unusually preoccupied with investigating alleged homosexuals” and reprinting the anecdote that “the pair also made a show of registering for separate hotel rooms, remarking loudly that they didn’t work for the State Department.” In the same column, Pearson emphasized some of Cohn and Schine’s feminine habits, noting that the pair borrowed $600 to buy perfume in Paris. Also in June 1954, the months-old Las Vegas Sun column explicitly suggesting that Joe McCarthy was gay (a story originally leaked to Sun editor Hank Greenspun by Pearson) was reprinted in the national gossip magazine Rave.

Despite the steadfast support of friendly columnists such as Walter Winchell and George Sokolsky, the dominant mood in the press was decidedly anti-Cohn, as confirmed by a June 10 Washington Post editorial noting the prevailing opinion that “Mr. Cohn has been shown to have been absurdly importunate in behalf of his friend, Private Schine.”

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65 Drew Pearson. “The Washington Merry-Go-Round: More on Cohn-Schine Jaunt.” Washington Post June 5, 1954, p. 13. In a 1969 oral history interview with the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Pearson again used coded language to suggest that the McCarty-Cohn-Schine relationship was queer, if not fully homosexual. Interviewer Joe Frantz asks Pearson, “Do you think that [McCarthy’s] relationship with Roy Cohn and the Schine fellow was, shall we say, sinister?” To which Pearson replies, “Yes, it was sinister.” Though we again are forced to read between the lines – even in an interview that will be deposited in a presidential library and not released for a number of years – the suggestion behind the clause “shall we say” is obvious given the context. See: Transcript, Drew Pearson Oral History Interview I, 4/10/69, by Joe B. Frantz, Internet Copy, LBJ Library.


So concerned was Winchell about the newspaper coverage of his friend that he threatened *Washington Post* reporter Murrey Marder one day following the hearings, warning Marder that, “We’re going to get you.”

Despite this fear of the press, the event most damaging to Cohn’s reputation was the Army-McCarthy hearings themselves. The nationally-televised and widely-watched hearings illustrated to the American public that their perception of Cohn, one that was built on a carefully crafted public performance abetted by friendly media outlets, completely changed once the filter of a sympathetic print media was removed. As a result, Cohn was outed in the most public forum possible, an event that destroyed his masculine public image and all but assuring that he would never be able to secure a position of power that was reliant upon public support.

The most immediate difference was that Cohn’s physical appearance on television did not match the image of him the American public had gleaned from newspaper reports. Though Cohn had previously appeared on television news shows such as *Meet the Press*, the Army-McCarthy hearings were the first opportunity for a widespread audience to see Cohn on television for an extended period of time.

Cohn was largely silent until he took the stand, but his body language showed him to be unsettled and uncomfortable throughout the proceedings. When the camera turned to him, he was usually looking down and rarely smiled. The image of Cohn broadcast over television was of a pudgy young man with a puffy face, swollen lips, and large ears. The shadows across his face caused by his deep-set eyes and heavy brow were made

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68 Von Hoffman, *Citizen Cohn*, 206. N.B.: Marder was not a columnist like Winchell, Sokolsky, or Pearson, but a beat reporter assigned by the *Post* to cover the day-to-day events during the Army-McCarthy hearings. The fact that Winchell resorted to threatening this man illustrates just how ubiquitous the negative coverage of Cohn and McCarthy had become.
darker by Cohn’s posture, as the television lights hit his face at a downward angle. His eyes constantly searched the room. He never seemed comfortable. Altogether, it was a drastic departure from the newspaper photographs of Cohn out on the town, double-dating with Schine. A number of times, particularly when McCarthy made glaring errors of judgment, the television cameras captured Cohn in silent torture, seemingly searching for a convenient patch of sand where he could bury his head.

When Cohn did open his mouth, he came across as arrogant and entitled. In a series of self-aggrandizing moments, Cohn referred to himself in the third person, declaring that “Roy Cohn is here speaking for Roy Cohn, to give the facts.” Further complicating Cohn’s statements was the heavy New York accent with which he spoke. This common man’s brogue undermined Cohn’s public image by making him sound more like a dock worker in Elia Kazan’s recently-released film On the Waterfront than a major player in Washington’s halls of power.

Equally problematic was the fact that as one of the accused, Cohn spent the hearings constantly on the defensive, thereby legitimizing the charges against him by suggesting to the television audience that he had something from which to be defended. Cohn’s constant denials and use of confusing legalese could not match the knowing telegenic repartee of Army counsel Joseph Welch, a grandfatherly figure who seemed to wink at the camera as he delivered each quip, no matter how biting. Welch’s methods became so popular that newspapers began running columns dedicated to exploring and explaining Welch’s wit, emphasizing how his deft use of vernacular enabled him to build a connection with the American public. Despite his best efforts,

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69 Cook, Nightmare Decade, 509.
Cohn was woefully unable to engage in such banter, establishing a disparity between himself and Welch that clearly injured Cohn’s sense of pride and hurt his reputation in regards to his legal expertise and confidence. Once again, these exchanges had the effect of making Cohn appear less powerful and less masculine.71

In addition, Cohn was queered through his association with David Schine, whose heterosexuality was under constant attack during the hearings. Already suspect due to the press’ coverage of his trip to Europe with Cohn, Schine’s sexuality was further questioned by a variety of participants in the proceedings.72 Less than a week into the hearings, Ray Jenkins, counsel for the subcommittee, was questioning Army Secretary Stevens about whether he was aware of the preferential treatment Schine had received while in the Army, including being exempt from working in the base kitchen (so-called kitchen patrol, or KP, duty), not wearing his uniform on base, and riding in the cab of a truck while his fellow soldiers remained in the truck bed. At one juncture, Jenkins asked Stevens,

Mr. JENKINS: Did it come to your attention that this private, David Schine, was hiring his fellow soldiers and paying them money to clean his rifle?
Secretary STEVENS: I think I heard something about that later.
Mr. JENKINS: You knew that was against regulations.
Secretary STEVENS: Yes, I certainly know that.73

At the suggestion that Schine had his (male) peers “clean his rifle,” the normally serious proceedings erupted in laughter. Many of the senators, Secretary Stevens, and Senator McCarthy all enjoyed a loud laugh, though Cohn sat stone-faced. Whether the double-

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71 Cook, Nightmare Decade, 510-11.
72 It should be noted that by the time the hearings began Schine had officially left the employ of the McCarthy committee in order to fulfill his obligation to the Army and thus was not present during the hearings.
entendre was intended or not, the vast majority of those present were clearly aware of the rumors surrounding Schine (and, thereby, Cohn).

Exactly a month later, as Cohn was on the stand being questioned by Jenkins about his relationship with Schine, more suggestive language emerged.

Mr. JENKINS: In all fairness, Mr. Cohn, isn’t it a fact that [Schine] is one of your best friends? We all have our best friends. There is no criticism of you on that account.
Mr. COHN: No, of course not, sir.
Mr. JENKINS: We have friends whom we love. I do. And the relationship between you and Dave Schine has been very close for the past two years, hasn’t it?
Mr. COHN: Yes, sir. He is one of a number of good friends I am proud to have.
Mr. JENKINS: Have you known him socially?
Mr. COHN: I have.
Mr. JENKINS: Visited in his home?
Mr. COHN: Yes, sir.
Mr. JENKINS: Has he visited in your home?
Mr. COHN: Yes, sir.
Mr. JENKINS: And perhaps you have double-dated together. There is no reflection on anything about that. You are both single men as we understand it.
Mr. COHN: We have been on double dates, sir…

Once again the signals were subtle, but to anyone aware of the rumors about Cohn and Schine, the reasons were clear why Jenkins included the word “love,” referenced both men’s marital status, and took care to place each man in the other’s home. At another point, when questioning Army counsel John G. Adams, Jenkins asked if Adams tried to “break the news gently” to Cohn that Schine would probably be shipped overseas, once again causing the audience to laugh at the subtle hint that the Cohn-Schine relationship was so close as to necessitate a certain degree of tenderness when discussing it.75

However, by the time Cohn was called to the witness stand at the end of May, the most dramatic moment of his undesired public outing had already happened. The

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74 Army-McCarthy Hearings, Part 44, Page 1664-65. This exchange took place on May 28, 1954.
75 Point of Order, DVD, 11:30-12:04.
sockdolager had come two days after the “clean his rife” comment, with McCarthy associate Jim Juliana on the stand and Joseph Welch asking the questions. A couple of days earlier, Cohn and McCarthy had introduced into evidence a photograph depicting Schine and Secretary Stevens smiling at each other, the intent being to suggest that animosity between the two was impossible if they were clearly on such good terms. After a little digging by the Army legal team, it was discovered that the photograph Cohn and McCarthy had presented was actually a cropped version of a larger image, an image that actually showed Stevens smiling at a third person, Colonel Kenneth Bradley. Welch called to the stand Jim Juliana, the McCarthy staff member responsible for enlarging the image for use during the hearing, for the purpose of identifying who had instructed him to crop the photograph in such a manner.

Welch, like everybody else in the room, knew Cohn was behind the alterations, he was just having trouble getting Juliana to admit it under oath. Welch began by asking the witness why he brought the cropped version to the hearings (as opposed to a copy of the original), before suggesting the image had originated with a “pixie.” Whether Welch’s comment was planned or the result of a moment of frustration is debatable. What is clear is that the audience’s reaction to the comment – prolonged laughter – was directed at Cohn. From Cohn’s viewpoint, this moment was only worsened when Joe McCarthy oafishly attempted to critique Welch by suggesting the Army’s counsel was an expert in such matters. Welch seized on the opportunity presented by McCarthy’s charge, sharpening his barb by defining a pixie as “a close relative of a fairy” and once again causing the audience to laugh.

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76 Cohn himself later admitted that the cropped photo incident originated with him. See: Cook, Nightmare Decade, 497.
77 Army-McCarthy Hearings, Part 14, Page 543. This exchange occurred on April 30, 1954.
It is impossible to determine what proportion of the American viewing public realized Welch’s comment was a reference to Cohn, though it is reasonable to posit that the percentage was significant, given the proliferation of rumors about Cohn and the immediate, unified reaction of the live audience. Even if certain members of the television audience did not immediately catch the reference, the resulting water-cooler discussions – “Why did everyone laugh at that exchange?” – would have spread rumors about Cohn’s homosexuality.

In employing the terms “pixie” and “fairy,” Welch was referencing a shared cultural vernacular that all those watching the hearings could understand. He was also suggesting that in addition to partaking in homosexual affairs, Cohn possessed a particularly feminine character. The moment was a culmination of years of rumor and hearsay about Cohn’s sexuality that had circulated by way of coded language in political columns, radio news-programs, gossip tabloids, and word-of-mouth discussions. From that point forward, Cohn’s homosexuality was no longer the secret he wanted it to be. For all intents and purposes, he was outed.

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After Welch’s comment, the floodgates opened. In late May, Ray Jenkins – not known for being a bold inquisitor – came as close as he could to asking Cohn if he and Schine had a homosexual relationship during the “we all have our best friends” portion of Cohn’s testimony. In June, Rave Magazine, a national gossip tabloid, reprinted Hank Greenspun’s explicit claim that Joe McCarthy was a homosexual from The Las Vegas Sun. Also in June, Senator Ralph Flanders of Vermont addressed the issue of
McCarthyism on the floor of the Senate, referring to McCarthy as “Dennis the Menace” and clearly referencing the rumors of homosexuality surrounding McCarthy and his staff.

But the committee has not yet dug into the real heart of the mystery. That mystery concerns the personal relationships of the Army private [Schine], the staff assistant [Cohn], and the Senator [McCarthy]... Then, there is the relationship of the staff assistant [Cohn] to the Army private [Schine]. It is natural that [Cohn] should wish to retain the services of an able collaborator, but [Cohn] seems to have an almost passionate anxiety to retain him. Why?

And, then, there is the Senator himself. At times he seems anxious to rid himself of the whole mess, and then again, at least in the presence of his assistant, he strongly supports the latter’s efforts to keep the Army private’s services available. Does the assistant have some hold on the Senator? Can it be that our Dennis, so effective in making trouble for his elders, has at last gotten into trouble himself? Does the committee plan to investigate the real issues at stake?78

That afternoon, an irate McCarthy used the hearings to respond to Flanders’ comments.

Returning to a favored tactic, McCarthy charged that Flanders was a religious and racial bigot.79 This time, however, McCarthy’s claims were largely ignored by the press and his fellow senators; they had become accustomed to his strategy of charging his opponents with racism. At least on Capitol Hill, the tide had fully turned against McCarthy and Cohn. Soon, almost every member of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations was calling for Cohn’s resignation, an action he finally took on July 20. In accepting Cohn’s letter, McCarthy claimed, “The resignation of Roy Cohn must bring great satisfaction to

79 “I have been very patient with the Senator from Vermont as he has engaged in his diatribes over the past number of weeks. I have felt that he is a nice, kind, old gentleman. I wondered whether this has been a result of senility or viciousness. In any case, we can’t let him continue to intimate that he does have information, without calling him. Mr. Chairman, I may say that in this statement on the Senate floor he does more than any man I have ever heard to inflame racial and religious bigotry. It is a vicious thing. It is a dishonest thing. He brings in the question of Jewish people, Protestant people, Catholic people. May I say, Mr. Chairman, that of the three top people of our committee, the chief counsel, the chief of staff, and myself, one happens to be Jewish, one happens to be Protestant, and one happens to be Catholic. All of us are very active in our particular faiths. This has interfered not even in the slightest in this exposure of Communists. I think that it is dishonest beyond words for a Senator to take the Senate floor and try to inject religious and racial bigotry into his effort to expose communism.” (Army-McCarthy Hearings, Part 47, Page 1827.)
the communists and fellow travelers. The smears and pressures to which he has been subjected make it clear that an effective anti-communist cannot long survive on the Washington scene. “80

Conclusion

On the day Joseph Welch called Roy Cohn a “fairy,” national news was dominated by the Army-McCarthy hearings. The New York Times and Washington Post ran front-page articles describing the previous day’s major developments in the hearings and reprinted large portions of the testimony inside the paper. Sidebar reports covered the hearings from seemingly every angle, from a list of notable persons in attendance to a music critic’s assessment of a pop song David Schine had written while in college.¹

But the true significance of the red scare in American daily life is better realized by looking at the day’s other news. The fear of communism had burrowed into nearly every portion of American life, including politics, culture, foreign relations, citizenship, entertainment, economics, sports, and the legal system. On April 30, the New York Times reported that 250,000 people were expected to march through the streets of Manhattan the following day. This parade was termed a “Loyalty March” by its organizers and intended to counter socialist-sponsored “May Day” events around the globe by demonstrating the participants’ love for the United States.² On the same day, President Eisenhower repeated his pledge that American troops would not be sent to Indochina to assist the French in fighting a communist insurgency, though the Belleau Wood, an American aircraft carrier

on loan to the French, did arrive in Indochina that day with a number of fighter planes.\(^3\)

The Paramount Theater on 43\(^{rd}\) Street and Broadway was showing, in 3D, *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, one of the 1950s “creature features” that some critics have seen as an expression of American fears of communism.\(^4\) Elsewhere in New York, a Brooklyn high school teacher was fired from his job after taking the 5\(^{th}\) Amendment in front of the McCarthy Committee and the Russian-born leader of the Fur and Leather-Workers Union was sentenced to one-to-three years in prison “for falsely swearing he had no ties to the Communist party.”\(^5\)

The April 30\(^{th}\) *New York Times* also included an article examining whether J. Robert Oppenheimer, head of the Manhattan Project, deserved to be suspended from his role as an advisor to the Atomic Energy Commission after he had been charged with associating with communists and lobbied against the building of a hydrogen bomb.\(^6\) At North Carolina’s Fort Bragg, the Army conducted war games, simulating attacks with “nerve gases and biological agents, as well as missiles and atomic weapons” during “Exercise Flash Burn, the largest Army maneuver since World War II.”\(^7\) In a night game on April 30, the Dodgers reclaimed first place by beating the Cincinnati Redlegs, a team that had changed its name from “the Reds” so as not to be associated with communism.\(^8\)

In a report released earlier that day, three doctors claimed that, “Radiation injury to

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4 Advertisements throughout the April 30 *New York Times* promote the film, which was presented in 3D. See also: Lois W. Banner. “The Creature from the Black Lagoon: Marilyn Monroe and Whiteness.” *Cinema Journal* 47.4 (Summer, 2008): 4-29.


pregnant women in an atomic bomb explosions apparently causes a high incidence of birth failures, or death and damage to the offspring … among the thirty pregnant women with major radiation injury, there were three miscarriages, four stillbirths, three babies who died within the first month of life, three who died with the first year of life and one who died at two and a half years. Four of the surviving sixteen children were mentally retarded.”

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It sounds obvious, but we must not underestimate the role of the red scare in McCarthyism. The most plausible explanation for McCarthyism, forwarded by numerous historians and other commentators, is that Joseph McCarthy and those like him (including Roy Cohn) were driven not by ideology but by a desire for power. Specifically in regards to Cohn, it is difficult to determine with any certainty whether he turned to anticommunism because he actually saw it as a major threat or because he viewed it as a route to increased power; this difficulty partially arises from the fact that Cohn was so adamant in his public comments concerning the communist threat. While the answer to why Cohn embraced conservative anticommunism is probably a mixture of both reasons, a number of factors point to the latter explanation as having more weight than the former.

That is: anticommunism was a means to an end. But the reason why Cohn and McCarthy’s power grabs worked so well is because they played to deeply-seeded fears

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10 This did not mean that Cohn, McCarthy, and other notable anticommunists of the immediate postwar era were not fearful of a global communist takeover. On the contrary, they probably believed that such a possibility existed, even if it was remote. Cohn even claimed that “Only a Miracle Can Save America from the Red Conspiracy” in a 1954 speech that he gave after leaving the McCarthy Committee, But in using such language to portray postwar communism as the greatest threat to American democracy since the Civil War, Cohn and McCarthy confirmed the fears Americans had harbored since the end of World War II and contributed to the development of what amounted to a national paranoia.
held by the American people. As the above news reports illustrate, this fear had manifested itself everywhere Americans turned.

Both men would have utilized any tool at their disposal in their quest for power; communism happened to be the perfect tool. Not only was the national fear of communism potent, it also predated Cohn and McCarthy’s arrival on the national scene. The post-World War II red scare had already produced the infamous expansion of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and its subsequent investigation into communism in Hollywood. Thus, both men knew anticommunism was a topic that promised a broad base of public support. They also knew that it had legs; Americans had been afraid of the communist-socialist boogeyman since its emergence from Europe in the mid-19th century and there was no reason to think that fear would subside anytime soon. Concurrently, the inertia driving this fear ensured that charges of communist sympathies difficult to disprove. Those who did attempt to counter charges of communism were easily labeled as unpatriotic, making it difficult for opponents of Cohn and McCarthy to attack them directly.

Particularly appealing for Cohn in his turn to anticommunism was the fact that by adopting such a position he associated himself with a group of individuals who were seen as patently masculine. Due to the lavender scare, homosexuals and communists became married in the American public imagination. According to historian David Johnson, “News outlets,” including two of the largest newspapers in Washington, the Post and Times-Herald, “assumed that homosexuals and communists were working together to undermine the government.”11 Thereby, any man who could position himself as opposed to communism was implicitly suggesting he was also against homosexuality. As a result,

anticommunists occupied a space in the American public consciousness that overlapped with the area dedicated to those opposed to homosexuality and made anticommunists seem more masculine by presenting them as the antithesis to effete queerness. In addition, these men were seen as explicitly patriotic because their attacks on communism made them defenders of communism’s antithesis, American democracy.

Cohn’s early experience as a federal prosecutor illustrates his explicit attempts to occupy this masculine, patriotic, anticommunist space, his actions during the Rosenberg trial being particularly noteworthy. As with the Hiss and Remington trials, the government’s case against the Rosenbergs depended less on hard evidence than on fostering the jury’s (and the nation’s) pre-existing belief that the accused were outsiders and thereby anti-American. The defendants in all three cases certainly had ties to communist sympathizers, but proving the accused’s guilt in the eyes of the law and of the American public demanded even more emphasis be put on each defendant’s outsider status. In the case of Hiss, this meant fostering rumors of the young bureaucrat’s homosexual tendencies and establishment, class-based effeminacy. The lack of overt masculinity and connections to leftist movements generally was what led to Remington’s conviction. In a similar manner, the Rosenbergs were felled by their sheer foreignness, particularly their Jewish heritage.

In each instance, Cohn worked to promote the otherness of the accused while concurrently juxtaposing himself with that otherness. In honing his public image, Cohn presented himself as a member of the dominant, accepted majority. Cohn was not a communist, he was a staunch anti-communist. Cohn was not a member of the establishment elite, he was a hardworking boy from the Bronx. Cohn was not effete, he
was decidedly masculine. Cohn was not foreign, he was quintessentially American.\textsuperscript{12}

Thanks to his ability control his public image with help from sympathetic newsmen, Cohn was able to create a public identity approximating the public’s expectations of what a powerful man \textit{should} be. The American public of the time fully embraced this portrayal because it squared with what they expected of their public figures, particularly those involved in the regulation of right and wrong.\textsuperscript{13}

What brought this illusion to an end was the increasingly negative press coverage Cohn received as he continued his climb up the federal bureaucracy, coverage that fostered rumors about Cohn’s character and personal life before culminating in the spectacle of the Army-McCarthy hearings, during which Cohn’s performance lent legitimacy to the rumors that had been circulating for years.

While Cohn, McCarthy, and Schine were chasing supposed communists and making headlines in both the “politics” and “gossip” sections of the newspaper, their opponents were busy publicizing contradictory accounts through their own channels. Ironically, one of the few aspects of Cohn’s public image that held in private – his excessively brash attitude – led to increased conflicts with powerful forces (including columnists such as Drew Pearson) and his old cabal of friends in the media could not protect him from the growing wave of anger directed his way. These accounts gained

\textsuperscript{12} The irony, of course, is that in actuality Cohn was all of these things (but for a communist), the effete son of Jewish, left-leaning parents who was grandfathered into his position of upper-class power through nepotism. A more evenhanded treatment of the Rosenberg case can be found in the second edition of Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton’s \textit{The Rosenberg File} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), which opens with a new introduction that includes new primary source material from recently-released Soviet and US government archives.

\textsuperscript{13} Cohn, like all public figures, was assumed to be straight. As Douglas Crimp illustrates, all people are presumed to be heterosexual, leading to constant “outings” that break the veil of heterosexuality (Douglas Crimp. “Right On, Girlfriend!” \textit{Fear of a Queer Planet}. Ed. Michael Warner. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 305). These assumptions obviously helped Cohn in his quest to be perceived as heterosexual.
legitimacy when the public could see Cohn and McCarthy live on television and judge the pair for themselves, without the buffer of the duo’s allies in the press.

The television broadcast of the hearings presented a wholly different image of Cohn to the American public. The young man about town who had appeared in newspaper photographs transformed into a bratty, conniving malcontent. What the public had previously seen as Cohn’s intense dedication to fighting communism by any means necessary morphed into an extreme, vulgar form of bullying. Even Cohn’s voice did not square with the public’s expectations.

Moreover, in the hearings Cohn ran headlong into the most masculine of American institutions, the Army. As a result, it was impossible for him to rely on his proven tactic of juxtaposing the opposition’s questionable masculinity against his own. As a result, Cohn’s bulletproof reputation as a machismo anticommunist was finally pierced. Given this breakdown of the public’s preconceived notions about Cohn, it was easy to entertain, if not fully embrace, the recent rumors concerning his homosexuality.

History remembers the “have you no decency” exchange as the instant when Joe McCarthy’s reign as one of the most feared and powerful men in America came to an end. In a similar sense, it is tempting to attribute the end of Cohn’s power to the pixie/fairy exchange, another memorable line by Joseph Welch. But just as McCarthy’s downfall cannot be attributed to one moment, neither can Cohn’s. It began like a rumor itself, a soft whisper that is slowly emboldened by the number of voices repeating it until a fever pitch is reached, by which time the rumor has grown, and mutated, and finally solidified. In the end, the truth of the rumor is less important than the underlying desires
driving it. By the time Cohn realized his colossal miscalculation in dealing with the Army, there was little he could do to halt the oncoming tide.

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On July 28, 1954, a week after his resignation, a farewell party was held for Roy Marcus Cohn in the ballroom at New York City’s Hotel Astor, coincidentally the same hotel at which he had first met Joseph McCarthy. The five-hour dinner was attended by over two thousand guests and was organized by Rabbi Benjamin Schultz. Schultz opened the proceedings by recognizing Cohn for “his battle for his God and country, which has inspired America,” and noted that he had to turn away six thousand additional requests for tickets to the dinner. Joe McCarthy was the night’s keynote speaker. A dozen plaques were presented to Cohn by various conservative-leaning organizations. Speakers included columnist George Sokolsky, conservative radio personality Fulton Lewis, chairman of the American Jewish League Against Communism Alfred Kohlberg, conservative writer William F. Buckley, and Fordham Law School Professor Godfrey Schmidt. On the dais sat numerous members of American conservative movement, including Judge Robert J. Morris, former Notre Dame Law School dean Clarence Manion, financier E. F. Hutton, and Robert Vogeler, an American businessman who had been imprisoned by Hungarian communists for seventeen months.

Both Cohn and McCarthy were treated to numerous standing ovations during the event. Rabbi Schultz was forced to ask attendees to refrain from rushing the stage. The

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15 Cook, Nightmare Decade, 535.
mainstream press, particularly *The New York Times*, was continually attacked by those who addressed the crowd. Cohn was cast as “the American Dreyfus,” a reference to the infamous turn-of-the-century French case that was shot-through with anti-Semitism. Another favored target was Senator Ralph Flanders, who had recently introduced a resolution calling for the censure of McCarthy.\(^{16}\)

The lengthy *New York Times* article reporting the event included a large photograph of a smiling Cohn and McCarthy, arms around each other as they wave to the crowd. Both men are wearing suits, and Cohn looks thin, confident, and dapper. Gone are the bags under his eyes and the shadows across his face. He even wears the hint of a smile to go along with his pocket square. He looks ready to his the town with a young actress, perhaps take her to the exclusive Cub Room at the Stork Club.\(^{17}\)

But when Cohn read the newspaper the day after the dinner, he probably failed to notice how good he looked. He probably failed to count the plaques he had received and he probably failed to read the kind quotes about him from his friends. He probably focused on the fact that a major article about him, the article on an event celebrating his achievements and praising him wholeheartedly, the first vaguely positive news coverage he had enjoyed in months, had been relegated to page nine.

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\(^{17}\) Ibid., 9.
A Note on Sources

Many of the books below, particularly those written by principals involved in the events described herein, toe the line between “primary” and “secondary” source. For example, Roy Cohn’s autobiography is truly an edited and extended oral history. Likewise, instead of relying on documentary sources, the journalist Nicholas von Hoffman’s penned his 1988 book *Citizen Cohn* from a collection of interviews he conducted with individuals who knew Cohn.

Secondary Sources

*Angels in America.* Dir. Mike Nichols. Avenue Pictures Productions, 2003. DVD.

*Citizen Cohn.* Dir. Frank Pierson. Breakheart Films, 1992. DVD.


*Point of Order*. Dir. Emile de Antonio. Point Films, 1964. DVD.


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**Primary Sources**


