The McCarthyism canard

by Michael Weiss

Russ Smith at Splice Today has a short but pungent squib against the ridiculous charge of “McCarthyism” being leveled at all types of Ground Zero Mosque opponents. He reserves particular scorn for Peter Beinart, a pundit who has lately undergone the transformation from ADA-style liberal hawk to reigning hall monitor of American Jewry:

“If Beinart’s going to raise the Joseph McCarthy specter, shouldn’t he at least provide some evidence of Congressional inquisitions of Muslim-Americans (which haven’t occurred under the presidencies of either Bush or Obama), blacklisted men and women in academia, entertainment or even those applying for a mortgage or credit card, or mass deportations borne of rampant Islamophobia?”

It would have been nice if Smith also took his scalpel to the nonsensical term “Islamophobia,” but perhaps he lives to splice another day. But there are other substantial historical ironies and discrepancies that intrude upon this facile comparison between McCarthyism and the mosque affair.

-- The shrewdest critiques of McCarthyism came from serious Cold Warriors such as Whittaker Chambers and Robert Conquest, who argued that by sensationalizing a world-historical struggle, McCarthy was in effect giving a free hand to Soviet propaganda. Which indeed he was: Even into the perestroika and glasnost decades, Stalinoid apologists could compare the Great Terror to Congressional Red-baiting without a trace of irony. Just to put this in perspective, between years 1937 and 1938, the Soviet Union arrested seven million people, executed one million more, and was complicit in the deaths of two million gulag inmates who perished either from starvation, medical neglect and/or extreme overwork. It would be gratifying to hear, as against so much multiculturalist patter, that the problem with the Ground Zero Mosque opponents is that they similarly confuse rather than make crucial distinctions in a long-term and necessary war. Is a slippery and self-promoting imam trying to be all things to all people a real “extremist” or just a nuisance? So far, Lawrence Wright has been one of the few students of global
jihadism to offer sensible commentary on the mosque controversy and yet even he cannot elevate himself above equating loud but non-violent demagogues such as Pamela Geller with professional head loppers and suicide bombers.

-- McCarthyism claimed no human lives and his “victims” have largely been sacralized in the popular imagination as martyrs even when defending them on civil libertarian grounds ought not to mean defending them on political grounds. One of these, Dalton Trumbo was an avowed Stalinist who even censored new editions of his 1939 antiwar novel, *Johnny Got His Gun*, when the Hitler-Stalin pact evaporated with the Wehrmacht’s invasion of Russia. Trumbo also blocked -- in a rather “McCarthyist” fashion, you might say -- the Hollywood adaptation of Arthur Koestler’s anti-Communist masterpiece, *Darkness at Noon*.

-- Indeed, Communists, fellow travelers and Soviet spies and agents of influence who eventually “broke” with Moscow faced much harsher public defamation campaigns in the international press and threats to their survival than did any blacklisted screenwriters. Former underground activist turned national whistle-blower Elizabeth Bentley was repaid for her service to national security by having her sexual escapades ventilated in the American media. KGB agent Ignace Reiss was murdered in Switzerland. KGB defector Walter Krivitsky committed suicide in a Washington, D.C. hotel room. The aforementioned Chambers, who narrow escaped the NKVD/GPU’s attempts to find him after he’d abandoned the underground, then had a pleasure of facing Alger Hiss’s rebarbative national defense team, which persists today, in spite of all evidence, in the masthead of *The Nation* magazine. Within the last few years, Trumbo has been the subject of a fawning documentary while Chambers’ much more fascinating and film-worthy career has so far failed to find studio backing.

-- So preoccupied is the intelligentsia with this brief but shameful episode in American history that McCarthyism has become its own statute in politically correct thought policing even to the point of absurdity. Angela Davis was thus described as an “activist” in the Stanford University newspaper when she came to speak at the California campus because to name her as the actual vice president of the CPUSA would have been “McCarthyist” of the student press. The Italian film *Il Postino* lost an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film because it dealt with Stalinist indoctrination and the Italian media complained to the *Los Angeles Times* that such subject matter was... you get the idea. In the same manner, Rauf’s unpleasant-to-cretinous views on everything from Israel’s right to exist to the Khomeinist concept of vilayet-i-faqih to the “root causes” of the September 11 mass murders are papered over or ignored by histrionic defenders of “tolerance,” even when those not necessarily opposed to the idea of a mosque close to Ground Zero mention them.

-- Former Soviet officials used to seriously suggest to Western interlocutors that McCarthy himself was a Russian spy. As cited earlier, he was a rhetorical or polemical scarecrow for distracting audiences from grave Soviet atrocities and, after all, didn’t he receive electoral help from the Wisconsin Communist Party in first unhorsing Robert LaFollette for the senatorship? It seems
unlikely in the extreme that Al Qaeda’s lieutenant corps has made the equivalent inquires of Osama bin Laden about Newt Gingrich, Abe Foxman and Sarah Palin’s true identities.

-- On balance, McCarthy underestimated the extent of Soviet espionage in the United States, particularly in the State Department. For a good summary of what the Russian archives and FBI Venona decrypts have turned up on the surprising level of Communist infiltration in the 1930s and 1940s, see The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West, by Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, and also Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America, by John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr and Alexander Vassiliev.

-- McCarthy’s ultimate downfall followed his stupid attempt to hunt suspected Communists in the U.S. military, the one precinct of state power that the Soviets put the least amount of effort in infiltrating. Being publicly abjured by General Eisenhower put an end to the senator’s overlong career. By contrast, the Islamist organization Hizb ut Tahrir believes that the easiest way to establish a worldwide caliphate is to take over militaries in Muslim countries from within and foment coups. In a U.S. context, the ascension of Major Nidal Malik Hasan would seem to tell against a paranoid fear of at least a strong attempt at this clandestine strategy.

-- The severest bullies in the present conflict are fanatical Muslims, not the United States or Western countries, which, if anything, have been far too lax and submissive in combating Islamism’s farsighted entryist agenda. If there is a pointlessness to the mosque controversy it is that it has turned a real cultural argument into a sentimental brief on cultural sensitivities. Last Spring, Ibn Warraq and I wrote a long essay for City Journal on how the Organization for the Islamic Conference (OIC) operated as a kind of sacred Comintern, working to criminalize “blasphemy” by instituting speech and literature codes in Western countries. It has so far had its most impressive success in controlling the largest voting bloc of the UN Human Rights Council, a body designed to protect internationally against abuses of human rights but has instead, at the OIC’s prompting, remained silent on genocide in Darfur, the crackdown of civil dissent in Iran and murder of homosexuals in Saudi Arabia. It has even re-written the mandate of its Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Speech such that this official must now inform on people saying critical or unflattering things about religion, with one in particular in mind. Meanwhile, Saudi sheiks engage in libel tourism and get embarrassing books about themselves banned from the shelves in Europe. Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, who has endowed two major Middle East academic centers at Harvard and Georgetown, sponsors tele-a-thons in Riyadh where clerics are permitted to spout the vilest incitements against Jews, secularists and Americans. Last I checked, it was Muslims claiming “offense” who have hauled their critics before actual government tribunals where verdicts rendered against the defendants can carry real financial and civil consequences. See Mark Steyn and Ezra Levant’s separate skirmishes with the “Human Rights Commissions” of Canada. If this is not a more accurate semantic updating of the McCarthyism card, then nothing is.
**Michael Weiss** is the Communications Director of the Henry Jackson Society, a London-based foreign policy think tank. He blogs (mostly about Russia and the Middle East) for *The Daily Telegraph*. 