

“The terror is right here in this room.”

A review of the George Clooney film, “Good Night and Good Luck”, which deals with the famous TV programme in 1954 by Journalist Ed Murrow, attacking the high priest of the House Un-American Activities Committee, Senator Joe McCarthy.

George Clooney’s Film, ‘Good Night and Good Luck’ has the feel of a documentary. Shot in black and white, its frames saturated with cigarette smoke, it gives a faithful representation of the 1950’s. It incorporates historical footage from the period. The film records events without spelling out a message in simplifying and exaggerated Hollywood style. The story centres on the conflict between journalist Ed Murrow and the ‘star’ of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Senator Joseph McCarthy. Although HUAC is associated with the name of McCarthy, it was founded in 1937 under the chairmanship of Martin Dies, to investigate “un-American and subversive” activities. Dies and other members of the HUAC were supporters of the Klu Klux Klan. Dies had spoken at several of their rallies. The Klan sent a telegram to Dies welcoming the formation of the HUAC. “Every true American, and that includes every Klansman, is behind you and your committee in its effort to turn the country back to the honest, freedom-loving, God-fearing American to whom it belongs.” HUAC member John S Wood said of the Klan: “The threats and intimidations of the Klan are an old American custom, like illegal whisky-making.” Hardly any wonder that demands to interrogate the leaders of the Klan were resisted. Eventually Ernest Adamson, the HUAC’s chief counsel, announced that: “The committee has decided that it lacks sufficient data on which to base a probe.” Whilst this traditional American organisation was left to its burnings and lynchings, the HUAC concentrated its attention on left wing radicals. In 1940 the passing of the Smith Act (Alien Registration Act) helped to create an anti-communist hysteria. The Act made it illegal for anyone in the United States to advocate, abet, or teach the desirability of overthrowing the government, ironic given the revolutionary origins of the USA. The law also required all alien residents in the United States over 14 years of age to file a comprehensive statement of their personal and occupational status and a record of their political beliefs. Within four months a total of 4,741,971 ‘aliens’ had been registered.

The Act was first used against the Socialist Workers Party, whose leaders were imprisoned under it. It was used again in 1948 against leaders of the Communist Party who were imprisoned for 5 years. One of the tactics of the prosecution was to ask questions about other party members. For refusal to discuss other members the defendants were thrown into gaol for contempt of court.

The idea that these organisations were planning to overthrow the government of the United States was absurd. Essentially they were persecuted because their political programmes were said to violate the Constitution.

The Hollywood Blacklist

In 1947 the HUAC began an investigation into the Hollywood Motion Picture Industry. In September 1947, the HUAC interviewed 41 people who were working in Hollywood. These people attended voluntarily and became known as “friendly witnesses”. During their interviews they named several people who they accused of holding left-wing views.

Bertolt Brecht, the emigrant German playwright, gave evidence and then left for East Germany. Ten others, known as the Hollywood Ten – Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Albert Maltz, Adrian Scott, Samuel Ornitz, Dalton Trumbo, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner Junior, John Howard Lawson and Alvah Bessie – refused to answer any questions. They were all found guilty of contempt of congress and each was sentenced to between six and twelve months in prison.

As a result of these hearings 320 people were placed on a Hollywood blacklist which prevented them from working in the industry. Anybody who refused to ‘name names’ suffered this fate. You did not have to have any connection with the Communist Party or left wing organisations to face dire consequences. You merely had to be at the wrong party with the wrong people, years before, to be implicated. McCarthy was fed material by Edgar Hoover’s FBI which was used as ‘evidence’ in the HUAC hearings. Many people did not work for years, or had to produce work by subterfuge. There was an exodus of people like the film maker

Joseph Losey and musician Larry Adler who came to Britain.

Arthur Miller, who wrote the play *The Crucible* as a kind of parable about the McCarthyite witch-hunt, wrote of the period:

“It was not only the rise of “McCarthyism” that moved me, but something that seemed more weird and mysterious. It was the fact that a political, objective, knowledgeable campaign from the far right was capable of creating not only a terror, but a new subjective reality, a veritable mystique which was gradually assuming even a holy resonance. The wonder of it all struck me that so practical and picayune a course, carried forward by such manifestly ridiculous men, should be capable of paralysing thought itself, and worse, and of causing to billow up such persuasive clouds of “mysterious” feelings within people. It was as if the whole country had been born anew, without a memory even of certain elemental decencies which, a year or two earlier no one would have imagined could be altered, let alone forgotten. Astounded I watched men pass me by without a nod whom I had known rather well for years; and again the astonishment was produced by my knowledge, which I could not give up, but the terror in these people was being knowingly planned and consciously engineered, and yet all they knew was terror.”

Witch-hunt in the labour movement

The witch-hunt did not just affect literary/artistic circles, of course. It was widespread, heavily impacting of union activists who were often witch-hunted not just by the state but by the anti-communist leaderships of the trades unions. In 1949 ‘communist dominated’ unions, with a membership of 1 million, were expelled from the CIO union federation. The UE (United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America), an independent union outside the AFL-CIO, which actually left before it was expelled, records that:

“Following the war, disagreements with the CIO leadership over the direction of the labor movement led to UE’s withdrawal from the CIO in 1949; within months, a CIO convention “expelled” UE and 10 other unions with a total member of one million workers. The CIO joined big business, the press and politicians in smearing UE as “communist-dominated;” the CIO chartered a new union (IUE) to take the union’s place. UE came under ferocious attack as the anti-communist hysteria intensified in the early 1950s. Attempts were made to officially brand the union as a “subversive organization” and to deport UE leader James Matles. UE shop leaders were fired and blacklisted, even jailed. Politicians, big business and the CIO worked closely together to destabilize UE; the union lost more than half its members.”

There were thousands upon thousands of personal tragedies as people lost their jobs, their livelihoods, and in some cases their lives.

The case of Milo Radulovich

The film’s story begins with Murrow’s team considering whether to run with a programme on Milo Radulovich, a Lieutenant who was thrown out of the Air Force Reserve owing to the supposedly radical views of his father and sister. He was told if he repudiated them he might get his commission back, but he refused.

The TV programme caused such an outcry that Radulovich was reinstated. Emboldened by this success, Murrow and his team decided to attack the high priest of HUAC, Senator McCarthy. The President of CBS eventually agreed to screen the programme, though Murrow and the Producer of his programme Fred Friendly had to stump up the \$3,000 advertising revenue lost as a result of the refusal of the corporate backers of the programme to be associated with an attack on McCarthy.

Murrow was told to drop anybody from his team who might have something in their past which McCarthy and his friends could pick up on. One of Murrow’s team offers to resign, but he is told not to. Joe Werschba, a member of the team records that:

“When we looked at the near-final cut of the McCarthy broadcast and the staff showed fear of putting it on the air, Murrow spoke a line that landed like a lash across our backs: “The terror is right here in this room.” And later: “No one man can terrorize a whole nation unless we are all his accomplices.” When someone asked what he would say on the McCarthy broadcast, he replied, “If none of us ever read a book that was ‘dangerous,’ nor had a friend who was ‘different,’ or never joined an organization that advocated ‘change,’ we

would all be just the kind of people Joe McCarthy wants.”

Murrow condemned McCarthy:

“The line between investigating and persecuting is a very fine one and the junior Senator from Wisconsin has stepped over it repeatedly. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason, if we dig deep into our own history and our doctrine and remember that we are not descended from fearful men, not men who feared to write, to speak, to associate, and to defend causes which were for the moment unpopular. This is no time for men who oppose Senator McCarthy’s methods to keep silent. We can deny our heritage and our history, but we cannot escape responsibility for the result.”

When the broadcast went out, there was a flood of supportive calls to CBS – 12,348 people phoned in comments about it, with a fifteen to one majority in Murrow’s favour. The sponsors also reported receiving over 4,000 letters, with the vast majority supporting Murrow’s stance. This did not stop the McCarthy crowd attempting to smear Murrow, but the tide was already turning against the witch-hunt which carried his name. The following morning the New York Times claimed that with the programme, “broadcasting recaptured its soul”.

But the witch-hunt wasn’t over yet. When the See It Now programme ended on 9th March, Don Hollenbeck, came on the air with the regular 11.00 p.m. news and said: “I want to associate myself with every word just spoken by Ed Murrow.” Hollenbeck was denounced in the pro-McCarthy press as a communist. After three months of smears, Hollenbeck, unable to take the strain, committed suicide.

Murrow offered McCarthy the right of reply. When he did, instead of dealing with the issues raised by Murrow he simply denounced him, calling him the “leader of the jackal pack”. Murrow, said McCarthy, had been a member of the ‘terrorist’ organisation the IWW (the International Workers of the World or Wobblies), and had links with ‘communist’ organisations. It was not a credible performance.

McCarthy was a hypocrite and a fraud. He was originally a supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. However, after failing to become the Democratic Party candidate for district attorney, he switched parties and became the Republican Party candidate in an election to become a circuit court judge. McCarthy shocked local officials by fighting a dirty campaign. This included publishing campaign literature that suggested that Werner was senile as well as guilty of financial corruption.

When the United States entered the Second World War McCarthy resigned as a circuit judge and joined the Marines. After the war McCarthy ran against Robert La Follette to become Republican candidate for the senate. As one of his biographers has pointed out, his campaign posters pictured him in “full fighting gear, with an aviator’s cap, and belt upon belt of machine gun ammunition wrapped around his bulky torso.” He claimed he had completed thirty-two missions when in fact he had a desk job and only flew in training exercises.

A mythical war record

In his campaign, McCarthy attacked La Follette for not enlisting during the war. He had been forty-six when Pearl Harbor had been bombed, and was in fact too old to join the armed services. McCarthy also claimed that La Follette had made huge profits from his investments while he (McCarthy) had been away ‘fighting’ for his country. The suggestion that La Follette had been guilty of war profiteering (his investments had in fact been in a radio station), was deeply damaging and McCarthy won by 207,935 to 202,557. La Follette, deeply hurt by the false claims made against him, retired from politics, and later committed suicide.

On his first day in the Senate, McCarthy called a press conference where he proposed a novel solution to a coal-strike that was taking place at the time. McCarthy called for John L. Lewis and the striking miners to be drafted into the Army. If the men still refused to mine the coal, McCarthy suggested they should be court-martialed for insubordination and shot.

McCarthy’s first years in the Senate were unimpressive. People also started coming forward claiming that he had lied about his war record. He was also being investigated for tax offences and for taking bribes from the

Pepsi-Cola Company. In May, 1950, afraid that he would be defeated in the next election, McCarthy held a meeting with some of his closest advisers and asked for suggestions on how he could retain his seat. Edmund Walsh, a Roman Catholic priest, came up with the idea that he should begin a campaign against communist subversives working in the Democratic administration.

Murrow's programme on McCarthy was a turning point. But Murrow did not defeat McCarthy single handed. Wide sections of American society were sick to death with the atmosphere of fear. Moreover, McCarthy's arrogance was unbounded. Not used to be challenged by people who were fearful of the consequences, his wild accusations were directed at the Democratic Party which he denounced as being 'soft' on communism. In a 1950 speech he said:

"The reason why we find ourselves in a position of impotency is not because the enemy has sent men to invade our shores, but rather because of the traitorous actions of those who have had all the benefits that the wealthiest nation on earth has had to offer – the finest homes, the finest college educations, and the finest jobs in Government we can give.

While I cannot take the time to name all the men in the State Department who have been named as members of a spy ring, I have here in my hand a list of 205 that were known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping the policy of the State Department."

McCarthy's next target was "anti-American" books in libraries. His researchers looked into the Overseas Library Program and discovered 30,000 books by "communists, pro-communists, former communists and anti anti-communists." After the publication of this list, these books were removed from the library shelves. Anybody who did not support the HUAC was deemed to be 'defending the communists'. Truman was portrayed as a dangerous liberal and McCarthy's campaign helped the Republican candidate, Dwight Eisenhower to win the presidential election in 1952.

In October, 1953, McCarthy began investigating 'communist infiltration' into the military. Attempts were made to discredit Robert Stevens, the Secretary of the Army. The President, Dwight Eisenhower, was furious and began moves to undermine McCarthy. The United States Army passed information about him to journalists who were known to be opposed to him. This included the news that McCarthy and Roy Cohn had abused congressional privilege by trying to prevent David Schine from being drafted. When that failed, it was claimed that Cohn tried to pressurize the Army into granting Schine special privileges. Drew Pearson published the story on 15th December, 1953.

McCarthy attacks the wrong targets

Whilst the US rulers were not worried about the consequences of the witch-hunt for ordinary people, McCarthy would not be allowed to take on the upper echelons of the ruling elite. Five days before Murrow's programme, under instruction from Eisenhower, Vice President Richard Nixon, made a speech attacking McCarthy (not by name, but the target was clear).

"Men who have in the past done effective work exposing Communists in this country have, by reckless talk and questionable methods, made themselves the issue rather than the cause they believe in so deeply." This was the context in which Murrow's programme was screened on March 9th 1954.

McCarthy's eventual fall from grace came as a result of the televised senate investigations into the United States Army. Leading politicians in both parties were embarrassed by McCarthy's hysterical performance and on 2nd December, 1954, a censure motion condemned his conduct by 67 votes to 22. He lost the chairmanship of the Government Committee on Operations of the Senate. He was now without a power base and the media lost interest in his claims of a communist conspiracy. As one journalist Willard Edwards pointed out: "Most reporters just refused to file McCarthy stories. And most papers would not have printed them anyway."

"Fat, comfortable and complacent"

The film begins and ends with a speech of Murrows to the Radio and Television Directors' Association. He

committed the sin of lecturing them on the dangers of TV being, as would be said today, dumbed down. He accused them of being “fat, comfortable, and complacent” and television for “being used to detract, delude, amuse and insulate us.”

In the film Murrow is shown interviewing Liberace, discussing the improbable prospect of finding the woman of his dreams. Ray Strathairn, with the merest raising of his eye brows gives us a look which asks, ‘what am I doing this rubbish for?’ The withdrawal of Murrow’s programme was a straw in the wind so far as the direction of US TV was concerned. His critical comments came back to bite him. His programme was replaced by a game show, ‘The \$64,000 dollar question’.

‘Good Night and Good Luck’ provides a snapshot of McCarthyism. At 90 minutes long this is inevitable. It would have needed double the time to give a deeper historical context. George Clooney has been criticised for suggesting that there are parallels between the McCarthy period and Bush’s America. It is certainly true that the witch-hunt of the McCarthy period was much deeper than the current one. However, if you are of Arab or Muslim origin in the USA, then the impact on you would be much greater than the rest of the population.

The film does not turn Murrow into a saint. It shows that he signed the ‘loyalty oath’ which CBS introduced, like many other companies, to show their fealty to the anti-communist campaign. What the film shows, however, and this is relevant for today’s situation, is that innocent people were persecuted and hounded, on the basis of innuendo and fabrications. So deep was the paranoia that many people were desperate to prove their loyalty, though guilty of nothing. Such a mentality continues to this day. Clooney rightly excoriates the Democrats who say they were ‘misled’ over WMD. As he points out they supported the war on Iraq because they were desperate not to be faced with the charge of being ‘un-American’ and lacking in ‘patriotism’. Bush told us all, “you are either with us or with the terrorists”. McCarthy told people dragged before the HUAC, if you don’t name names you are against us; you are with the HUAC or against it. ‘Good Night and Good Luck’ is a film well worth seeing and may well motivate people who are not acquainted with McCarthyism to look at the rich literature about it.

To read about McCarthyism go to:

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAmccarthyism.htm>

To listen to a Murrow broadcast on McCarthy and a broadcast from Buchenwald concentration camp go to:

<http://www.otr.com/murrow.html>

Martin Wicks
May 24th 2006