tation of hysterical public fears, and the reckless persecution of innocent or relatively harmless dissidents. Critics used the term in the sense of witch-hunting or demagoguery, and, as such, McCarthyism deserved utter repudiation.

Only after McCarthy's career had crashed in flames did the Left succeed in attaching the "McCarthyite" label to the whole anti-Communist enterprise, gaining a mighty historical victory in the process. Any cause that could be linked to McCarthy—spuriously or otherwise—was, by definition, wrong. The suggestion that Communists might have been highly placed in the federal government (as in fact they were) was deemed McCarthyism. The suggestion that Julius Rosenberg, Alger Hiss, and others were Soviet spies was deemed McCarthyism (though spies they were). The notion that the Soviet Union was operating hundreds of spies on American soil (as has now been confirmed beyond any doubt) was deemed McCarthyism. The distortions go on and on—even to suggest that the government was targeting authentic Communists rather than well-meaning liberals was "McCarthyism."

In short, to label the whole anti-Communist movement as "McCarthyism" is to accept a highly loaded and inaccurate picture of the era, as if all anti-Communists were paranoid "witch-hunters"—and Schrecker even uses the disreputable "witch-hunt" language herself. She knows perfectly well the realities of the Communist presence and the whole pernicious mythology that is associated with the language of McCarthyism. Why, then, does she perpetuate the McCarthyism myth?


Reviewed by Steven Aftergood, Federation of American Scientists

Shortly after the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) voted in 1954 to deny reinstatement of J. Robert Oppenheimer’s security clearance in the wake of a tumultuous four-week hearing, a reporter asked the eminent physicist for his assessment of the AEC decision against him. “People will study the record of this case and reach their own conclusions,” Oppenheimer replied. “I think there is something to be learned from it.” Indeed there is. The Oppenheimer case was the very template of an official security investigation run amok, in which the full weight of the government security bureaucracy was brought to bear against a single individual on a questionable and shifting pretext, the norms of due process were discarded, and an absurd conclusion was reached: that Oppenheimer, the man who did more than anyone else to ensure the success of the U.S. nuclear weapons program, was unfit to hold a security clearance.

The transcript of the proceeding is a dark jewel of many facets. It is, to begin with, an exceptionally engaging legal drama, featuring a resplendent cast of characters who come to praise or to bury Oppenheimer. “It is only the great sinners who become the great saints,” observed George F. Kennan (p. 147), when urging the AEC Person-
nel Security Board to place Oppenheimer’s past radical associations and security infractions in perspective. Perhaps the most famous portion of the hearing was the damning testimony of Edward Teller, who said “I would like to see the vital interests of this country in hands which I understand better, and therefore trust more” (p. 253). Yet even Teller did not believe that there was any security basis for denying his old friend and adversary a clearance: “Dr. Oppenheimer’s character is such that he would not knowingly and willingly do anything that is designed to endanger the safety of this country” (p. 264).

One is driven inescapably to the conclusion that the entire proceeding was only nominally about Oppenheimer’s fitness to handle classified information. Rather, despite the Board’s insistence to the contrary, it seems clear that security clearance procedures were employed in this case to regulate the boundaries of expert opinion, especially opinion about the future of the U.S. nuclear weapons program.

Beyond the particulars of Oppenheimer’s record, the transcript of the proceeding is a rich primary source on the wartime history of the nuclear bomb program, the scientific and political controversy over the development of the hydrogen bomb, the elements of U.S. military strategy in the early Cold War, the role of scientific advisers in the policy process, and of course the nature and function of the personnel security system during the McCarthy era. Richard Polenberg’s new edition of the Oppenheimer hearing transcript presents approximately one-quarter of the original text. It includes most of the testimony from the most significant witnesses but excludes various procedural digressions and other material deemed secondary. The Polenberg edition has a number of important virtues, beginning with the fact that it brings this classic back into print, three decades after the original 1954 edition was reprinted by MIT Press in 1971. Whereas the original volume extended over a thousand pages of tiny, densely packed type and was nearly unreadable for more than a few pages at a time, the new edition is handsomely produced with a decently sized typeface and is a pleasure to read.

Polenberg also provides a helpful introduction to orient readers who have forgotten or never knew the historical context of the proceeding, and he offers a capsule interpretation of its larger meaning. Naturally, this brief survey cannot substitute for the kind of full-scale exegesis of the hearing memorably provided by Philip M. Stern in his 1969 book The Oppenheimer Case: Security on Trial (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), which is cited by Polenberg. Polenberg’s abridged text is otherwise faithful to the original, even to the point of preserving obvious errors of syntax in the transcription. (The new edition does not include the passage on p. 85 of the original, noted with amusement by Stern, in which Oppenheimer’s remark that “you can’t make an omelet rise twice” was transcribed as “you can’t make an anomalous rise twice.”) Regrettably, the new edition also necessarily reflects the original 1954 deletions of classified information, which in most cases has still not been declassified.

Perhaps inevitably, Polenberg has editorially smoothed some of the rough edges of the proceeding. The original transcript, in all of its rambling bulk, was fundamentally confusing, and left an impression of incoherence. All parties would later cite portions of it in defense of their own positions. By cutting large passages and inserting
explanatory notes at the beginning of each major section of testimony, Polenberg’s edition endows the proceeding with a sharper focus than it actually had and eliminates some of its ambiguity. As a result, readers may now understand more clearly how Oppenheimer was placed at a disadvantage. But the same readers may find it even harder to understand how the AEC Personnel Security Board could possibly have reached its adverse conclusion in good faith.


Reviewed by Laura McEnaney, Whittier College

Kenneth Rose’s One Nation Underground explores U.S. nuclear history from the bottom up—literally. He examines the fallout shelter not as Cold War kitsch but as Cold War artifact, a subterranean physical space in which policymakers and citizens alike played out their apocalyptic fears, political interests, and moral quandaries. Rose helps us understand that in the anxious years of the Berlin and Cuban missile crises, the fallout shelter was less a real protective device than a malleable metaphor about the U.S. nuclear predicament. “Like few other icons,” Rose argues, “the fallout shelter was a conundrum, a riddle whose meaning was always just beyond reach” (p. 213). Rose tries to solve this riddle by excavating the most important political, scientific, and popular cultural debates of the 1950s and 1960s, the decades in which Americans had to reconcile themselves to the real possibility of nuclear war.

Rose begins his narrative by reviewing the development of Cold War diplomacy and nuclear defense policies in the years following World War Two. Some of this is familiar territory, but it provides important background material for the general reader. In line with the findings of recent scholarship on the nuclear age, Rose shows that scientific research, congressional investigation, and bureaucratic expansion proceeded apace ten years after Hiroshima, but none of it yielded a coherent civil defense program. Neither the Truman nor the Eisenhower administration could resolve the basic technological or logistical problems: Blast shelters could not spare people from increasingly powerful bombs, and evacuation from city to suburb to countryside was proven a failure with each trial run. By 1955 the revelation that radioactive fallout could not be safely contained in the blast area exposed the futility of government proposals for blast shelters and evacuation. Rose pointedly reminds readers of some of the ridiculous advice disseminated after this revelation: Val Peterson, the head of the U.S. civil defense agency, proposed that fleeing urbanites could escape fallout exposure by building a roadside trench, covering it with tar paper, and huddling underneath until the air cleared (p. 31).

One Nation Underground turns from the fanciful scenarios of defense planners to the disaster plots of postwar multimedia, and this purposeful segue reveals that the producers of nuclear-age fiction, comic books, and B movies shared the doomsday