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A Cautionary Tale

By Steve Horton

Arthur Miller is best known for *Death of a Salesman*. And rightly so. But the University of Michigan graduate wrote other highly-regarded dramas during his life—not least of which was *The Crucible*, a courageous piece of work.

The play gave a fictionalized account of a real-life event—the Witch Trials that occurred in Salem, Massachusetts from February 1692 to May 1693. A check of the historical record noted that during that time frame over two hundred people were of accused of witchcraft, with thirty found guilty of this capital crime. Of those convicted, nineteen were executed by hanging—fourteen women and five men. Another man was pressed to death for refusing to plead, and at least five people died in jail.

The accusations and ensuing trials, which spread from Salem to nearby towns, is described as “one of Colonial America’s most notorious cases of mass hysteria” and

“a cautionary tale about the dangers of isolationism, religious extremism, false accusations, and lapses in due process.”

The Massachusetts Bay Colony in those early years was a theocracy, the church and state being essentially one in the same. Within this social and governmental framework, there was only the choice between obeying God (i.e. the church and its laws) or the forces of darkness and evil. An in-between approach didn't cut it.

Also, the event was not that far removed from when the Pilgrims had landed at Plymouth Rock some seventy years earlier, opening up this area of the New World for English settlement. Which happened, with thousands of Puritans immigrating to the colony over the next few decades. Yet, despite the quick arrival of European customs to this new land, there were still plenty of hardships and dangers. For people living in the more remote towns, the wild and scary frontier was just over the hill and in the dark recesses of the vast forest.

And it was not necessarily an unfounded fear. The armed conflict between the colonials and the indigenous inhabitants of New England, known as King Phillip's War, had been fought less than twenty years earlier. The memory of that bloodshed and threat was still fresh.

Along with all of that, people believed that witches existed as agents of Satan and that they could corrupt or possess others unless stopped. To stop them, they had to be discovered and forced to confess.

I used the word ‘courageous’ because Miller offered this story in 1953 during the height of McCarthyism and the Red Scare (as in fear of communism).

It didn’t take a Harvard lawyer or even a University of Michigan graduate to see that *The Crucible* was an allegory of what was then happening in the United States, with its message about intolerance, fear of the unknown, false accusations, along with confessions forced by the threat of death or imprisonment, plus the widening of the net by offering leniency to the accused if they named others complicit in the crime.

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James ‘Scotty’ Reston, who served as a national columnist, Washington bureau chief, and executive editor during his illustrious career with the *New York Times*, had a chapter on Joseph McCarthy in his memoir *Deadline*; McCarthy being the Republican senator from Wisconsin who inspired the term McCarthyism.

Both men have passed. McCarthy died in 1957 at age 48, not long after his fall from grace that included being censured by the U.S. Senate for his tactics and an accompanying loss of popular support, while Reston was 86 when he died in 1995.

But the history remains.

As Reston wrote, “If his malevolent influence had died with him, he would probably have been forgotten like many other two-bit demagogues of the past, but... traces of McCarthyism live on like an old infection.”

McCarthyism, as it's come to be defined, was a period of anti-communist hysteria whipped up by Senator Joe McCarthy in the early 1950s, with thousands of Americans accused of communist involvement or sympathies; many of these accusations made without substantive evidence, due process, or any right of reply.”

McCarthy did not invent anti-communism out of whole cloth. A fear of this political and economic system had been around since Lenin and his fellow Bolsheviks seized control of Russia in the October Revolution of 1919, ebbing and flowing in the American body politic over the ensuing years. But in the late 1940s, events conspired to greatly heighten the concern.

These included the Soviet Union clamping an Iron Curtain across Eastern Europe and turning those nations into satellites, threats to Greece of a Communist takeover, the fall of China to Mao Tse Tung and his Red army, the allegation that Alger Hiss (a State Department official) had spied for the Soviet Union in the 1930s, the Soviets obtaining the atomic bomb, and the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg who were convicted of conspiring to pass those U.S. atomic secrets to the Soviets.

Also, other Republicans had found electoral success by accusing liberal Democrats of being “soft on communism” or, worst yet, “dupes” or even “fellow travelers.” But by design or happenstance, McCarthy became the poster child for the movement by claiming that Communists had infiltrated the American government and were influencing foreign policy.

His first allegation came in early 1950 when he stated during a speech that there were over 200 ‘security risks’ at the State Department and that the Truman Administration had ignored this situation. While this charge was apparently not a new one and had been discounted, it made headlines and he was off and running.

Reston pointed out that McCarthy always claimed he had the evidence backing his accusations, but never got around to producing it. “He knew that big lies produced big headlines,” Reston said. “He also knew that most newspapers would print almost any outrageous charge a United States senator made in public, provided he put his name to it, and he counted on the fact that newspapers didn’t like to print denials of charges from anonymous sources.”

Whatever his motives—whether he was an opportunist or really believed in what he said, albeit without caring a whit about methods he used or who he hurt—the message resonated with a lot of Americans, tapping into a combination of fear, animosity, and that human appetite for sensation.

For the next few years, the senator rode roughshod over opponents and, just as effectively, silenced others who disapproved of his tactics—the latter taking the path of caution and political expediency. Of greater consequence, he emboldened others to follow his path.

The House Committee on Un-American Activities, which had been around long before McCarthy, began looking into other areas, besides government, for Communist influence or infiltration, with the entertainment industry becoming a prime target. Witnesses were brought before the committee, questioned about past or present activities, their political beliefs, and possible association with others suspected of being a communist or a communist sympathizer. A favorite tactic of the committee was to ask the accused to “name others” or face contempt of Congress and possible imprisonment.

It was observing his friends and fellow artists being paraded before this committee, their livelihoods put in jeopardy, or seeing them turn stool pigeon to avoid punishment that prompted Miller to write *The Crucible*. In retaliation, he was unable to obtain a passport to leave the country to see the British production of the play and was later hauled before the committee and questioned about his beliefs and past associations. When asked for a list of names, he declined and was subsequently convicted of contempt and sentenced to jail. However, that sentence was overturned.

But other victims of McCarthyism had less fortunate outcomes. They found their careers ruined, being either fired or blacklisted, their reputations destroyed, and their lives left in shambles. Some, faced with this bleak situation, took their lives.

The ideals of free speech, free association, freedom of thought and belief, and individual rights including due process were likewise under siege from this onslaught.

While a concern of subversives infiltrating the government, coupled with Soviet expansion, might seem legitimate enough at face value, the movement had spun out of control, turning into a witch hunt. Hence, Miller's comparison through the tool of theater.

McCarthy finally went too far when he took on the U.S. Army during a Senate committee hearing in 1954—a measure of hubris considering that the country was less than a decade from the end of World War II, had just gone through the Korean Conflict, and one would assume that most of those veterans and their families held a loyalty towards this branch of the service.

It was during this hearing that the senator made an attempt at character assassination of a young man on the Army's legal team to gain the upper hand. The tactic, one he often used, prompted the famous rebuke that marked the start of McCarthy's decline in public and political support... "Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?"

The Senate censure came shortly afterwards

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Human nature, despite our many progresses in knowledge and understanding, despite our toy land of technological marvels, is what it is. Fear, animosity, and an appetite for sensation are still very much around.

As many observers have noted, we're living in contentious times. The partisan divide is deep, the differing cultural outlooks profound, and the sound-and-fury often deafening.

In the midst of a presidential campaign, when everything gets amplified and exaggerated, remedying the situation seems an overwhelming and insurmountable undertaking.

Still, Americans of good faith and firm resolve need to come together, bridge the divisions, find common ground, and bring back a more civil discourse. Yes, I know, all of that Sunday School stuff.

The hallmark of American greatness has been people setting aside their differences, their individual pursuits, and even their self-interest to come together in a co-operative fashion, to rally around a higher cause, and find the bright path forward.

This nation, we Americans, have been in the crucible before; faced severe tests and trials in our past, dealt with challenges and adversities that tested our resolve, but more importantly our character and ideals. In our seemingly darkest moments, we've turned to follow a guiding light.

We've preserved then. We can do so again.

Steve Horton is a mid-Michigan journalist and editor-publisher of the Fowlerville News & Views. If you'd like to have Horton's Michigan Notebook sent directly to your email In-Box, send your email address to hortonnotebook@gmail.com