



Gossip Men: J. Edgar Hoover, Joe McCarthy, Roy Cohn, and the Politics of Insinuation

Christopher M. Elias

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In his informative, entertaining history book, *Gossip Men*, Christopher M. Elias tracks the surveillance state of the latter half of the twentieth century to its roots in both a culture of gossip and insinuation, and in a kind of performative masculinity practiced by some of the era's key authoritarian figures.

Elias focuses on three men: J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation; Joseph McCarthy, the Republican Wisconsin senator whose name has become synonymous with red-baiting witch hunts; and Roy Cohn, the lawyer and McCarthy ally who made his name with the prosecution of the Rosenbergs. He walks through each man's career, tying them to themes of gossip—both innuendo that they spread, and that was spread about them and their sexuality. He shows that each tried to present himself as an archetypal male authority and makes a compelling case that the trio's own insecurities manifested in their need to reveal others' secrets, or to use untrue rumors to ruin lives.

Elias addresses how Hoover's upbringing influenced his rise to power: he witnessed the promotion of "G-man" to the status of a modern hero, and saw movies glorifying FBI agents, until he himself became a prominent persona in that world. He also details McCarthy's use of innuendo in his political races: he tried to come across as a Midwestern tough guy, and used his nonexistent list of prominent communists as a tool to ruin numerous lives. He shows how Cohn hid his sexuality by cultivating an image based on his habit of dating famous women.

Though these men's public images ultimately unraveled, they left the United States with a surveillance legacy because of their gossip-driven persecutions. Such revelations make *Gossip Men* an important, novel history text.

JEFF FLEISCHER (May / June 2021)

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