



Cohn, Roy (1927-1986)

by Randolph Baxter

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Roy Cohn in 1964.
Photograph by Herman Hiller.
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Roy Cohn rose to fame as a tenacious prosecutor of suspected Communists during the McCarthy witch hunts of the 1950s, the principal victims of which were homosexual men. Although he led an extravagantly gay lifestyle during the 1970s, replete with an entourage of handsome "assistants," he denied his homosexuality even as he lay dying of AIDS.

Born Roy Marcus Cohn on February 20, 1927, he was the only child of a respected, New York City judge and a doting mother, both Jewish liberal-Democrats. Cohn completed his law degree from Columbia University at the age of twenty and was appointed the youngest-ever Assistant United States Attorney at age 21.

Cohn soon began specializing in prosecuting suspected Communist Party leaders and spies. He first earned national fame in the early 1950s, having contributed to the successful prosecutions of accused Soviet spies William Remington, Julian and Ethel Rosenberg, and Owen Lattimore.

The ambitious Cohn became infamous for his tactics of back-room harassment, threat, and intimidation. Many of his cases, observers thought, were tainted with corrupt testimony. Cohn's reputation for ruthlessness ultimately contributed to his appointment in 1953 as chief counsel to the investigations subcommittee of Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy, who was launching a wide-ranging purge of leftists and "sexual deviants" from federal employment.

Cohn became the target of anti-gay rumor in March 1953. In a tour of U.S. embassies in Europe at the behest of McCarthy, Cohn drew the mockery of reporters who insinuated that he enjoyed overly close ties with his unpaid assistant, G. David Schine (1927-1996), who--at Cohn's request--had been placed on Army leave to serve on McCarthy's subcommittee. Tall, rich, and suave, the Harvard-educated (and heterosexual) Schine contrasted starkly with the short, physically undistinguished, and caustic Cohn.

Cohn's friendship with Schine contributed to McCarthy's censure the following year. During an inquiry into Communism and homosexuality in the military, Cohn used a doctored photo of Schine and an Army general to demonstrate the Army's approval of Cohn's bullying attempts to get Schine permanently assigned to McCarthy's committee. Army lawyers insinuated McCarthy's homosexuality by suggesting that a "pixie"--a close relative of a fairy"--was responsible for altering the photo.

After the nationally televised Army-McCarthy hearings, which culminated in the Senator's censure, Cohn left for private practice, while Schine was reassigned to active duty, in Alaska.

Cohn soon became a minor star in New York's legal and night-club scenes. Known primarily as a hatchet-man for right-wing politicians and organizations, he acquired a client list that included figures associated with the New York Mafia, the Roman Catholic archbishop of New York, and Donald Trump. A regular at Studio 54 during its heyday, he maintained friendships with such members of the glitterati as Calvin Klein, Bianca Jagger, and Andy Warhol.

During his checkered legal career, he was several times reprimanded for unethical conduct and sued by disgruntled clients. On three occasions he was tried on various charges, including fraud, but was acquitted. He was ultimately disbarred for financial and ethical improprieties.

Cohn never acknowledged his homosexuality, even as he openly frequented gay bars in the 1970s. In Tony Kushner's award-winning *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes--Part One, Millennium Approaches* (1991), Cohn is memorably depicted in terms of the dilemma faced by closeted gay men who define themselves as "real men" (penetrative, "dominant"), yet loathe effeminacy (and, therefore, homosexuality) as "weak." As his character explains to a doctor who has just told him of his seropositive status, he is "a heterosexual man" who just happens to "fuck around with guys."

Cohn died of AIDS complications on July 22, 1986.

An exasperating yet fascinating person, Roy Cohn can be seen as a deeply twisted man who failed his prodigious gifts. He might also be seen as a tragic figure, a complicit victim of the anti-liberal, anti-gay ideology of his era, an ideology that he--like so many others--thoroughly internalized.

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About the Author

Randolph W. Baxter studied European History at the University of California, Berkeley and U. S. foreign policy and Third World security at Columbia University before completing his Ph.D. in History at the University of California, Irvine. His dissertation on "*Eradicating This Menace: Homophobia and Anti-Communism in Congress, 1947-1954*" is excerpted in "Homo-Hunting in the Early Cold War: Senator Kenneth Wherry and the Homophobic Side of McCarthyism" in *Nebraska History*. Baxter participated in "ex-gay" Christian ministries from 1983 to 1988, and since 1993 has been active in Evangelicals Concerned with Reconciliation, a glbtq Christian organization.