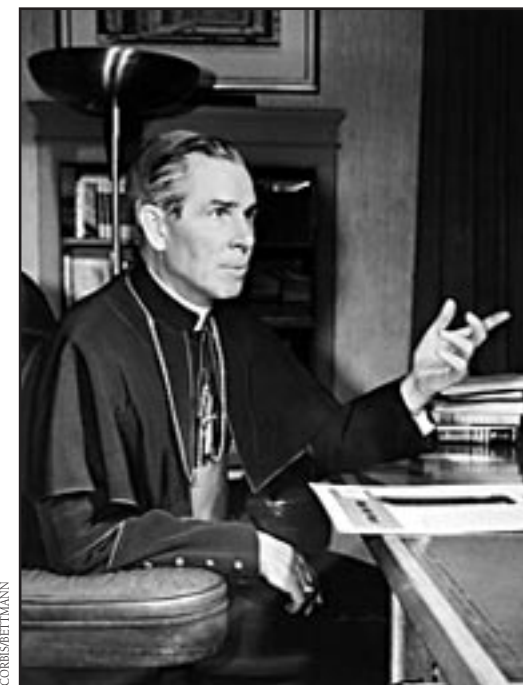


Gentleman Author

Biographer of Chester Arthur, Joe McCarthy and JFK turns attention to Bishop Fulton Sheen

Story by **Joseph Hanneman** • Photos by **Charles S. Vallone**



Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen

President John F. Kennedy once expressed disgust for historians, exclaiming: “Those bastards. They’re always there with their pencils out.”

No doubt the assassinated 35th president would have saved even stronger invective for historian Thomas C. Reeves, who did much to dismantle Kennedy’s carefully crafted image in his best-selling 1991 biography, “A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy.”

While Reeves might argue with Kennedy’s description of his vocation, he relishes the role of the man with the sharp pencil, playing historical detective to tell fair, full and accurate stories about some of American history’s most celebrated people. ►

“That’s what it’s all about — accuracy,” said Reeves, 62, since 1970 a professor of history at UW-Parkside and author of six major books. “It’s all about accuracy. There are people who will laugh at you for going into details like this, but damn it, you must if you want to tell the whole story.”

TV’s Popular Preacher

After writing pioneering biographies of President Chester A. Arthur and Red-hunting U.S. Sen Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin, and the popular and controversial book on the character of JFK, Reeves is busy researching his next book: on 1950s television preacher Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen.

Like Reeves’ previous books, the Sheen biography will be a first. No one had written comprehensive biographies of Arthur or McCarthy, and Reeves’ book on JFK peeled more veneer off the Camelot image. No one has ever written a biography of Sheen, perhaps the best known American cleric of his generation.

“It makes no sense, to have a figure who was that prominent for so long, and a pioneer in television, to have no biography. It’s really shocking,” he said.

Sheen, a longtime professor of philosophy at the Catholic University of America and later auxiliary bishop of New York, is best known for his “Life is Worth Living” television series, which aired from 1952 to 1957.

Millions of Americans still remember

“ They put him on Tuesday night opposite Milton Berle, who was Mr. Television, and it wasn’t long before he was beating him in the ratings. ”

Sheen speaking common sense about Christian matters of faith during the half-hour program. The show, which aired on the DuMont Television Network, regularly drew 10 million viewers. Sheen won a 1952 Emmy award for most outstanding television personality, during a year when “I Love Lucy,” “What’s My Line?” and “Dragnet” were popular shows.

“They put him on Tuesday night, opposite Milton Berle, who was Mr. Television,” Reeves said. “And it wasn’t long before Sheen was beating him in the ratings. Then they put Frank Sinatra on opposite him, and he beat Frank Sinatra.

“Imagine an America that would watch a man dressed in full bishop’s regalia — let alone a Catholic — lecturing for a half-hour,” Reeves said. “There has never been a speaker like that, to my knowledge.”

With a grant from the Milwaukee-based Bradley Foundation, Reeves spent the past year doing research on Sheen. The book must be finished in two years. It will be published by the new Encounter Press, an offshoot of the Bradley Foundation.

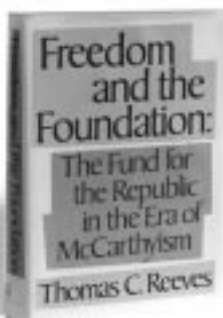
Aside from interviewing relatives and former associates of Sheen, Reeves is reading the prelate’s 68 books and reviewing his radio and television programs. Reeves described the El Paso, Ill.-born priest as “very outspoken.”

“He attacked psychiatry. He attacked Freudianism. He was responsible for a number of very prominent converts,” Reeves said.

Reeves is researching Catholicism to help with the Sheen biography. Reeves converted to Catholicism from Protestantism in 1997, a year after writing “The Empty Church: the Suicide of Liberal Christianity.” The book argued that mainline Protestant churches have abandoned orthodox Christianity and yielded to liberal interest groups, dumbing down Christian tradition.

Reeves said the book “showed me the futility of what I was in. I persuaded myself, or the book persuaded me (to convert). I had to do something.”

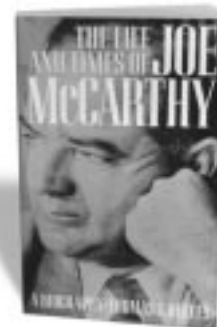
Another major Reeves project, “20th Century America: A Brief History,” will be published in November by Oxford Press.



“Freedom and the Foundation: the Fund for the Republic in the Era of McCarthyism,” (Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 355 pages.



“Gentleman Boss: The Life of Chester Alan Arthur,” (Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 500 pages.



“The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy: A Biography,” (Stein and Day, 1982), 819 pages. Selection of the Book of the Month Club.

The book covers the Gilded Age of the late 19th century through the Clinton impeachment in 1998, and NATO-led attacks on Kosovo in 1999. Reeves originally signed the contract for the book in 1978.

"It was very, very hard to do," Reeves said. "It's easy to be long. It's murder to be brief. I had only 30 photographs to choose."

With the year 2000 approaching, Reeves said the publisher believes the book will do well when released in hardback later this year.

Long Publishing Career

The new books are but the latest credentials in Reeves' long publishing career. It has been a long road from Reeves' youth in blue-collar Tacoma, Wash. Growing up, "the reading material consisted of Reader's Digest in the bathroom," he recalled.

Reeves caught the fever for research and writing in college and as a graduate student at the University of Washington. The first member of the Reeves family to even finish high school, Reeves discovered his calling in history.

"It was just a natural outgrowth of what I guess I was made to do," he said.

Writing political biography can be very tough, especially if sources are uncooperative or documents elusive or missing.

It took Reeves "three and a half years of pursuit" before McCarthy's widow, Jean,

would consent to an interview for "The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy: A Biography," published in 1982. "I'm the only one who ever interviewed her," said Reeves of the late Mrs. McCarthy, who died two years prior to publication of his book.

McCarthy's widow had donated some of the senator's papers to Marquette University, but ordered them sealed.

Fresh View on McCarthy

The portrait that emerged of McCarthy was vastly different than the "monster from the back woods" portrayed in most historical texts. It is the definitive work on McCarthy — historian Stephen Ambrose called it "masterful" — and shows sides of the anti-communist zealot that many would find surprising.

For "Gentleman Boss: The Life of Chester Alan Arthur," published in 1975, Reeves tracked down the late president's son-in-law, who was 99 and living in upstate New York. "He had a box full of clippings, newspaper clippings that Arthur's sisters had left," Reeves said. The president's grandson also provided boxes of papers never before discovered. That material was crucial, because a dying Arthur ordered his papers burned in 1886.

For his study of JFK, Reeves encountered what he describes as a cover-up and conspiracy to hide the truth about the late president. The John F. Kennedy Library in Boston was of little help, and



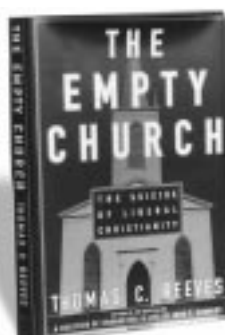
the family forbids access to valuable papers.

"They've just denied access to everyone but their buddies," Reeves said. "You have to be family approved and you have to submit your manuscript to them before they'll give you anything."

The Kennedy family and sympathetic historians have continued a longstanding



"A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy," (Free Press, 1991), 510 pages. New York Times bestseller for 12 weeks.



"The Empty Church: the Suicide of Liberal Christianity," (Free Press, 1996), 276 pages.



"20th Century America: A Brief History," (Oxford Press, 1999). Scheduled for November release.

M'GARTHY INSISTS
TRUMAN OUST REDSPRESIDENT GARFIELD SHOT BY
AN ASSASSIN.KENNEDY PLEDGES
SPACE ADVANCES;Gen. Reber Asserts Cohn
Put Pressure on Him to
Commission Schine

G.R.N.

P
1015

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES — Reeves calls his JFK book “a great piece of detective work” to “cut through the layers of deliberate falsification.”

whitewash of the truth about the president, according to Reeves. “A Question of Character” debunks many JFK myths and shows how Kennedy’s lack of a moral core led to incredibly reckless behavior and affected his policies and presidency.

“That was a wonderful piece of detective work, to cut through the layers of nonsense and deliberate falsification,” he said. “I think to this day it’s an in-depth picture of who the Kennedys were.”

Years of Research

The McCarthy book took more than seven years to research and write. “Gentleman Boss” and “A Question of Character” took five years each, while “The Empty Church” took two. Extensive oral histories were combined with substantial archive work. Reeves interviewed 230 people for the McCarthy book alone.

“I interviewed people in bars, moving cars, in their homes and restaurants,” he said. “They remembered him with such clarity.”

Writing wasn’t done using a computer until the Kennedy book. Before then, it was with typewriters and carbon paper.

“I discovered early a fascinating thing,” Reeves said. “Books write themselves. It’s as if though you’re in their grip and they lead you along from chapter to chapter, from topic to topic. You start with making these elaborate outlines and then you kind of dissolve and the story carries you along.”

Reeves’ books are exhaustive (McCarthy is 819 pages), descriptive and crisply written. An example: “The second Red scare, of course, was larger than McCarthy, and in political campaigns all over the country Republicans — and some Democrats — were busily hammering away at their opponents with crimson cudgels.”

Critics, the Media, Movies

Overall, Reeves’ books have been well-received by critics. But he hasn’t been spared totally. Historian Ronald Steel, writing in the Chicago Tribune, called the JFK biography a “well-crafted demolition derby.” Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., an adviser to Kennedy, has sparred verbally with Reeves on PBS’s “Firing Line” program.

“Schlesinger’s position is that ‘I knew Jack Kennedy and he was a good man. You do not know Jack Kennedy.’ ”

Excerpts of the JFK book were syndicated nationally by the Los Angeles Times. Reeves is regularly called by reporters around the nation to comment on Kennedy, McCarthy and Arthur. He has appeared on ABC’s “Good Morning America,” and CNN’s “Larry King Live.”

He writes commentaries and book reviews for The New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. He also has written articles on President Dwight Eisenhower, Arthur, and Cold War spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for Encyclopaedia Britannica and the World Book Encyclopedia.

Reeves recently signed a contract to make “The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy” into a three-hour television movie. He will serve as a consultant to the project.

“It’s been in the works for about three years. They’re now getting serious,” he said. “I’m going to have to go out to Hollywood to help sell the idea to some big studio.”

In the meantime, Reeves will continue getting to know Fulton Sheen in the hopes of starting on the writing of his latest book by fall.

“Writing and research,” he said, “are my life.” ■

DAYS OF VICTORY

ARTHUR TAKES THE OATH
AS PRESIDENT.

WELCH ASSAILS M'CARTHY'S 'CRUELTY'

Counsel Is Near
as Crowd Approaches
Him at Lincoln

PRESIDENT ARTHUR'S JOURNEY.

KENNEDY IS KILLED

JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY



THE MAN, THE MYTH — JFK's image as a statesman, liberal, intellectual and hero are challenged by revelations in Reeves' book. "Jack was not the man projected in the image," Reeves wrote.

A MANUFACTURED HERO

Thomas Reeves and his wife campaigned for presidential candidate John F. Kennedy in 1960, plastering their car with stickers and buttons. Reeves described himself as a "total devotee" and cast his vote for the handsome Massachusetts U.S. senator.

Later, Reeves lectured on JFK as a hero. It didn't last.

"I started to read anti-Kennedy stuff and I couldn't believe it," Reeves said, recalling when he first contemplated writing what would eventually be a highly critical 1991 book, "A Question of Character."

"I was interested in finding out who he was. And I think I did."

What Reeves said he discovered was an unprecedented gap between JFK's public image and the real man. The real man, as it turned out, was deeply flawed.

"Gifted with good looks, youth and wealth, he was often, in his personal life, reckless, vain, selfish, petty and lecherous," Reeves wrote. "Jack's character — so much a reflection of his father's single-minded pursuit of political power and personal indulgence — lacked a moral center, a reference point that went beyond self-aggrandizement."

Despite JFK's proclamations to make the White House the "center of moral leadership," Reeves found:

- **Womanizing** — JFK had hundreds of liaisons, including secretaries, hookers, stewardesses, a suspected German spy, Marilyn Monroe, mafia mistress Judith Campbell Exner and his wife's press secretary. The mob had wiretaps of some of his affairs, making JFK

"seriously vulnerable to blackmail." On his way to a liaison, he once ditched the Army official carrying the secret nuclear missile launch codes.

- **Health** — JFK was frail and sickly most of his life, suffering from intense back pain and Addison's disease, an adrenal illness. On several occasions, he was so ill he was given last rites. While in the White House — including during the Cuban missile crisis — he received many injections of amphetamines from controversial "Dr. Feelgood" Max Jacobson.

- **Judgment** — JFK maintained ties to Chicago mobster Sam Giancana while in the White House. He approved plans to have the mob assassinate Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, and to have the CIA kill South Vietnam's president.

- **Politics** — JFK was neither an intellectual nor a liberal. His election wins to the U.S. Senate and presidency were helped by vote fraud from the mob and attempted payoffs from his family.

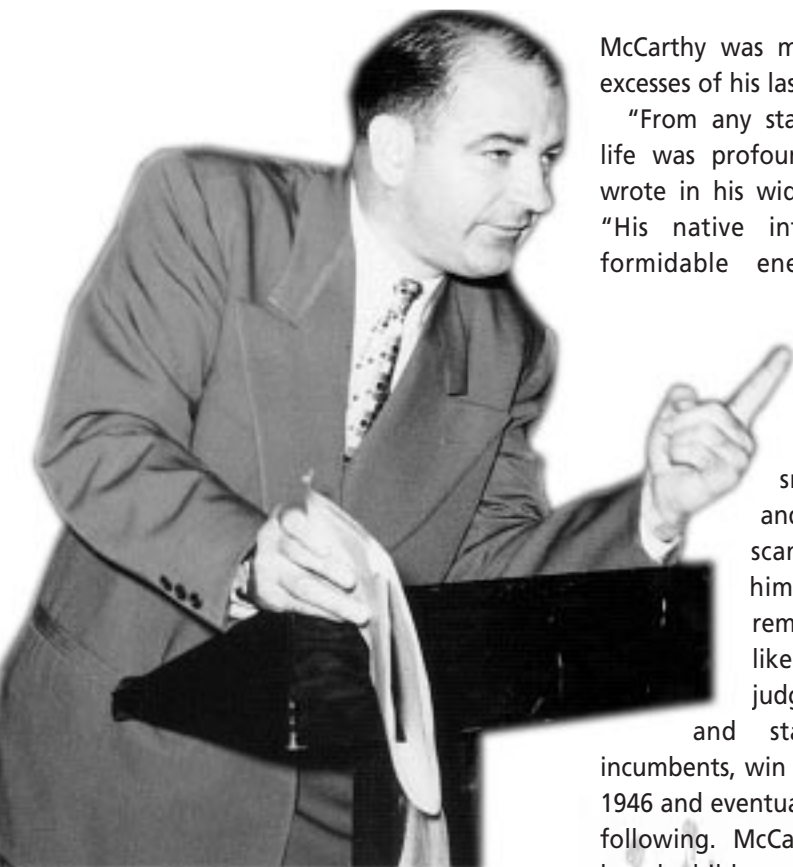
- **Accomplishments** — JFK's Pulitzer-Prize-winning "Profiles in Courage" — as well as most of his brilliant speeches — were written by aide Ted Sorensen.

JFK "lacked greatness in large part," Reeves wrote, "because he lacked the qualities inherent in good character."

MCCARTHY INSISTS
TRUMAN OUST REDSPRESIDENT GARFIELD SHOT BY
AN ASSASSIN.KENNEDY PLEDGES
SPACE ADVANCES;Gen. Reber Asserts Cohn
Put Pressure on Him to
Commission Schine57 Communists Still
on Job

THE PRESIDENT DEAD

ZEALOUS, BUT NOT A MONSTER



STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WISCONSIN

Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy is popularly remembered as almost comically evil, the anti-communist crusader caricatured in newspapers as an ape-like, stooping figure trampling the civil rights of innocent Americans.

Most of what has been written about the Republican U.S. senator from Wisconsin since his death in 1957 has been decidedly negative.

But in his 819-page biography, "The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy," historian Thomas Reeves argues that McCarthy's story was a tragedy, and

McCarthy was much more than the excesses of his last years on Earth.

"From any standpoint, McCarthy's life was profoundly tragic," Reeves wrote in his widely acclaimed book. "His native intelligence and his formidable energy were largely squandered."

While most probably remember the out-of-control, sneering McCarthy and the Army-McCarthy scandal that brought him down, few may remember the charming, likeable former county judge who used his wit and stamina to topple incumbents, win a U.S. Senate seat in 1946 and eventually attract a national following. McCarthy was generous, loved children and was prone to emotion when supporters cheered.

McCarthy learned early in life that a bluff served him well. He stumbled his way through Marquette Law School, falsified documents to attain an undeserved World War II medal and continually exaggerated his military service record.

McCarthy's anti-communist crusade began in 1950, almost by accident. Deciding at the last minute to give a speech on communism, McCarthy told a West Virginia audience he had proof of subversives in high places. "I have here in my hand a list of 205 — a list

of names that were known to the secretary of state as being members of the Communist Party..."

The ensuing uproar forced McCarthy to scramble to come up with the evidence he didn't have. It also showed him that Communism was an issue to generate the massive publicity he would so gainfully seek.

"I've got a pail of shit and I'm going to use it where it does me the most good," he said at the time.

Fueled by an insatiable need for publicity and a genuine belief in the dangers of Red conspiracy, McCarthy probed books in U.S. State Department libraries, investigated the Voice of America and hunted communists in the Government Printing Office and Army Signal Corps. His often-brutal tactics were likened to the Gestapo and led to coining of the phrase "McCarthyism."

No one was above his wrath. Generals, clerks, fellow senators, the secretary of the Army — even the president. McCarthy's crusading forced hundreds of people from their jobs, often with no due process. "You watch and see what he does. It will make history," an aide once boasted.

McCarthy's destruction came after he attacked the U.S. Army for "coddling" Communists. The Army in turn charged that McCarthy aide Roy Cohn had pressured commanders for favors for another McCarthy employee, Army draftee G. David Schine. The charges led to the televised Army-

“ Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?
Have you left no sense of decency? ”

DAYS VICTORY

ARTHUR TAKES THE OATH
AS PRESIDENT.

PRESIDENT ARTHUR'S JOURNEY.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 14, 1881.

WELCH ASSAILS M'CARTHY'S 'CRUELTY'

KENNEDY IS KILLED

Counsel Is Near
as Crowd Approaches
Him at Lincoln

IGNORED PRESIDENCY A GOOD STUDY

"Knowledge," Thomas Reeves once wrote, "usually dissolves indifference." In the case of his book on President Chester A. Arthur, he said, "the experience was exceptionally rewarding."

The 21st president had been dead for 81 years when Reeves decided to write a biography on Arthur. Amazingly, only one book had been written on him (in 1934), and no one had attempted a complete life story.

Reeves attributes the lack of interest in Arthur to historians who shunned the Gilded Age, and to Arthur, who remained aloof from the press and ordered his son to burn his papers as he lay dying in 1886.

"Nobody wants to start a project about a guy who destroyed his papers," Reeves said.

Reeves found a "terrific story" about the minister's son who may have been among the most despised men to become president, but who nonetheless became a good one.

Arthur, a former school teacher, later became a lawyer and won an 1854 civil case for a black woman who was roughed up for refusing to



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS COLLECTION

President Chester A. Arthur

vacate a New York street car reserved for whites. The woman won a \$225 judgment.

The former Civil War brigadier general had plenty to hide, though. As collector of New York's Customs House, he presided over a massive system of spoils and patronage. He was fired by

President Hayes in 1878 after allegations of corruption.

Arthur was placed on the 1880 Republican ticket with compromise presidential candidate James Garfield. Garfield was assassinated in 1881 by a deranged man claiming he wanted Arthur to be president.

Arthur proved a better president than critics expected, supporting creation of a federal civil service system based on merit and initiating a rebuilding of the U.S. Navy.

"He was a good president at a time in our history when the American people neither expected nor sought great presidents," Reeves wrote.

Reeves was the first historian to disclose that Arthur died of Bright's disease, a kidney ailment that the president tried to keep secret.

Reeves also discovered Arthur's true year of birth to be a year prior to the 1830 quoted by historians and listed on Arthur's tombstone. And he debunked a myth that Arthur had been born in Canada, not Vermont.

The book remains the definitive biography of Chester Arthur.

McCarthy hearings in spring 1954.

Twenty-million viewers saw McCarthy at his worst. The seething senator raged at

witnesses and continually interrupted the proceedings with his now-famous "point of order" objections. "His zeal, no doubt intensified by his heavy



STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WISCONSIN

drinking, blinded him," Reeves wrote.

The fatal blow to McCarthy's power and reputation came in June 1954, when McCarthy lashed out at Army special counsel Joseph Nye Welch, wrongly accusing the Boston attorney of employing an attorney with ties to the Communist Party.

In a dramatic rebuke that Reeves called "one of modern American history's greatest moments," Welch attacked McCarthy for his recklessness.

"Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?" For the first time in memory,

McCarthy had no reply.

The U.S. Senate voted 67-22 to condemn McCarthy in December 1954. Politically, he was finished. Scorned by colleagues and the press, McCarthy sank into alcoholism that destroyed his liver and took his life in May 1957.

In all his headline-grabbing zeal, McCarthy never found one communist in the government. Not one.

"The great tragedy of Joe McCarthy is that he had such great talents, that if they had been put to use positively," Reeves wrote, "he could have been a great asset to his state and country." ■