

The Apprentice: From the McCarthyism of Roy Cohn to the fascism of Donald Trump

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The Apprentice, the valuable new film about the relationship between Donald Trump and Roy Cohn, was finally released in US theaters last weekend, only a few weeks before the election in which Trump seeks a second term, aiming to become president-dictator.

The movie, directed by Iranian-Danish filmmaker Ali Abassi (*Border, Holy Spider*) and written by American journalist Gabriel Sherman, was screened to considerable applause at the Cannes film festival last May, but struggled to find a US distributor amidst legal threats from Trump and his lawyers.

It is clear why the would-be Führer sought to block the theatrical release. Abassi's film does not at all treat Trump as a cardboard villain. Its serious approach only makes things worse for him. Instead of name-calling, *The Apprentice* attempts to educate. It aptly and entertainingly depicts Trump's rise in the 1970s and '80s, from his wealthy real estate roots to someone whose name becomes synonymous with cruelty, greed, racism and contempt for the working class. Trump is revealed to be the "apprentice" of Roy Cohn, and through Cohn of the hysterical anticommunism associated with the name of Wisconsin's Republican US Senator from 1947 to 1957, Joseph McCarthy.

Trump's rise was inseparable from the orgy of financial parasitism set in motion in the decade after the near-bankruptcy of New York City in 1975. The fourth child of real estate multimillionaire Fred Trump became, some two to three decades after the events with which this film concludes, the dominant figure in the Republican Party.

This was not the result of his personal qualities, nor his "genetics," as the Nazi-inclined former president might say. Trump was a product of the sharp decline and decay of American and world capitalism, a decline that pushed both US capitalist parties sharply to the right, found expression in the wretched personnel they increasingly put forward and created the objective conditions for the rise of a demagogue who would go much farther and rise far higher than McCarthy. It created a yearning within sections of the financial oligarchy for a "strongman" to save their outmoded system from social revolution. Trump received support from leading figures in both parties. He was boosted by the press. All of this testified to the fact that capitalism had no progressive alternative, from the Democratic Party or anywhere else, to the reaction that has continued for more than 40 years.

The use of "The Apprentice" in the title is a play on words that looks both forward and back. Trump, convincingly portrayed by

Sebastian Stan (*Captain America: The First Avenger*), is mentored by Cohn, brought to life (and death) by Jeremy Strong (*Succession*). The film also stars Maria Bakalova as Trump's first wife, Ivana Trump, while veteran performer Martin Donovan plays Trump's racist father Fred Trump Sr. Most of the audience will of course be aware that *The Apprentice* is also the name of the reality television program (2004-2017) that some years later made Trump a household name. The former "apprentice" to Cohn by then had his *own* apprentices, and today he aims to turn the vast majority of the population, not into apprentices, but into those who have no choice but to follow his orders and serve the interests of the oligarchy.

The film opens with President Richard Nixon infamously declaring, in 1973 amidst the Watergate scandal that would force his resignation less than a year later, "I am not a crook. I've earned everything I've got." This is the context in which we first see a twenty-something Donald Trump (Stan), still a bit wet behind the ears. Blond, confident but nonetheless inexperienced, Trump enters a dark and exclusive club full of some of New York's wealthiest and best-connected.

Inside the establishment, Trump and Cohn lock eyes, soon forming what would be a mutually beneficial relationship that would continue for most of the period until Cohn's death from AIDS in 1986. Much of Trump's political personality, from his violent and thuggish speech and his "Big Lie" techniques utilized against political rivals, to his fascist and anticommunist politics, comes from Cohn's playbook.

With Cohn as his lawyer, Trump's rise in the real estate world begins. He stakes his claim to a transformation of the old Commodore Hotel near Grand Central Station in midtown New York into a gleaming and glitzy high-rise hotel, part of the Hyatt chain. The movie shows Cohn, the fixer, introducing Trump to the CEO of Hyatt, Jay Pritzker (uncle of the present Illinois governor and played by Chris Owens). Eventually, the deal is agreed, after Trump secures an unprecedented \$100 million tax abatement from the city, with Cohn at his side. This is followed by plans for an even more high-profile structure, the ghastly Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue.

Others who are introduced by Cohn to Trump include ultra-right media mogul Rupert Murdoch (Tom Barnett) and New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner (Jason Bliker), another oligarch notorious for his callousness and bullying.

Cohn, the subject of the 2019 film, *Where's My Roy Cohn?*, was

born in 1927 into a wealthy New York City Jewish family, his father a Democrat and a federal judge. After attending elite boarding schools, Cohn graduated from Columbia Law School at the age of 20, avoided the draft through family connections and became an assistant US attorney at the unprecedentedly young age of 21.

In Abassi's work, Trump, already familiar with Cohn's reputation for ruthlessness, seeks his help in the face of a discrimination lawsuit against his father's properties brought by the federal government and the NAACP. Trying to explain his family's racist business practices, Trump tells Cohn, "10 percent of our buildings go to black people. It's just they have to make four times the amount of the rent in terms of the income to be approved." Cohn uses his bullying tactics and secures a very favorable ruling for the Trump family. Trump is suitably impressed.

Recognizing in Trump a kindred spirit, Cohn takes the younger man under his wing. He teaches him "Roy Cohn's rules"— 1) Attack, Attack, Attack; 2) Admit Nothing, Deny Everything; and 3) Claim Victory, Never Admit Defeat. Cohn lived by this brutal "Big Lie" credo, in small matters as well as large. A notorious homophobe in public, he went to his death denying that he was gay, and claiming that the AIDS that was killing him was "liver cancer."

When Trump, still a bit green, expresses some hesitancy in the face of Cohn's thuggish and illegal tactics, including secretly recording conversations for blackmailing purposes, Cohn replies:

Oh, it's illegal? Donald, wake up. You know, when I tried the Rosenbergs, I wanted so badly to see those pinko kikes fry for what they did. Now, Judge Kaufman had no trouble sending Julius to the chair, but Ethel was a mother with young kids. They wanted her to live, as if that's some sort of special immunity for betraying your country.

So during the trial, I'd slip out at lunch to a phone booth and call Kaufman. You know, technically *ex parte* conversations, they are not allowed, but, when democracy is at stake, you're damn right I'm willing to violate a few technicalities. I don't care if she's a mother with young kids, she betrayed our country, and she has to die. You have to set an example and put this woman to death.

Cohn's ruthless prosecution of the Rosenbergs and his hatred of communism drew the attention of the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover and Sen. McCarthy himself. After the trial, Cohn began working for the pair, joining McCarthy's staff as chief counsel on the latter's Subcommittee on Investigations. While the Wisconsin senator was disgraced in 1954 during the so-called Army-McCarthy hearings, Cohn went on to private practice in New York, representing mob bosses, millionaires and eventually Trump. He was not simply a powerful and wealthy lawyer, he was a well-known "fixer," the man who brought together big business, politicians and organized crime for their mutual benefit. Throughout it all, Cohn continued to be Hoover's friend and pen pal.

Reporting on the release of over 750 pages of FBI files on Cohn in 2019, the *New York Times* wrote that the files "suggest that Mr. Cohn and Mr. Hoover shared a special bond." In a 1969 letter to Hoover, Cohn wrote: "You are such a great institution up and down this nation." Replying to "Dear Roy," Hoover wrote that his "generous comments regarding me are indeed gratifying."

It is interesting to note that Cohn justifies his amorality and flat-out lying on the basis of notions promoted by various postmodernist trends that came into vogue in the 1970s, often associated with what is misleadingly termed "the left." Throughout Abassi's film, Cohn instructs Trump on the need—if he is to achieve his goals of power and wealth—to cast aside not only his humanity, but also any notion of the existence of objective truth.

"It's an advantage to not care what people think of you," Cohn asserts. "There is no right and wrong. There is no, uh, morality. There is no truth with a capital T. It's a construct. It's a fiction. None of it matters except winning. That's it."

(Along these lines, famously, in 2004, an unnamed White House official told a journalist that the Bush administration rejected what he called the "reality-based community," founded in a "judicious study of discernible reality," and argued that "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.")

Unfortunately for Cohn, Trump and the system they represent, there is an objective reality, an objective historical process that can be understood, explained and acted upon. Flowing from this reality, there is a class struggle, and a working-class morality, one that will inspire many millions to fight to rid the planet of capitalism before capitalism does away with human civilization.

It is also important to trace the development of the fascistic demagoguery of McCarthy and Cohn 70 years ago to the more developed threats represented by Trump today. McCarthy was censured and removed from influence in 1954 because American capitalism, then in the midst of the postwar boom, had no need for such methods. But Cohn lived long enough to mentor a young man who was only a small child when McCarthy was riding high. Trump, by now the oldest candidate ever to run for US president, has bided his time and prepared for a moment when the crisis of world capitalism is giving birth to ultra-right and fascist movements around the globe. He does not yet lead a mass fascist movement, but that is his goal, and also that of his most fanatical supporters.



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