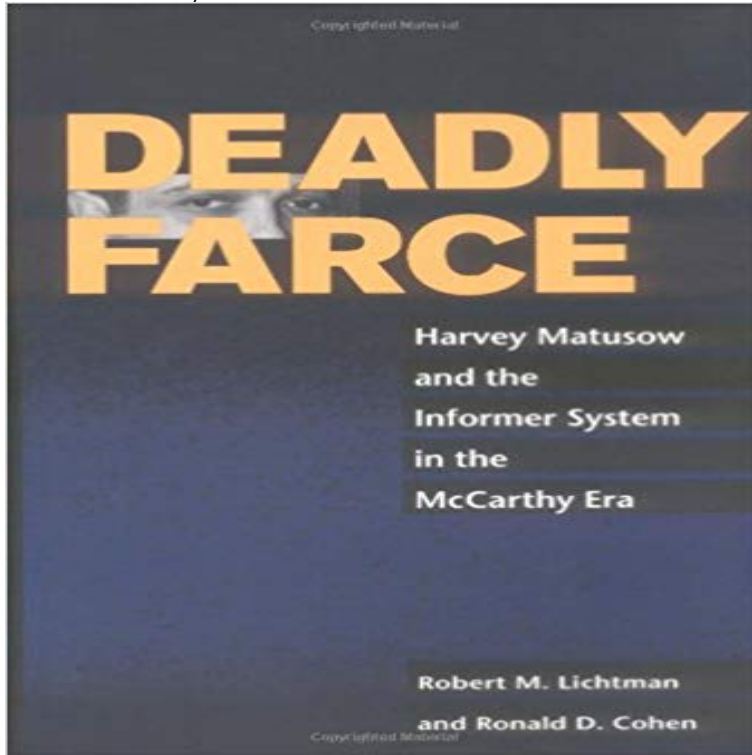


# Deadly Farce: Harvey Matusow and the Informer System in the McCarthy Era



No issue so possessed the nation in the first half of the 1950s as alleged Communist subversion in the United States. Deadly Farce presents Harvey Matusow, a young Bronx wise guy who became a Communist Party member, an undercover FBI informer inside the Party, and then a leading witness for the government during the McCarthy era - until he recanted his testimony. His story illuminates a disturbing time in American history, one with renewed relevance today. Matusow was easily the most flamboyant of the professional ex-Communists, a celebrity informer who considered himself booked by Congressional committees not just to testify, but to entertain. He testified that Communists fostered loose sex, taught politicized Mother Goose rhymes to small children, and tried to infiltrate the Boy Scouts. He also named more than 200 people as Communists and was a prosecution witness in major criminal cases. Robert M. Lichtman and Ronald D. Cohen draw on FBI records, court transcripts, personal interviews, private papers, and other primary sources, most never before utilized, to describe the unusual role of ex-Communist informer-witnesses during the McCarthy era. The Justice Department kept several dozen political informers on the government's payroll to testify in hundreds of deportation, sedition, and contempt of Congress cases. Some informers achieved celebrity as the result of high-profile appearances at criminal trials and before Congressional committees. But as the era continued, instances of perjury began to appear. Harvey Matusow's sensational recantation in 1955 gave him his biggest audience yet. It led to the dissolution of the Justice Department's informer stable and ended the public's infatuation with the group. Matusow's unrepentant and at times vaudevillian appearances before the Senate red-hunting committee investigating his

recantation, followed by his prosecution for perjury - for the recantation, not his original testimony - and prison sentence, mark the climax of Deadly Farce. Matusow's career, during which he came to know Joe McCarthy, Roy Cohn, Pat McCarran, and Elizabeth Bentley, among many others, offers an inside, entertaining, and closely documented view of a largely untold part of McCarthy-era history. The columnist Murray Kempton described Matusow as a truly remarkable witness in the opera bouffe sense demanded by inquisitions of the 1950s.

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