

## **Vito Anthony Marcantonio: The Idea Lives On**

By Ruby McIntee  
High School of Dundee  
Dundee, Scotland

Woodlawn Cemetery is over 400 acres of non-denominational burial ground in the Bronx, New York. Hidden away, in the vast expanse of final resting places, is one grave that was not meant to be there. The headstone reads “Vito Marcantonio”. The man died in 1954, suddenly, aged only 51. He died with a rosary in his pocket (Day). Presumably, he should have been buried at St. Raymond’s, the Bronx’s only Catholic cemetery. But his body is not there. Cardinal Spellman denied him last rites (*Times*, “THRONGS AT BIER OF MARCANTONIO”). What kind of heresy could Marcantonio have committed to be censured in death? Was he an arsonist? A mob boss? A murderer?

No.

Marcantonio was a seven-time US Representative, uncompromising in his commitment to liberty (“Vito Marcantonio Papers: 1935-1953”). The Cardinal’s vindictive act intended to distance the church from Marcantonio, to bury not only the man but his politics. To cloister Marcantonio’s relentless progressive lobbying away from the public eye, to shroud his words to history. But within dusty congressional records, Marcantonio’s spirit still shines. Particularly, his opposition to H.R. 5852.

Proposed by Mundt and Nixon, the ‘Subversive Activities Control Act of 1948’ (H.R. 5852) was a measure to combat the dissemination of communism. Originating from the Un-American Activities Committee, the act required all communists to register with the Attorney General. It denied passports and non-elective federal jobs to communists, giving the Attorney General power to designate organisations “communist fronts” (Congress, House of

Representatives,6104). The bill capitalised on American public hysteria during the second Red Scare. The fear of communism was visceral, the world had just witnessed Mao's rise to power.

However, H.R 5852 didn't just attack the left: it undermined The Constitution and its guaranteed freedoms. It didn't just attack communists either: the legislation critically failed to define the term 'communist' (Hill). Left to interpretation, almost anyone could be silenced for political dissent (Thompson 83).

Vito Marcantonio would point this out in his opposition. He declared, "this anti-communist attack reaches out and destroys the rights of all those who disagree with the views of those who are today seemingly in power" (Congress, House of Representatives 5842). He argued against the "violence to the constitutional guarantee of due process" and compared it to legislation instituted by Mussolini and Hitler (Congress, House of Representatives 5842). Rising above hysteria, Marcantonio would get to the heart of H.R. 5852; "The question before the House," he said, "is whether or not we shall have the courage to defend the democratic traditions of our Nation and the democratic foundations on which our Government is based, despite the hysteria which is mounting every day to the accompaniment of the fast beating of war drums" (Congress, House of Representatives 5842).

The democratic principles Marcantonio references within his speech are seen in his voting record. He advocated anti-lynching measures and abolition of the poll tax. From the start to the end of Marcantonio's career, he would stand by his fundamental moral principles: democracy and equality (Meyer).

On the 19th of May 1948, the Subversive Activities Control Act passed in a landslide victory (Congress, House of Representatives 6150). Marcantonio would be labelled a "NATIONAL SCANDAL AND INTERNATIONAL DANGER", becoming a pariah in the anti-communist fervour ("Letter No. 57" 3). He was secretly pursued by the very government that he faithfully served for most of his life. The FBI tracked his every move, as revealed in an FOIA request that produced a 25-part, 933-page file (Federal Bureau of Investigation). Marcantonio

was shunned by all his colleagues, regardless of party affiliation. Association with Marcantonio's voting record became political suicide. Congress passed bipartisan legislation preventing political party cross-filing, designed specifically to bar him from running in his own district (Champion 45).

On the 3rd of January 1951, the majority would succeed in damming the representative's political prospects. Marcantonio would lose his seat. He died suddenly, three years later (Serby).

In his pocket was a rosary.

This display of faith did not matter to the Catholic Church. What mattered was Marcantonio's politics. A belief in fundamental freedoms had already cost the Representative his career, and Cardinal Spellman would ensure Marcantonio paid a price even in death. For adhering to his principles Marcantonio lost his final resting place.

In his last speech to Congress, Marcantonio explained the politically damning but morally correct decisions he made: "I have stood by the fundamental principle which I have always advocated. I have not trimmed. I have not retreated. I do not apologise, and I am not compromising" (qtd in Simon). These words would be echoed years later, by John F. Kennedy. Kennedy claimed that courageous leaders would always do their duty "in spite of... consequences... obstacles... and pressures -- and that is the basis of all human morality" (Kennedy, *Profiles* 225).

In his opposition to the Subversive Activities Control Act, Vito Marcantonio fought in the public interest against the will of a tyrannical majority. His arguments that began on the house floor continued in the Nations courts. *Aptheker v. Secretary of State*, *Albertson v. Subversive Activities Control Board*, *United States v. Robel*: case after case of lower and Supreme Court rulings declared the Act unconstitutional, until it was repealed by Nixon himself in 1971, seventeen years after Marcantonio died (Izumi).

The courage of Marcantonio's public opposition to the Mundt-Nixon bill, and his defense of free speech would define his life and death. He would not receive last rites and the American people would largely not remember his name. Yet, Marcantonio's legacy is very much alive. It lives on in the politicians who championed his causes posthumously, in ratifications and amendments, in repetition of rhetoric and case law, and in the new generation of politicians who stand for equality and against tyranny.

Vito Anthony Marcantonio's body may lie in Woodlawn cemetery, but his political legacy continues. As J.F. Kennedy said, "A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on" (Kennedy, "Remarks").

### Works Cited

- Champion, Thomas. *Vito Marcantonio*. Rutgers University Library, 1972, jrul.libraries.rutgers.edu/index.php/jrul/article/download/1532/2971. Accessed 11 Jan. 2024.
- Congress, House of Representatives. "The Congressional Record." *United States Government Publishing Office*, May 1948, pp. 6104–50. [www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1948-pt5/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1948-pt5-6-2.pdf](http://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1948-pt5/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1948-pt5-6-2.pdf). Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Congress, House of Representatives. "The Congressional Record." *United States Government Publishing Office*, May 1948, p. 5842. [www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1948-pt5/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1948-pt5-3-2.pdf](http://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1948-pt5/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1948-pt5-3-2.pdf). Accessed 15 May 2024.
- Day, Dorothy. *Death in August – Vito Marcantonio – Catholic Worker Movement*. 1 Sept. 1954, catholicworker.org/674-html. Accessed 12 Jan. 2024.
- Hill, Warren P. "A Critique of Recent Ohio Anti- Subversive Legislation." *Ohio State Law Journal*, vol. 14, 1953. CORE, core.ac.uk/download/pdf/159573883.pdf. Accessed 12 Jan. 2024.
- Izumi, Masumi. "PROHIBITING 'AMERICAN CONCENTRATION CAMPS.'" *Pacific Historical Review*, 2005, pp. 165–94. online.ucpress.edu/phr/article-

abstract/74/2/165/80035/PROHIBITING-AMERICAN- CONCENTRATION-CAMPS?redirectedFrom=fulltext. Accessed 11 Jan. 2024.

Kennedy, John F. *Profiles in Courage*. New York, Harper Perennial, 2006.

Kennedy, John F. "Remarks for USIA Transmitter Opening, Greenville, North Carolina, 1963." 8 February 1963. Papers of John F. Kennedy. Presidential Papers. President's Office Files. Box 42, Folder 38. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts. [https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/jfkpof-042-038#?image\\_identifier=JFKPOF-042-038-p0002](https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/jfkpof-042-038#?image_identifier=JFKPOF-042-038-p0002) . Accessed 15 May 2024.

"Letter No. 57." *Counterattack: Facts to Combat Communism*, 25 June 1948, pp. 3–4. <https://library.bloomu.edu/Archives/SC/RadicalNewsletters/Counterattack/19480625.pdf> Accessed 15 May 2024.

Meyer, Gerald. "Vito Marcantonio: American Radical." *Marcantonio Defender of Human Rights* <http://vitomarcantonio.com/gerald-meyer-articles/vito-marcantonio-american-radical/> Accessed 15 May. 2024.

Serby, Benjamin. "New York's Last Socialist Congressperson." *Jacobin*, 20 Dec. 2018, [jacobin.com/2018/12/vito-marcantonio-socialist-congress-puerto-rico-civil-rights](http://jacobin.com/2018/12/vito-marcantonio-socialist-congress-puerto-rico-civil-rights). Accessed 11 Jan. 2024.

Simon, John J. "Rebel in the House: The Life and Times of Vito Marcantonio." *Monthly Review*, 30 June 2014, [monthlyreview.org/2006/03/01/rebel-in-the-house-the-life- and-times-of-vito-marcantonio](http://monthlyreview.org/2006/03/01/rebel-in-the-house-the-life- and-times-of-vito-marcantonio). Accessed 12 Jan. 2024.

"Vito Marcantonio". FBI file for Vito Marcantonio. File Number; 100- 28216, 2000, The FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation, US Department of Justice, [vault.fbi.gov/Vito%20Marcantonio](http://vault.fbi.gov/Vito%20Marcantonio). Accessed 12 Jan. 2024.

Thompson, Roger J. "Legislation From the Past Speaks to Us Today: The Mundt- Nixon Bill." *Law And Society Review USBC*, 2002, pp.81-83. *HeinOnline*, [heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/lawso1&div=16&id=&page=](http://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/lawso1&div=16&id=&page=). Accessed 12 Jan. 2024.

Times, New York. "THRONGS AT BIER OF MARCANTONIO; Catholic Church Refuses Him Religious Service -- Funeral Is Set for Tomorrow." *The New York Times*, 11 Aug. 1954, [www.nytimes.com/1954/08/11/archives/throngs-at-bier-of-marcantonio-catholic- church-refuses-him.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1954/08/11/archives/throngs-at-bier-of-marcantonio-catholic- church-refuses-him.html). Accessed 10 Jan. 2024.

U.S. National Park Service. *Woodlawn Cemetery: Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site*. [www.nps.gov/places/woodlawn-cemetery.htm](http://www.nps.gov/places/woodlawn-cemetery.htm). Accessed 12 Jan. 2024.

"Vito Marcantonio Papers: 1935-1953." *Manuscripts and Archives Division, the New York Public Library*, [archives.nypl.org/mss/1871](http://archives.nypl.org/mss/1871). Accessed 12 Jan. 2024.