My name is Michael Green. I am an associate professor of history at UNLV. I am an almost lifelong Nevadan and have published and taught extensively on the history of the state, including a textbook on the history of Nevada.

In one of my first scholarly publications, when I was 23 years old, I played down Pat McCarran’s anti-Semitism. First, in focusing on his relationship with Hank Greenspun, I felt that his attitude toward Greenspun had more to do with conflicts over political power than Greenspun’s Judaism—and I still think that is largely true. Second, what I saw at the time was not virulence, but someone who was, as so many of his era were, ignorant about Jews and Judaism. Third, I certainly had read less widely then than I have since, and I have learned more about McCarran and about anti-Semitism itself.

I have joked for some years that McCarran was a racist, anti-Semitic, communist witch-hunting lunatic, but he was OUR racist, anti-Semitic, communist witch-hunting lunatic.

Through many years of subsequent reading and thought, I have realized that was not only too kind, but also insensitive and wrong. Pat McCarran unquestionably did a great deal for his state, but he was an anti-semitic, and not simply one who thought Jews were different and who could not understand the difference. He was comfortable in private making virulently anti-Semitic statements—and friends of his felt equally comfortable in doing the same with him, which certainly would not have been the case if he had discouraged them. We are increasingly conscious as a people, as human beings, of hatred. Pat McCarran was as entitled as any of us to his personal views, as he expressed them in private and sometimes, yes, in public. But he made them a part of law, and legislation, and that is a significant difference.

In the wake of World War II, a refugee crisis affected Europe. There were about 400,000 “displaced persons.” Harry Truman sent Earl Harrison, a former immigration commissioner and law school dean, to report on it; Harrison came back saying, “We appear to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them, except that we do not exterminate them.” Truman sought to increase the number of people the United States would accept. A significant number of senators preferred not to do that, or even to reduce the number. The bill that emerged from the Senate, which McCarran’s biographer Michael Ybarra described as having his “fingerprints ... all over” it, would admit only 100,000, and limit the number to those who had been in a refugee camp before December 22, 1945, thereby excluding most of the Jewish refugees. Truman signed the bill in 1948, and called on Congress to improve and expand the provisions the next year. When a new bill came up, McCarran formed a subcommittee of opponents of admitting Displaced Persons to take the teeth out of the bill further. He requested a leave of absence to investigate the problem and traveled through Europe, finding occasional examples of corruption or dishonesty to bolster his claims, which even the National Catholic Welfare Conference dismissed as lies. McCarran told his administrative assistant, Eva Adams, “They are displeased persons rather than displaced persons. Eighty-seven percent are of one blood, one race, one religion. You know what that is without my telling you.” The bill for displaced persons eventually passed, although McCarran delayed it for more than a year and amended it several times, and then cut the agency’s budget and the number of Jews permitted to enter the U.S.
In 1941, when Franklin Roosevelt nominated Gregory Hankin, an attorney for the Federal Power Commission who had worked for the federal government since Calvin Coolidge’s administration in the 1920s to serve on the District of Columbia Public Utilities Commission, McCarran chaired the subcommittee that vetted the nominees, concluded that Hankin was unqualified, and delayed matters until the nomination expired. McCarran then became chair of the District of Columbia committee in the Senate, effectively running the federal enclave. He told the Roosevelt administration that Hankin was a communist because he and his in-laws had been born in Russia, which was not communist at the time of their birth. Roosevelt aide James Rowe looked at the files of McCarran, the FBI, and other agencies on Hankin and wrote to the president, “I am absolutely convinced in my own mind that Hankin is not a Communist. McCarran has actively opposed only three of your nominations. They were Felix Frankfurter [for the U.S. Supreme Court], Jerome Frank [for the Court of Appeals] and Gregory Hankin. These three have nothing in common except they are Jews. There is no question of McCarran’s anti-Semitism. As you may remember he tried to make out Frankfurter to be a Communist.” Roosevelt stuck to his guns and Hankin eventually received the appointment, with McCarran voting against it. Attorney General Robert Jackson insisted to friends in the administration that McCarran held up Frank’s appointment only because he was Jewish, and, again, the Roosevelt administration stuck to its guns. Later, as Judiciary Committee chairman, McCarran blocked the nomination of Nathan Margold as a U.S. District Court judge. Margold’s friend, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, insisted that it was because of anti-semitism. Further, Margold had written a report in 1930 for the NAACP in which he laid out the plan for how the organization’s attorneys could fight segregation by focusing on public funding of education; that report formed the basis for how Charles Hamilton Houston and his protégé, Thurgood Marshall, ultimately argued the cases that led to Brown v. Board of Education.

In private, McCarran told his daughter Mary, a nun, “You say you want to go to Holy Land. The Jews and Arabs are at war over there. And you can’t see the barn where He was born any way. They tore it down and the Jews sold it for firewood and made one hundred percent profit on it a long time ago .... And the sheep that the shepherds were tending are all old bucks and made into baloney long ago, and they don’t herd sheep there any more. Under the Taylor Grazing Act all grazing rights have been allotted to the Jews and all the Arabs can do is tend camp for the kikes so what’s the use.” During the 1952 presidential campaign, McCarran wrote to his wife, “It seems both Stevenson and Isenhour are dumb as to law. They show gross ignorance as to my bill. They dont even read the bill. The Jews are misleading both of them. The fellow who has the democratic nomination here—Mechling is going wild with his lies about me, and I’m going to answer him on the radio. He too is being led by eastern Jews, and ‘Commies.’”

Those are indeed private comments. But the bill he was talking about was an immigration bill that sought to limit the number of people from eastern Europe who could come to the United States. It imposed quotas, and it banned people who had BEEN accused of membership in or sympathy toward the Communist Party, whether or not they had been. In vetoing the bill, President Harry Truman wrote, “Today, we are "protecting" ourselves as
we were in 1924, against being flooded by immigrants from Eastern Europe. This is fantastic. ... We do not need to be protected against immigrants from these countries—on the contrary we want to stretch out a helping hand, to save those who have managed to flee into Western Europe, to succor those who are brave enough to escape from barbarism, to welcome and restore them against the day when their countries will, as we hope, be free again.... These are only a few examples of the absurdity, the cruelty of carrying over into this year of 1952 the isolationist limitations of our 1924 law.” Congress overrode President Truman, suggesting, indeed, that McCarran was not alone. In response, McCarran said that “we have in the United States today hard-core, indigestible blocs which have not become integrated into the American way of life, but which, on the contrary are its deadly enemies. Today, as never before, untold millions are storming our gates for admission and those gates are cracking under the strain. The solution of the problems of Europe and Asia will not come through a transplanting of those problems en masse to the United States....” Among those who were unable to enter the United States because of this legislation were four Nobel laureates in literature (Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Pablo Neruda, Doris Lessing, and Dario Fo), and numerous other writers and scholars. It kept out others who were seeking to escape from communism and anti-semitism.

McCarran also was the driving force behind the Internal Security Act of 1950, which, among other things, required communists to “register” with the federal government, created a board to investigate those suspected of subversion, and authorized the president to detain “each person as to whom there is a reasonable ground to believe that such person probably will engage in, or probably will conspire with others to engage in, acts of espionage or sabotage.”

The U.S. Supreme Court later struck down parts of this legislation as violating the First Amendment’s guarantee of freedom of association and the Fifth Amendment’s right to avoid self-incrimination. But the legislation fit McCarran’s view of the First Amendment. During a trial, McCarran stated in a deposition that Morry Zenoff, the owner of the Boulder City News, was “printing a newspaper at the Air Force Base at Las Vegas which contained political criticism. McCarran said he protested to the Air Force. Zenoff ultimately lost the contract. McCarran said Zenoff later told him ‘he was sorry about the attitude he had taken about me.’” When the Nevada State Labor News criticized his positions, suddenly and mysteriously, American Federation of Labor leader William Green wrote to Nevada labor leaders and threatened to withdraw the AFL’s financial support for “one of the staunchest friends of the AFL.” When Hank Greenspun of the Las Vegas Sun criticized McCarran’s views and actions, suddenly and mysteriously, almost every casino in Las Vegas canceled its advertising in the Sun in one morning; according to Greenspun, Moe Dalitz told him that he and his colleagues had to do this because “You’ve put us in a terrible position. You know as well as I that we have to do what he tells us. You know he got us our licenses. If we don’t go along, you know what will happen to us.” Greenspun sued and won a settlement, not only because the evidence supported him, but because the federal judge trying the case, Roger T. Foley, was scrupulously fair despite owing his appointment to McCarran, who never forgave Foley and did his best to make his life miserable.
Unquestionably, McCarran played an important role in the origins of the airport that bears his name. He co-authored the bill that led to the creation of the Civil Aeronautics Board, a precursor of the current Federal Aviation Administration. He encouraged Clark County to build its own airport to replace the field it was sharing with the Army Air Corps and helped with the original agreement. In turn, Alamo Field became McCarran Field in 1948, at a time that nationally he was about to regain the chairmanship of the Senate Judiciary Committee and locally the mayor and some of the Clark County Commissioners were among his closest political allies.

But let us consider that in its first year, McCarran Field had 12 daily flights with four airlines (Western Air Express, TWA, Bonanza, and United) bringing in a total of 35,000 passengers. By the end of 2016, McCarran International Airport boasted 490 daily flights, 45 million passengers, and 30 commercial airlines. McCarran certainly helped with the beginning of the airport, but to compare what it was in 1948 with what it is today is to compare apples and oranges. It is true that we name many things for people who have been important in our history, and we later find out that some of their words and deeds have been questionable or reprehensible, from Thomas Jefferson owning slaves while declaring all men were created equal to Abraham Lincoln questioning racial equality. But we also are obligated, as historians and as civic-minded citizens, to understand and evaluate them in the light of the times in which they lived. We know that Jefferson and Lincoln wrestled, in private and in their consciences and sometimes in public, with that world. Pat McCarran does not appear to fit into that category.

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