

## The McCarthy Era

The time period from 1948–1954 has become known as the McCarthy Era. It was a difficult and controversial period in American history. It was a time when American power was unequalled, but also a time when Americans felt most threatened from foreign sources. Some **demagogues** gained power and prestige by exploiting these fears. No politician was more adept at this than Senator Joseph McCarthy from Appleton, Wisconsin.

In the late 1940s the threat posed by communism became a significant part of American life. Daily, Americans read news of the threat in the newspapers and listened to reports of communist activities on the radio. Despite America's great military and economic strength, the threat was very real to the American people. Many believed that a war with the Soviet Union was inevitable.



Joseph McCarthy

A series of events fed the fear. In 1948 the Soviets blockaded West Berlin, and the communists triumphed in the Chinese Revolution in 1949. That same year, the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb, a weapon that only the United States had possessed. Finally, in 1950, communist forces invaded South Korea. It seemed that the communists were advancing everywhere. Joseph McCarthy was able to exploit this fear.

McCarthy gave a simple explanation for America's setbacks. He recklessly charged that communists had **infiltrated** the American government. In 1950 at Wheeling, West Virginia, McCarthy made the first of many speeches about communist traitors in the U.S. government. He stated: "I have here in my hand a list of 205 communists" whom he claimed were working for the State Department. There was no list. McCarthy had no proof, but he knew that making the charges would bring him fame and revive his sagging political career. Using a specific number only made his claim seem more believable.

Perhaps McCarthy understood little about communism, but he was an expert at manipulating the media. Reporters printed thousands of stories about McCarthy in the years after his speech at Wheeling. Some were positive, some negative. Either way, McCarthy was constantly in the news, and his fame and power in Washington grew. Prominent Republican leaders rallied to McCarthy's cause even though they knew his charges were baseless. They knew that McCarthy enjoyed a great deal of popular support, and his charges made President Truman, a Democrat, look bad. As time passed, McCarthy regularly charged that top government officials were actually communists. Among those accused were Secretary of Defense George Marshall, Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and even President Truman. However, all of the charges were made without any evidence.

As McCarthy attacked his opponents in government, American society became more suspicious and less tolerant. **Conformity** suddenly became the greatest virtue. Those people with different views or beliefs became vulnerable. Many professors, journalists, entertainers, and clergymen lost their jobs because their loyalties were suspect. Many

companies refused to hire anyone who had ever been accused of having communist beliefs, even if no proof had ever been found. This practice became known as “**blacklisting**.” Merely accusing someone of being a communist could get them blacklisted.

In the 1952 election the Republicans scored a great victory. Dwight Eisenhower became the new president, and the Republicans gained control of Congress. McCarthy was elevated to a new position of power, chairing the Subcommittee on Investigations. With great fanfare, McCarthy continued his efforts to track down communists in the government. Despite all of his investigations and accusations, he never found any communists, but he managed to ruin many men’s careers.

McCarthy soon fell out of favor with the Republican Party, however. He was now attacking the party’s own leaders and the policies of the Republican administration. In 1954 McCarthy’s career reached its pinnacle—and its ruin—during his nationally televised hearings investigating communist infiltration of the U.S. Army. An enthralled nation watched as McCarthy made his usual **bombastic** charges against suspected communists in the army. It was the first time the American public truly saw McCarthy at work, rather than reading about him in the newspapers. Once again McCarthy failed to find any communists, but this time he succeeded in offending most Americans. Even many of his supporters were disgusted by his actions during the hearings.

McCarthy’s political power dwindled quickly after the hearings. Soon after his army investigations, he was **censured** by the Senate. His power in Washington was effectively at an end. He died as the result of alcoholism in 1957.

### Think about It

1. Senator McCarthy was considered to be a demagogue by many of his opponents. Do you think that this was an accurate description?
2. Senator McCarthy was a very powerful politician. Many of his supporters thought that he would make a good president. Do you think he would have been a good president? Why or why not?

### Dictionary Exercises

Find definitions to the following words:

1. Demagogue
2. Conformity
3. Blacklisting
4. Infiltrate
5. Bombastic
6. Censured

## Teacher's Guide



### 1.3A: McCarthyism

**What do you see here? This man is Senator Joseph McCarthy, who promoted anticommunism in the 1950s. Why do you think he spoke out against communism? How do you think the American public responded? Why?**

**In this transparency** we see a portrait of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy from Wisconsin, who led the movement to rid the United States of Communists.

- The Birth of McCarthyism** In 1950 Joseph McCarthy was a little-known Republican senator from Wisconsin. After a lackluster first term, McCarthy faced almost certain defeat in his bid for reelection. McCarthy sought a way to promote his political career and found it in anticommunism, an issue that resonated nationwide as Cold War tensions increased. On February 12, 1950, McCarthy attracted national attention in a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia. The senator held up what he said was “a list of 205 names that were made known to the secretary of state as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department.” According to McCarthy, the country faced a serious threat from “a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man.”
- McCarthy succeeded in being reelected, and for the next four years he worked zealously to root out the communist menace he said existed in government, the entertainment industry, and education. As a member of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), McCarthy browbeat, bullied, and berated the seemingly endless parade of suspected Communists called to testify before the committee. Each accused was asked to answer the question, “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?” Witnesses who refused to testify were labeled “Fifth Amendment Communists.” Others were deemed “guilty by association” with communist or left-leaning organizations. One of McCarthy’s favorite targets was Hollywood. Interrogating actors, writers, and producers created extraordinary media interest and put McCarthy on the front pages of newspapers around the country. For several years, McCarthy was one of the most feared and powerful men in Washington. The fear, suspicion, and scapegoating that surrounded his accusations came to be known as *McCarthyism*.
- Anticommunism as a Political Weapon** McCarthy’s recognition of anticommunism as a potent political tool was not lost on other political figures. The Democratic Party’s association with liberal causes and reform politics made it vulnerable to the charge of being “soft on communism.” As early as 1946, the Republican National Committee

claimed to offer Americans a choice between “communism and republicanism.” Practitioners of anticommunism claimed that the country was not only threatened by “Reds,” but also by “Pinks” who would gradually lead the country to communism. Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal was cast in this light and dubbed “20 years of treason.” It was argued that conservatism and anti-Communist vigilance were the only protections against the “creeping socialism” advocated by liberals.

- **McCarthyism and the Cold War** The prominence of McCarthyism was the result of a political atmosphere dominated by anti-Communist fears and tensions in the early years of the Cold War. The years immediately surrounding McCarthy’s rise were marked by Cold War setbacks and revelations about real spies. In the year 1949 alone, China, a country with one-fifth of the world’s population, became a Communist state; Alger Hiss, a top state department official, was tried and later convicted for passing classified documents to the Soviets; and the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb. Then it was revealed that several Americans, including Julius and Ethyl Rosenberg, had worked in a spy ring to pass atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. The Rosenbergs were convicted of treason and executed in 1953.



### 1.3B: Anti-Communist Sentiment in American Society

What do you see in this film poster? What is the “Red Menace”? How can you tell? What do you think the filmmaker’s purpose was in making this film? How do you think moviegoers responded to the film’s message? What conclusions can you draw about Americans’ cultural attitudes during the McCarthy era? Explain.

- In this transparency we see a promotional poster for the film *The Red Menace*, a stridently anti-Communist film made in 1949.

- **Anti-Communist Sentiment Pervades American Life** The hysteria and paranoia of McCarthyism permeated American society and culture during much of the 1950s. Virtually no aspect of American life, from political discourse and lawmaking to education and film, was left untouched by the anti-Communist fervor. While the consequences in some cases seem extreme, even comical, in many cases the impact of McCarthyism was serious and long lasting.
- **Political Discourse** The anti-Communist campaign pushed the American political scene decidedly to the right. Any proposal that called for an expanded government role in social programs was perceived as leading the country down the path to socialism. For example, Truman’s proposal for health care in 1948 was defeated by opponents who argued that the Communist Party also favored “compulsory health insurance.” In the 1950s, after Jonas

Salk invented a vaccine for polio, it was suggested that it be distributed free to all school-age children. Eisenhower's secretary of health, education, and welfare argued against the proposal, saying that it would be "socialized medicine through the back door." Government funding for vaccinations was cut by 70 percent.

- **Lawmaking** Lawmakers at all levels passed laws to curb the communist threat. The Texas state legislature approved legislation that made membership in the Communist Party a felony punishable by 20 years in prison. The Texas governor threatened to veto the bill, saying that the penalty should be death. In New York City, citizens had to pledge their loyalty to the United States to obtain a fishing license. In Indiana, loyalty oaths were required for professional wrestlers to obtain a license to wrestle. At the federal level, Congress passed the Communist Control Act in 1954. The measure, which was supported by both Republicans and Democrats, made membership in the Communist Party illegal. It passed unanimously in the Senate and by a count of 265 to 2 in the House of Representatives. The federal government also established six concentration camps scattered around the country to house suspected Communist sympathizers in the event of an all-out war with the Soviet Union.
- **Education** Anti-Communist hysteria heavily impacted education. Teachers and professors were often required to take loyalty oaths to maintain employment, constraining academic freedom. Textbooks consistently emphasized patriotic themes, and even promoted anti-Communist propaganda. One warned high school students that "unquestioning party members are found everywhere. Everywhere they are willing to engage in spying, sabotage, and the promotion of unrest on orders from Moscow." Another told students to report suspicious behavior to the authorities. "Un-American" books were banned and removed from library shelves.
- **The Film Industry** As one of McCarthy's prime targets, the film industry was constantly under attack from HUAC. Some writers, producers, actors, and directors defended themselves before McCarthy, mostly with detrimental results to their careers, some of which were irreparably damaged. Many in the entertainment industry were blacklisted—banished from working in the industry—or jailed for refusing to cooperate with the committee. In response to the threat, others in the film industry moved to prove their loyalty to the United States. Stars such as John Wayne, Gary Cooper, and Walt Disney, among others, founded an organization called the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals. The organization took the position that "co-existence is a myth and neutrality impossible...anyone who is not fighting communism is helping communism." Film studios churned out a steady stream of anti-Communist films, including *The Iron Curtain*, *The Red Menace*, *Red Snow*, and *The Steel Fist*. In 1952 alone, 12 stridently anti-Communist movies were made.



## 1.3C: The End of McCarthyism

What do you see here? If this cartoon were in color, what color do you think the paint would be? Why? What do you think the cartoon is saying about what will happen to McCarthy next? How do you think the cartoonist felt about McCarthy?

- **In the transparency** we see a political cartoon of McCarthy painting himself into the corner of the room. His own accusations are the paint that now entraps him.
- **McCarthy Falls** Despite all the hysteria, McCarthy never proved his conspiracy charges. Indeed, not a single conspirator was found. As his allegations repeatedly turned out to be empty, his enormous political power waned and his supporters abandoned him. McCarthy finally overreached himself when, in televised hearings, he attacked the U.S. Army for sheltering Communists. McCarthy shouted at a general, whose loyalty was unquestioned: “You are disgrace to the uniform. You’re shielding communist conspirators.... You’re not fit to be an officer. You’re ignorant.” As McCarthy ranted, raved, and at times slurred his speech as if he were drunk, millions of Americans finally saw through McCarthy’s hectoring and bullying tactics. After he had disgraced generals, congressmen, and even President Eisenhower, the Senate passed a vote of censure against McCarthy in 1954 on a vote of 67–22. McCarthy died of liver failure three years later.
- **Minimal Communist Party Membership** One of the ironies of the anti-Communist hysteria of the McCarthy era is that official communism never gained a foothold in the United States. Whereas Communist Party membership in Italy and France ran to 20 percent of the population, the American Communist Party numbered only 45,000 members in 1946, about the same number that belonged to the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church. After the McCarthy hearings and a vigorous prosecution of Communist Party members by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), party membership dwindled to fewer than 5,000 members, many of whom were FBI informants. In fact, so many FBI agents had infiltrated the Communist Party by 1957 that the director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, contemplated a FBI takeover of the party at its national convention held that year.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Challenges

1. What were Americans afraid of during the McCarthy Era?

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2. List two world events that fed this fear.

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3. What charges did Senator McCarthy make in his Wheeling, West Virginia, speech?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. What proof did McCarthy have to back up his charges?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. List three government officials whom McCarthy accused of being communists.

\_\_\_\_\_

6. What might happen to someone accused of being a communist?

\_\_\_\_\_

7. What position of power in the Republican Congress did McCarthy hold?

\_\_\_\_\_

8. What was unusual about McCarthy's hearings investigating communist infiltration of the U.S. Army?

\_\_\_\_\_

9. What did the American people think of McCarthy?

\_\_\_\_\_

10. How many communists did McCarthy's investigations uncover in the government?

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