

McCarthyism—Second Red Scare

"Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist party?" In the 1950s, thousands of Americans who toiled in the government, served in the army, worked in the movie industry, or came from various walks of life had to answer that question before a congressional panel.

Senator Joseph McCarthy rose to national prominence by initiating a probe to ferret out communists holding prominent positions. During his investigations, safeguards promised by the Constitution were trampled.

Why were so many held enthralled to the senator? Why was an environment that some likened to the Salem Witch Trials tolerated?

In 1947, President Truman created the Federal Employee Loyalty Program that did background checks of every civilian in service to the government. When Alger Hiss, a high-ranking State Department official, was convicted on espionage charges, fear of communists intensified. In 1949 **Julius and Ethel Rosenberg**, minor activists in the American Communist Party, were accused of giving the Soviet Union information about the American atomic bomb. The Rosenbergs claimed their innocence, yet were found guilty of espionage and sentenced to death.

McCarthy

Senator McCarthy capitalized on national paranoia by proclaiming that communist spies were omnipresent and that he was America's only salvation. Senator Joseph McCarthy sent this telegram to President Truman two days after claiming that he had identified "205 card-carrying" members of the Communist party working in the U.S. State Department.

At a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, on February 9, 1950, McCarthy launched his first investigation. He proclaimed that he was aware of 205 card-carrying members of the Communist Party who worked for the United States Department of State. McCarthy soon began to attract headlines, and the Senate asked him to make his case.

On February 20, 1950, McCarthy addressed the Senate and made a list of dubious claims against suspected communists. He cited 81 cases that day. He skipped several numbers, and for some cases repeated the same flimsy information. He proved nothing, but the Senate called for a full investigation. McCarthy was in the national spotlight.

Staying in the headlines was a full-time job. After accusing low-level officials, McCarthy went for the big guns, even questioning the loyalty of Dean Acheson and George Marshall. Some Republicans in the Senate were aghast and disavowed McCarthy.

Others such as Robert Taft and Richard Nixon, saw him as an asset. The public rewarded the witch-hunters by sending red-baiters (communist accusers) before the Senate and the House in 1950.

McCarthy's Downfall

When Dwight Eisenhower became president, he had no love for McCarthy. Ike was reluctant to condemn McCarthy for fear of splitting the Republican Party. McCarthy's accusations went on into 1954, when the Wisconsin senator focused on the United States Army. For eight weeks, in televised hearings, McCarthy interrogated army officials, including many decorated war heroes.

But this was his tragic mistake. Television illustrated the mean-spiritedness of McCarthy's campaign. The army then went on the attack, questioning McCarthy's methods and credibility. In one memorable fusillade, the Council for the Army simply asked McCarthy, "At long last, have you no sense of decency left?"

Poll after poll showed the American people thought McCarthy unscrupulous in his attack of the army.

Fed up, McCarthy's colleagues censured him for dishonoring the Senate, and the hearings came to a close.

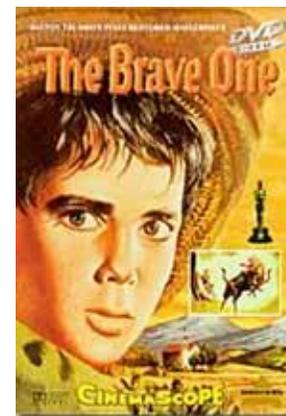
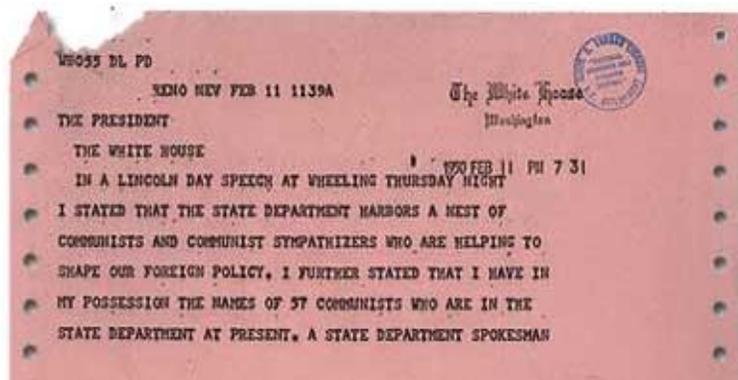
Plagued with poor health and alcoholism, McCarthy himself died three years later.

Blacklisting

McCarthy was not the only individual to seek out potential communists. The **House Un-American Activities**

Committee (HUAC) began to investigate Communist influence in the movie industry. The committee believed that Communists were sneaking propaganda into films. Actors, writers, and producers alike were summoned to appear before the committee and provide names of colleagues who may have been members of the Communist Party.

There were some witnesses that were called on to testify against the film industry that refused. These men were known as the **Hollywood Ten**. They decided not to cooperate because they believed that the hearings were unconstitutional. Because the Hollywood Ten refused to answer questions, they were sent to prison.



After being blacklisted, Dalton Trumbo, screenwriter and member of the Hollywood Ten, was forced to use false names to continue writing. In 1956, he won an Oscar for *The Brave One* under the name Robert Rich. It wasn't until 1960 that he could use his real name in Hollywood again.

Those who repented and named names of suspected communists were allowed to return to business as usual. Those who refused to address the committee were cited for contempt. Uncooperative artists were blacklisted from jobs in the entertainment industry. Years passed until many had their reputations restored.

Were there in fact communists in America? The answer is undoubtedly yes. But many of the accused had attended party rallies 15 or more years before the hearings—it had been fashionable to do so in the 1930s.

Although the Soviet spy ring did penetrate the highest levels of the American government, the vast majority of the accused were innocent victims. All across America, state legislatures and school boards mimicked McCarthy and HUAC. Thousands of people lost their jobs and had their reputations tarnished.

Other Witch-Hunt Victims

Unions were special target of communist hunters. Sensing an unfavorable environment, the AFL (American Federation of Labor) and the CIO

(Congress of Industrial Organizations) merged in 1955 to close ranks. Books were pulled from library shelves, including *Robin Hood*, which was deemed communist-like for suggesting stealing from the rich to give to the poor.

No politician could consider opening trade with China or withdrawing from Southeast Asia without being branded a communist.

Although McCarthyism was dead by the mid-1950s, its effects lasted for decades. Above all, several messages became crystal clear to the average American: Don't criticize the United States. Don't be different. Just conform.

Sir, I detest, I abhor their [communists'] philosophy, but I detest more than that their tactics, which are those of the fifth column, and are dishonest, but at the same time I never as a citizen want to see our country become urged, by either fear or resentment of this group, that we ever compromise with any of our democratic principles through that fear or resentment. I still think that democracy can do it.
– Ronald Reagan, testifying in front of the HUAC as president of the Screen Actors Guild (1947)

<http://www.ushistory.org/us/53a.asp>