

A Decade of Fear

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How 'McCarthyism' turned American against American in the decade after World War II

By *Sam Roberts*

On February 9, 1950, a relatively obscure United States Senator from Wisconsin delivered a speech to the Republican Women's Club of Wheeling, West Virginia.

Interest in the speech was so low—after all, Senator Joseph McCarthy had only recently been voted by the capital press corps as the worst Senator in Washington—that no audio recording was made.

But according to a local newspaper the next day, McCarthy dropped a bombshell: "The State Department is infested with Communists," he said. "I have here in hand a list of 205—a list of 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."

With the U.S. locked in a tense Cold War with the Soviet Union, news of McCarthy's accusation against the State Department of President Harry Truman sent shock waves across the nation. It catapulted McCarthy to national prominence overnight, and eventually made his name synonymous with a decade-long period of investigations—labeled "witch hunts" by his critics—to uncover Communist infiltration in American life.

In fact, the government's efforts to stem the spread of Communism at home began well before McCarthy's rise. In 1917, soon after the Bolshevik revolution that would turn Russia into the Soviet Union, thousands of alleged Communists in the U.S. were arrested and deported during what became known as the Red Scare.

By the end of World War II in 1945, the Soviet Union controlled most of Eastern Europe and installed Communist puppet regimes in countries like Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and East Germany.

In 1947, President Truman, in response to critics who said his administration wasn't being tough enough in containing Communism, ordered "loyalty investigations" of executive-branch employees. The same year, Congress began a high-profile investigation of Hollywood, and the House Un-American Activities Committee won the studios' cooperation in seeking to purge the movie industry of people whose Communist sympathies might influence popular films. The result was the Hollywood "blacklist."

Fear of Communist infiltration intensified in 1949 when Communists led by Mao Zedong took control of China and the Soviets detonated an atomic bomb—well before some American scientists had estimated they would have the expertise to do so. That raised suspicions that Soviet spies had stolen the technology from the U.S.

The Soviet Threat

Anxiety over a possible Soviet nuclear attack manifested itself in many ways, from talk of apocalyptic nuclear devastation to weekly air-raid drills that sent schoolchildren cowering under their desks or into fallout shelters.

As if an air raid wasn't enough to worry about, anybody, it seemed, could be a spy seeking to undermine American values by infiltrating civic institutions and the government—from local school boards to the White House itself.

A month before McCarthy's speech, a former Assistant Secretary of State, Alger Hiss, was convicted of perjury after denying that he was a Communist spy, lending credence to the idea that Washington itself could be compromised. (Most, but not all, historians believe Hiss was indeed a spy.)

What McCarthy actually said in Wheeling in February 1950 is not known for sure—the Senator later maintained that he had alleged 57 Communists worked in the State Department, not 205—but during this period, many Americans were inclined to believe the worst, even without evidence.

In fact, McCarthy never publicly revealed any list of alleged Communists. The basis for his specific claims of Communist subversion appeared to have been an investigation by the State Department itself several years earlier that recommended "against permanent employment" of 284 individuals. Seventy-nine had been removed, leaving 205.

But McCarthy's allegations, repeated to larger and larger audiences and with growing vitriol over the coming months, touched off a firestorm in Washington, even as many Americans began hailing him as a brave anti-Communist.

As his fame and power grew, so did his anti-Communist fervor. He accused government officials and politicians who opposed him of having Communist ties or at a minimum, being soft on Communism. He implicated General George C. Marshall, one of the heroes of World War II and later Truman's Secretary of State and the chief architect of Europe's postwar revival, in "a conspiracy so immense and an infamy so black as to dwarf any previous venture in the history of man."

Critics said McCarthy was stoking fear and smearing anyone in his path—Democrats or fellow Republicans—purely to grab at power. Herbert Block, a Washington Post editorial cartoonist, drew a caricature of the mud-slinging in which he coined a new term, "McCarthyism," which came to mean unscrupulously accusing people of disloyalty without evidence.

Ironically, the image today most often associated with this period is the congressional investigations of Hollywood that began before McCarthy came on the scene, when screenwriters, actors, directors, and producers were dragged before the House Un-American Activities Committee and asked to "name names" of colleagues who had Communist ties or sympathies.

Some agreed to testify, while others invoked their Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination. Either way, they risked ostracism that could cost them friends, families, and careers. As journalist Victor Navasky wrote, the committee and its victims agreed on one thing: "The test for friend or foe was the willingness to inform."

Many who would not cooperate with the investigating committees were blacklisted by potential employers and unable to work for many years. The playwrights Arthur Miller and Lillian Hellman, and the actors Charlie Chaplin, Zero Mostel, and Paul Robeson were among hundreds who were persecuted because of real or imagined Communist sympathies.

At the height of his power in 1953, McCarthy became chairman of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations and used the platform to make further charges of Communist spying. He found mostly flimsy evidence of Communist infiltration in the Voice of America (the American overseas radio network), the Army Signal Corps, and finally the Army itself.

It was his clash with the Army that would lead to his downfall. Early in 1954, McCarthy and his chief counsel, Roy M. Cohn, were accused of improperly using their influence to get preferential assignments for a former McCarthy aide, David Schine, who had been drafted into the military.

'Have You No Sense of Decency, Sir?'

The Senate convened the Army-McCarthy hearings, which lasted 36 days and were broadcast live on television. The most famous exchange came when the Army's lawyer, Joseph N. Welch, challenged Cohn to deliver McCarthy's list of 130 subversives working in defense plants. McCarthy intervened, suggesting that if Welch was so concerned about Communism he ought to look into one of his own associates, a young man who had once belonged to a leftist association of lawyers.

"Until this moment, Senator, I never gauged your cruelty or your recklessness," Welch interjected. "Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator. You've done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?"

The hearings, coupled with two penetrating documentaries by Edward R. Murrow on his TV program, *See It Now*, doomed McCarthy.

"We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty," Murrow said, in a warning that has been echoed repeatedly since then, from debates over the war in Vietnam to reconciling national security with civil liberties in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. "The actions of the junior Senator from Wisconsin have caused alarm and dismay amongst our allies abroad, and given considerable comfort to our enemies. And whose fault is that? Not really his. He didn't create this situation of fear; he merely exploited it—and rather successfully."

By mid-1954, opposition to McCarthy, even among Republicans, was simmering. In December, the Senate voted to censure him for, among other things, acting "contrary to senatorial ethics" and bringing "the Senate into dishonor and disrepute."

McCarthyism, President Eisenhower declared, had become "McCarthywasm." Less than three years later, McCarthy died, at age 48. Most accounts attribute his death to alcoholism.

For the U.S., McCarthyism was only the latest example of the government's questioning the loyalty of Americans during wartime. As far back as 1798, with the U.S. in an undeclared naval war with France, President John Adams signed into law the Alien and Sedition Acts, which allowed the government to deport noncitizens deemed dangerous and made it a crime for anyone to publish "false, scandalous, and malicious writing" about the government. During World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt placed thousands of innocent Japanese Americans in internment camps, fearing they would support Japan in the event of an invasion.

A half-century after McCarthy, accusations of McCarthyism still arise periodically, most recently when President George W. Bush suggested after Sept. 11, 2001, that a Citizens Corps of Americans be recruited to help prevent more terrorist attacks, in part by reporting on suspicious neighbors. That part of the proposal met with widespread derision and the initiative was scaled back by Congress.

Was McCarthy himself just a demagogue? In the 1990s, when decoded K.G.B. and Soviet military intelligence cables were released, it became apparent that there were Russian spies—K.G.B. agents and sympathizers who had indeed infiltrated the highest levels of the American government and delivered secrets about the atomic bomb and diplomatic strategy.

"Point by point," columnist Nicholas von Hoffman has written, "Joe McCarthy got it all wrong and yet was still closer to the truth than those who ridiculed him."

But historian Richard Gid Powers argues that no matter what the threat, McCarthy's methods were contemptible.

"McCarthy did nothing but harm," says Powers, "and besides the lives he wrecked, he also discredited American anti-Communism, which was for the most part a realistic view of a serious threat to the country, but a threat to the country from outside, not from within the country."