



LESSON 8.1.5 | READ | McCarthyism

PURPOSE

This article looks into one of the domestic effects of the Cold War, McCarthyism. You will learn about the efforts of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy to expose communists within the American government. This incident capitalized upon existing fears of communism and nuclear war and served to threaten the rights of many American citizens.

As you read, you should not only pay attention to the details of McCarthyism, but you should also make note of the general ways in which fear and misuse of power can be used in times of crisis.

ATTACHMENT

- [McCarthyism](#)

PROCESS

Read the attached article on McCarthyism. As always, read actively by marking up the text and taking notes. Answer the questions at the end of the document when you've completed the reading.



READING | McCarthyism¹ — USHistory.org² (2016)

During the Cold War (a time of political and military tension following WWII) the United States was exceedingly paranoid about the possibility of communist spies infiltrating the country. Communism is a political and economic system in which the goal is for everything to be shared equally. This is maintained through government control, in which all means of production are equally owned and income is equally divided. America feared losing the freedom that they had fought for and pushed back against communism by attempting to contain it to the countries it had already effected. Unfortunately, this led to wild accusations without proper evidence and unfair investigative techniques that ruined innocent people's lives, a practice we now refer to as "McCarthyism." As you read, take notes on how Joseph McCarthy's use of fear influenced the American people's actions.

"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 in thrall to the Wisconsin lawmaker? Why was an environment that some likened to the Salem Witch Trials tolerated?

THE ATOMIC ERA

In 1947, President Truman had ordered 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.

McCarthy capitalized on national paranoia by proclaiming that Communist spies were omnipresent and that he was America's only salvation.

An atmosphere of fear of world domination by communists hung over America in the postwar years. There were fears of a nuclear holocaust based on the knowledge that the Soviet Union exploded its first A-bomb in 1949. That same year, China, the world's most populous nation, became communist. Half of Europe was under Joseph Stalin's influence, and every time Americans read their newspapers there seemed to be a new atomic threat. ▶

1 Source <https://www.commonlit.org/texts/mccarthyism>

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At a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, on February 9, 1950, McCarthy launched his first salvo. He proclaimed that he was aware of 205 card-carrying members of the Communist Party who worked for the United States Department of State. A few days later, he repeated the charges at a speech in Salt Lake City. 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.

"TAIL GUNNER JOE" SHOT DOWN

When Dwight Eisenhower became president, he had no love for McCarthy. However, 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 Counsel for the Army simply asked McCarthy, "At long last, have you no sense of decency left?"

Poll after poll showed the American people thought that McCarthy was 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 Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) targeted the Hollywood film industry. 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. ▶



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. Below is an example:

"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)

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.



NAME _____

COURSE _____

TIME _____

WORKSHEET | Questions

1. What was Senator McCarthy claiming? What was he hoping to accomplish?
2. Why were Americans susceptible to fear-based politics in the early 1950s?
3. How did televising the hearings backfire on McCarthy?
4. What was "Blacklisting"?
5. How did McCarthyism limit the actions non-communists could take?
6. How can this incident be used to explain how fear impacts action and judgement?