

Name: _____ Class: _____

McCarthyism

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During the Cold War, the United States became increasingly paranoid about the possibility of communist spies infiltrating the country. The U.S. attempted to contain communism and stop it from spreading to new countries, which caused tension with other communist countries, such as the Soviet Union. This paranoia and growing fear of secret communists led to wild accusations and unfair trials led by Senator Joseph McCarthy that ruined many people's lives. As you read, take notes on how the fear of communism affected America during the Cold War.

- [1] "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 prominence¹ by initiating a probe to ferret out communists holding prominent positions. During his investigations, safeguards promised by the Constitution were trampled.



"Welch-McCarthy Hearings" by United States Senate is in the public domain.

Why were so many held in thrall² to the Wisconsin lawmaker? Why was an environment that some likened to the Salem Witch Trials tolerated?

The Atomic Era

- [5] 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 omnipresent³ and that he was America's only salvation.

1. **Prominence** (*noun*): the state of being important, well-known, or noticeable
 2. the state of being in someone's power or having great power over someone
 3. present everywhere at the same time

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.

At a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, on February 9, 1950, McCarthy launched his first salvo.⁴ 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.

- [10] 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 Acheson⁵ and George Marshall.⁶ Some Republicans in the Senate were aghast⁷ and disavowed McCarthy.

Others such as Robert Taft⁸ and Richard Nixon,⁹ 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, Ike¹⁰ 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,¹¹ 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 that McCarthy was unscrupulous in his attack of the army.

- [15] Fed up, McCarthy's colleagues censured¹² him for dishonoring the Senate, and the hearings came to a close. Plagued with poor health and alcoholism, McCarthy himself died three years later.

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4. a spirited attack
 5. Dean Acheson was the United States Secretary of State from 1949 to 1953
 6. George Marshall also served as Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense for President Truman
 7. **Aghast (adjective):** filled with horror or shock
 8. a conservative American politician who served as a United States senator from Ohio
 9. Richard Nixon was the 37th President of the United States from 1969 until 1974 when he resigned from office.
 10. referring to Dwight David "Ike" Eisenhower
 11. a spirited outburst, especially of criticism
 12. **Censure (verb):** to officially criticize strongly and publicly

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.¹³ 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 abhor¹⁴ 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?

- [20] 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.

13. being disobedient or disrespectful in a court of law

14. **Abhor** (*verb*): to regard with disgust and hatred

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. The government was cautious about communist spies and relied solely on Senator Joseph McCarthy to contain communism in America.
 - B. Following World War II, Americans became increasingly frightened by the prospect of nuclear war and began invading other countries to contain communism.
 - C. Joseph McCarthy used fear to manipulate Americans and government officials into wrongfully accusing and convicting people of being secret communists.
 - D. McCarthyism created national panic in the 1950s by falsely reporting that communism was present in America, even though it had historically only been present overseas.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "McCarthy capitalized on national paranoia by proclaiming that Communist spies were omnipresent and that he was America's only salvation." (Paragraph 6)
 - B. "Half of Europe was under Joseph Stalin's influence, and every time Americans read their newspapers there seemed to be a new atomic threat." (Paragraph 7)
 - C. "The public rewarded the witch-hunters by sending red-baiters (communist accusers) before the Senate and the House in 1950." (Paragraph 11)
 - D. "Above all, several messages became crystal clear to the average American: Don't criticize the United States. Don't be different. Just conform." (Paragraph 24)

3. PART A: What is the meaning of the word "unscrupulous" as used in paragraph 14?
 - A. impolite
 - B. corrupt
 - C. aggressive
 - D. shameless

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "mean-spiritedness" (Paragraph 13)
 - B. "no sense of decency" (Paragraph 13)
 - C. "Fed up" (Paragraph 15)
 - D. "censured him" (Paragraph 15)

5. How does Reagan's testimony in paragraph 18 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
