

McCarthyism 1947–1960

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What was McCarthyism?

McCarthyism was much more than the outrageous antics of Senator Joseph McCarthy. It was the most widespread and longest lasting episode of political repression in the history of the United States. In the name of protecting national security against the threat of domestic Communism, it effectively quashed left-wing dissent during the early years of the Cold War.

Who supported it?

The participation of many different groups and individuals, both within and outside the government, contributed to McCarthyism's success. Probably the most important single member of the network of dedicated anti-Communist ideologues and activists who sparked the witch hunt was FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Among the other members of that network were conservatives eager to destroy the New Deal, opportunistic politicians like McCarthy and Richard Nixon building their careers through the anti-communist crusade, and business leaders seeking to undermine the labor movement. Liberals, already unsympathetic to the far left, purged their own ranks to avoid being labelled as "soft on Communism."

Who was targeted?

Most of the victims were Communists and former Communists, not "innocent liberals" as many mainstream opponents of Joe McCarthy liked to believe. When the Cold War began, the already unpopular Communist Party's ties to the Soviet Union rendered it and all the individuals, institutions, and ideas associated with it vulnerable to repression. Although the party never had more than 100,000 members at its peak in the late 1930s and 1940s, it was the most dynamic organization on the left. Idealistic radicals supported it and the so-called "front groups" in its

orbit as the most effective vehicles for achieving their goals of social justice and peace. Most were not revolutionaries; and, by the 1950s, many had become disillusioned with the Soviet Union and left the CP. But since they remained radicals, these people along with the party's leaders and its front groups, became the main targets of the anticommunist witch hunt.

How did it operate?

It was a two-stage procedure. First the targets were identified, then they were punished. The first stage of the procedure was usually handled by an official agency—the FBI or a congressional investigating committee like the House Un-American Activities Committee. The second stage, the imposition of sanctions, was often the province of the private sector. Though two people (Julius and Ethel Rosenberg) were executed and a few hundred went to prison (mainly for contempt of Congress, perjury, or, in the case of the CP's leaders, the 1940 Smith Act that made "teaching or advocating" the overthrow of the US government a crime), most of McCarthyism's sanctions were economic. If the people fingered during that first stage refused to cooperate with the inquisition and "name names," they usually lost their jobs and were blacklisted.

What actually happened?

This two-stage process spread throughout American society. In 1947, the Truman administration created a loyalty-security program designed to purge the federal government of potential Communist subversives. State and local governments and many private employers adopted similar programs, often targeting people who had merely supported the same causes as the Communist Party. The two-stage procedure enabled many moderates and liberals to claim that they

opposed McCarthyism while still collaborating with the second-stage's purge of political undesirables. As a result, perhaps 15,000 people lost their jobs—in the civil service, entertainment industry, public schools, automobile factories, universities, and the press. The organizations they had worked with, including about a dozen progressive labor unions, were destroyed as well.

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Who resisted?

The main resistance came from the victims and the handful of dedicated civil libertarians who defended them. Most mainstream liberals and organizations like the ACLU and NAACP that one might have assumed would stand up to McCarthyism, backed off. Whether they were cynical, scared, or actually believed it, they facilitated the witch hunt by claiming that Communists should not enjoy the same constitutional protections as other Americans.

How did McCarthyism end?

By the mid-1950s, the witch hunters ran out of witches. The Communist Party had been essentially destroyed, Joseph McCarthy overreached and self-destructed in the nationally televised Army-

McCarthy hearings, and many liberals and moderates turned against the inquisition. The Supreme Court, which until then had legitimized McCarthyism's violations of individual rights on the grounds of national security, began to impose restrictions on the witch hunt.

What were the long-lasting results?

Besides the personal suffering that McCarthyism imposed, it narrowed the political spectrum. By destroying careers and forcing potential victims to censor themselves, it marginalized the American Left, essentially silencing all those who dissented from the official position on the Cold War.

Historians for Peace and Democracy (HPAD; formerly Historians Against the War) was formed in January 2003 to oppose the Bush Administration's drive for a pre-emptive, illegal invasion of Iraq. We participated actively in the antiwar movement of the Bush years, and we have continued to campaign for peace and diplomacy internationally, while extending our support for Palestinian human rights. Now, with the ascent of an extreme rightwing administration contemptuous of constitutional norms, we will add to our mission fighting for free speech and academic freedom for all members of campus communities, and for the human rights of our students, especially the undocumented, Muslims, people of color, women and LGBTQ people. We will challenge the "fake news" and "alternative facts" that

have driven the right's ascent, and defend the discipline of history against attempts to reduce it to affirmations of "American greatness," documenting how prior eras of reaction were successfully combated. Finally, we recognize that the Trump-Pence Administration is a threat not only to the people of the United States, but to the people of the world, and we will continue to stand against a new nuclear arms race, more imperial interventions, and collaboration with authoritarian regimes.

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