

Chapter 5

McCarthy and McCarthyism

It was January, 1950 and Joseph McCarthy was upset. He had been a US Senator from Wisconsin since 1946 with little to show for the years he had been in office. He had a reputation as a drunkard, a braggart, and a weak legislator who, though a Republican, often voted with the Democratic Party. But now he faced a re-election campaign with nothing he could use to stir up the electorate.

But as luck would have it, while Senator McCarthy had dinner one night in January with three friends the conversation drifted to finding an issue that could help the Senator's campaign. After discarding such subjects as the St. Lawrence Sea way and a guaranteed \$100 a month pension for the retired, the subject of communism came up. Why not make a campaign issue out of the presence of known communists in the US government!



The Enemy Within

Armed with an issue, McCarthy approached party leaders to arrange a speaking tour. His first stop was Wheeling, West Virginia, where on February 9, 1950 McCarthy unleashed a torrent of criticism against the Democratic Party:

Six years ago, there were within the Soviet orbit 180,000,000 people. Lined up on the anti-totalitarian side there were in the world at that time roughly 1,625,000,000 people. Today, there are 800,000,000 people under the absolute domination of Soviet Russia. On our side, the figure has shrunk to around 500,000,000. In other words, in less than six years the odds have changed from 9 to 1 in our favor to 8 to 5 against us. This indicates the swiftness of the tempo of Communist victories and American defeats in the Cold War.

The reason why we find ourselves in a position of impotency is not because our only powerful potential enemy has sent men to invade our shores, but rather because of the traitorous actions of those who have been treated so well by this nation. It has not been the less fortunate who have been selling this nation out, but rather those who have had all the benefits that the wealthiest nation on earth has had to offer – the finest homes, the finest college education, and the finest jobs. The bright young men who are born with silver spoons in their mouths are the ones who have been worst . .

In my opinion the State Department, which is one of the most important government departments, is thoroughly infiltrated by individuals who would appear to be either card-carrying members or certainly loyal to the Communist Party, but who nevertheless are still helping to shape our foreign policy.

“This brings us down to the case of one Alger Hiss who is important not as an individual any more, but rather because he is so representative of a group in the State Department. It is unnecessary to go over the sordid events showing how he sold out the nation which had given him so much. Those are rather fresh in all of our minds. “As you know, very recently the Secretary of State [Acheson] proclaimed his loyalty to a man guilty of what has always been considered as the most abominable of all crimes – attempting to justify his continued devotion to the man who sold

Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

out the Christian world to the atheistic world, [he] referred to Christ's Sermon on the Mount; this pompous diplomat in striped pants, with a phony British accent, [thus] endorsed communism, high treason, and betrayal of a sacred trust,^{24*}

Senator McCarthy was totally unprepared for the sensation his speech caused. When asked at his next stop for the list of card-carrying communists in the State Department, the Senator said he would turn the names over to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, if Mr. Acheson would only call. The next day Senator McCarthy responded to an inquiry from the State Department that he had been misquoted. When McCarthy finally began to reveal names, he actually relied on an old list developed by an obscure investigator by the name of Robert Lee. The list had been circulating around Washington since 1947 citing *unproved* allegations against men and women who had at some time worked in the State Department. Many were no longer employed.

Exaggerated Claims?

Using his talent for drama, Senator McCarthy made some notable changes in the allegations on the list. For example:

Unproved allegation on the Lee List	McCarthy's accusation in his speech
<p>This employee is with the Office of Information and Educational Exchange in New York City.</p> <p>His application is very sketchy. There has been no investigation. Though he is 43 years of age, his file reflects no history prior to June 1941.</p>	<p>This individual is 43 years of age. He is with the Office of Information and Education. According to the file, he is a known Communist. I might say that when I refer to someone being a known communist, I am not evaluating the information myself. I am merely giving what is in the file. The individual also found his way to the Voice of America Broadcast. Apparently the easiest way to get in is to be a Communist.²⁵</p>

The Lattimore Case

Despite the drama of his charges, Senator McCarthy had not been able to name one yet unknown Communist who had substantially influenced America's China policy. Finally, McCarthy came up with a name, Owen Lattimore, who he claimed every school child knew was "the architect of our Far East policy," and was "Alger Hiss's boss in the espionage ring at the State Department." McCarthy added, that his own credibility would stand and fall on the Lattimore case.

A recognized expert on the Far East, Owen Lattimore was not even a regular employee of the State Department though he had served as an advisor on several occasions. Lattimore's public record included a letter of praise for his services in behalf of China from Chiang Kai-shek, opposition to various actions

²⁴ Quoted in Daniel DeMello, *The McCarthy Era: 1950-54*, New York, Scholastic Book Services, 1968, pp. 7-12.

* In the absence of any known recordings of McCarthy's West Virginia speech, the above is quoted from a speech given in the US Senate on February 20, 1950, making the same charges. Senator McCarthy used different numbers -when referring to the presence of communists in the State Department - sometimes charging there were 57, sometimes 81 and other times 205.

²⁵. Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate*, (New York: Hayden Book Company, 1970), p. 57.

Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

taken by the Soviet Union, and criticism of his most recent book by the Communist press. But all of this was discounted as Louis Budenz, like Chambers an admitted ex-Communist, testified before the Tydings Committee which was investigating McCarthy's charges, that he had heard Lattimore was considered by insiders to be a fellow Communist. Budenz's charges were never corroborated. Nevertheless, McCarthy's reputation as a fighter against communism soared, while Lattimore's reputation as a academician suffered.

Further History of McCarthy and McCarthyism

The prestigious Tydings Committee completed its investigation of McCarthy's charges against Lattimore and the 57, 81, or 205 communists McCarthy claimed were in the State Department. The Committee the Committ6ee issued a report calling McCarthy's accusations a hoax riddled by numerous willful falsehoods. In response to this criticism, McCarthy labeled the Committee report "a disgrace to the Senate," and "a green light to the Red fifth column in the United States" before he even saw it.

Publicly opposing Senator McCarthy was akin to committing political suicide. Senator Millard Tydings was defeated in his bid for re-election by a virtually unknown Republican opponent, the victim of a doctored photograph allegedly showing him with the head of the American Communist Party. William Benton, a Republican who introduced a resolution to oust McCarthy from the Senate was



President Eisenhower refrained from publicly criticizing McCarthy

accused of "having established himself as a hero for every Communist and crook in and out of government." Benton did not survive his next bid for re-election. Accused by McCarthy "(0)f being part of a campaign so immense and an infamy so black as to dwarf any previous venture in the history of man," General Marshall, former Supreme Commander of US forces in World War II and Secretary of State, resigned from his position in government. President Truman was weakened by McCarthy's charges of treason following the firing of General MacArthur, and did not run for re-election.

Despite the vicious nature of the charges introduced by Senator McCarthy, Republicans in 1952 used them as part of their political campaign that year. The Republican party platform accused Democrats of "shielding traitors to the nation in high places," and "working unceasingly to achieve their goal of national socialism," appeasing the Soviet Union at Yalta and Potsdam, causing the 'loss of China' by denying military aid to Chiang Kai-shek, and carrying on the Korean War "without a will to victory." Vice-presidential candidate Richard Nixon

accused the Democrat's presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, as "Adlai the Appeaser...who got his PhD from Dean Acheson's college of cowardly communist containment."

But if Republicans thought they were immune from charges by the senator they were mistaken. As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Government Operations, McCarthy continued his investigation of the State Department after Eisenhower became president. As a result, State Department employees were summarily fired, 30,000 books suspected of favoring communism were removed from overseas libraries, and some were actually burned. Inspired by the success of McCarthy's investigative techniques, private citizens and local government officials continued the hunt for communists, 'communist sympathizers,' and unwitting dupes of communist agents. The results were truly sensational. Loyalty oaths were required of anyone seeking a government job; failure to swear to one's loyalty to the United States was sufficient to deny anyone government employment. Vigilante committees removed books from local

libraries. Movie, radio, and television writers and actors with vaguely suspicious backgrounds were blacklisted. In Indiana professional wrestlers were investigated for communist connections and in Washington, D.C. the FBI investigated shoeshine men. School committee races were rife with charges of disloyalty, teachers were questioned and fired, books were banished from the classroom, curriculum was altered and courses were introduced on the evils of communism.

While fear of communist subversion swept the nation, the US Senate censored McCarthy. McCarthy had made the strategic mistake first of attacking the loyalty of men in the US Army, and secondly of revealing his often brutal and unscrupulous questioning techniques in 35 days of widely televised hearings. Horrified by what they saw on TV, the American public turned against Senator McCarthy. Politicians who had used McCarthy's accusations to advance their own political careers shied away from the senator. Newspapers no longer reported his charges. President Eisenhower said McCarthy was not welcome in the White House. Three years after his censor in 1954, Senator Joe McCarthy died of sclerosis of the liver, probably caused by his excessive drinking. Nevertheless, the debate over the validity of his charges continues to this day.

Evaluations

Two contrasting views are presented below: The first, was written recently, and expresses the views of a man who thinks the US is still too influenced by people who are not completely loyal to their own country. The second quote comes from a Swedish newspaper, and was written during McCarthy's heyday:

A Positive View of McCarthy	A Negative View of McCarthy
<p>Joe McCarthy's great achievement was that he helped popularize a deep public animosity toward Communism and its agents. McCarthy attacked liberalism itself, exposing its fraud by proving liberal's willingness to side with Communist infiltration and treason, to glamorize the brutality of Communist governments. Liberalism and Communism are both infected with the same materialistic secular virus and have such philosophical affinity that usually they can not be distinguished. Their identical world-view creates a "strong affinity between the Communists and New Dealers; between the progressive and totalitarian visions of the maximalist state."²⁶</p>	<p>Those of us who shout loudest about Americanism in making character assassinations are all to frequently those who, by our words and acts, ignore some of the basic principles of Americanism – The right to criticize * The right to hold unpopular beliefs. * The right to protest. * The right of independent thought. The exercise of these rights should not cost one single American citizen his reputation or his right to a livelihood, nor should he be in danger of losing his reputation or livelihood merely because he happens to know someone who holds unpopular beliefs.²⁷</p>

Whichever statement you think best characterizes McCarthy and the hunt for communists in government he inspired, you should remember his accusations never resulted in the conviction of anyone on the charges of spying or treason. His actions did lead, however, to the dismissal of thousands of Americans from government and private sector jobs and were responsible for the widespread belief that America was losing its place in the world because of the 'enemy within' the government of the United States.

²⁶ Email: pha1941@hotmail.com

²⁷ Congressional Record, 81st Congress, 2d session (June 1, 1950), pp. 7894-7895.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Identify or define and briefly explain the relationship to the rest of the chapter of each of the following:

- | | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| a. search for an issue | e. Lee List distortion | i. George Marshall |
| b. losses in Cold War | f. Owen Lattimore case | j. General Zwicker |
| c. enemy within | g. Louis Budenz | k. censure |
| d. Dean Acheson | h.. Tydings and Benton | |

2. With which of the two diametrically opposite views of McCarthy expressed in this chapter do you come closest to agreeing - and why?

Your answer should include:

- a discussion whether the US was 'losing the Cold War' because of the enemy within [communists in the US government] and not the enemy without [factors outside of the US beyond its control].
- whether you think Alger Hiss and Owen Lattimore were really guilty as charged
- an analysis of the evidence supporting McCarthy's charges