

Title: The rise and fall of Joseph McCarthy

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Full Text:

American political life has never lacked scandal or controversial figures--and Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy (Source A) was perhaps one of the most controversial of these. Between 1950 and 1955 he greatly influenced US politics and society and found himself with the power to ruin people's careers or worse. To his supporters, McCarthy was a crusader in the fight against communism in America. To his critics, he was little more than a bully, who exploited Cold War fears and prejudices and manufactured a witch-hunt in order to serve his own political ambition. How is the rise and fall of the man who was the chief architect of the anti-communist hysteria that dominated post-1945 US politics best explained?

### McCarthy's roots

McCarthy was born in 1908 in Wisconsin, and there his path to Washington began. He started his political career as a Democrat, inspired to join politics by Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. His loyalty was dispensable, though, and he switched parties after the failure of his first attempt to get elected to a minor office. McCarthy next stood as a candidate for circuit court judge. His campaign tactics offered an insight into how he would operate later--he accused his opponent of senility and corruption. During this election, McCarthy represented himself as a decorated veteran of air combat. In fact, with the exception of a few training missions, he spent much of the war behind a desk. In the end, McCarthy won by little more than 2,000 votes and went on to be elected to the US Senate in 1946. His opponent, shamed and humiliated by McCarthy's 'dirty tricks', later committed suicide.

McCarthy's first term in the Senate was anything but remarkable. With a campaign for re-election looming, McCarthy--under investigation for tax offences and corruption--was desperate to find a way to retain his seat. Working with his closest advisers, McCarthy came up with the idea of publicly attacking those in the Democratic administration and party who he believed were working for Moscow and international communism.

### McCarthyism

McCarthy believed he could harness and take advantage of the anti-communism that had been a prominent feature of US political life following the Bolshevik takeover in Russia in 1917, the Red Scare of 1919 and 1920 and the onset of the Cold War. These events had left many Americans concerned about the security of their country. This anxiety was heightened by the Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe, the fall of China to communism in 1949, and the outbreak of the Korean War a year later.

Although McCarthy was to become the most recognisable anti-communist in 1950s America, he took advantage of the groundwork of others. During the Second World War over 100,000 Americans were members of the Communist Party. They were treated with suspicion, and in 1947 the US government, under the direction of President Truman, took steps to determine their loyalty. Between 1947 and 1951, the loyalty program investigated over 3 million Americans. Over 200 were sacked for 'questionable loyalty.' Another 3,000 federal employees chose to resign in protest at their government's actions. Among those deemed 'security risks' were alcoholics, homosexuals and those who owed money.

The 'red under the bed'

Truman's announcement in late 1947 that the free world was threatened by communism sent Americans into a near frenzy of gossip and spying on one another. In such an atmosphere communist sympathisers were 'everywhere'--many Americans looked for the 'red under the bed', as a popular slogan of the time warned. Neighbours reported each other's 'suspicious behaviour' to the authorities. Teachers, doctors and newspaper editors were among those placed under the greatest scrutiny. Fear of a communist conspiracy against the United States was further fuelled by two famous espionage cases, one involving Alger Hiss and the other, the Rosenbergs.

The House Un-American Activities Committee

Several opportunistic politicians quickly jumped on the anti-communist 'bandwagon.' The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) made headlines in 1947 when it targeted the film industry for scrutiny. To build up evidence that American communists were using films to spread communist propaganda, the Committee called on dozens of famous actors to testify (Source C). One result of the committee's activities was the Hollywood Blacklist, a document containing 500 names of people in the film industry (actors, scriptwriters, producers and directors) who were suspected of having communist sympathies. Many of them found it impossible to find work in such an atmosphere.

McCarthy emerges

On 9 February 1950, McCarthy gave a speech in the state of West Virginia (Source D). In his speech he claimed that 205 communists had infiltrated the US State Department. When pressed, McCarthy repeatedly changed his story, and over the course of the next few days the number dropped to 57 'card-carrying' communists in the State Department. McCarthy denied ever using the number 205; ultimately, he presented no evidence to back up his claim. However, far from being the end of McCarthy as a relevant political figure, this was only the beginning.

That same month, Congress, pressed by McCarthy and his supporters, passed the McCarran Internal Security Act. It required all communist organisations in America to register with the authorities and outlawed the planning of any act that might lead to the establishment of a communist government in America. As part of the law, Americans with suspected communist sympathies were prohibited from holding government jobs and had to surrender their passports to the government. Truman vetoed (opposed) the act, saying, 'In a free country, we punish men for the crimes they commit, but never for the opinions they have.' In the end he was overruled and the act became law.

### Leading a witch hunt

Suddenly seen as a 'rising star', McCarthy was elevated to the position of chairman of the HUAC. He took full advantage of the power afforded by this position to run a campaign of political terror against those he believed were communist sympathisers. He was a powerful and skilled speaker, who played masterfully on people's fear and uncertainty.

For a while McCarthy relished his time in the spotlight and enjoyed power and influence far greater than his position as a senator warranted. In the atmosphere of the time, many Americans were inclined to believe his outrageous claims. To begin with, few were prepared to stand up to McCarthy; those brave enough to do so were bullied during the public hearings he chaired or were accused of being communists. The Senate committee convened to investigate McCarthy's claims about the State Department and returned a report blasting him for wasting valuable time (Source E). McCarthy responded by accusing the committee and its chair, Senator Millard Tydings, of pro-communist sympathies.

### McCarthyism at its peak

McCarthyism, the name given to McCarthy's activities, took off during the Korean War. In the early years of the conflict the USA and its allies suffered serious military setbacks, which McCarthy blamed on communist spies in the USA. He found powerful backers in the 1952 presidential election as Dwight Eisenhower and his

running mate, Richard Nixon, supported his anti-communist campaign. McCarthy reached the height of his power in 1953 when President Eisenhower, influenced by McCarthy and the HUAC, ordered an investigation of the civil service. As a result, over 7,000 people were dismissed or forced to resign from their jobs.

### The tide turns on McCarthy

The tide of public opinion turned against McCarthy in 1954 when he accused 45 army officers of being communist spies. This proved to be a big mistake. Television coverage of the HUAC hearings against the accused officers showed McCarthy at his worst--a rambling, shouting bully who abused his position. On occasion he slurred his words, which led some to conclude he was drunk. More and more Americans began to question his credibility. His downfall came when he dared to accuse President Eisenhower, the war hero, of being a communist and claimed the army was run by communists. When one lawyer for the army protested at McCarthy's behaviour, saying, 'Have you no sense of decency, sir?' McCarthy was finished. Soon after, in December 1954, he was censured (reprimanded) by Congress. He continued his anti-communist campaign, but the country was less and less interested in what he had to say.

The advent of Nikita Khrushchev as Soviet leader in 1956 and the subsequent 'thaw' in cold war relations meant there was little interest in 'outing' communists. McCarthy drifted into obscurity and died in disgrace in 1957.

### Conclusion

Source I is one historian's view of McCarthy as a politically ambitious and unscrupulous man, whose actions must be seen in the context of the wider anti-communist feeling that had been part of American life since 1917. McCarthy's campaign, described as a witch-hunt by many, damaged people's careers and reputations, despite the fact that no evidence was ever produced to support McCarthy's claims. No communist plot or spy ring was ever uncovered. However, this did not stop McCarthy from treating those he accused with little sympathy, often mocking them and smearing them with groundless accusations. He created a climate of fear in which even prominent Americans dared not speak out in case McCarthy turned on them. Some of his victims could not stand the public scrutiny and committed suicide. America's fear of communism lasted much longer than McCarthy and did not truly disappear until the end of the Cold War in 1989.

### Key terms

communism

McCarthyism

media

witch hunt

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

SOURCE A

Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1953

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

SOURCE B

British cartoonist David Low's view of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), 1948

SOURCE C

A delegation of film stars, led by Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart, marches to the Capitol for the HUAC hearing on communism in Hollywood, 27 October 1947

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

SOURCE D

Part of McCarthy's speech, 9 February 1950:

When a great democracy is destroyed it will not be because of the enemies from outside, but rather because of enemies within. At the end of the war we were the strongest nation an earth and morally the most powerful. Yet instead of being a beacon in the desert of destruction we have failed miserably... because of the traitors who have been treated so well by this nation. Those who have been selling this nation out have the finest jobs in government. In my opinion the State Department ... is thoroughly infested with communists.

SOURCE E

Senator Millard Tydings, chair of the committee that investigated McCarthy's claims, gives his opinion:

[McCarthy's claims were] the most nefarious campaign of half-truths and untruths in the history of this republic.

Quoted in *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower* by David Cauter, 1978

#### SOURCE F

Philip Reed, head of General Electric, writes to President Eisenhower after a tour of Europe, 8 June 1953:

I urge you to take issue with McCarthy and make it stick. People in high and low places see in him a potential Hitler, seeking the presidency of the United States. That he could get away with what he already has in America has made some of them wonder whether our concept of democratic governments and the rights of individuals is really different from those of the Communists and Fascists.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

#### SOURCE G

An American newspaper cartoon of Senator McCarthy, May 1954

#### SOURCE H

Margaret Truman remembers Joe McCarthy:

Joe McCarthy spewed lies and slanders on dozens of reputations. He reached his peak on 14 June 1951 when he gave a 60,000 word speech in the Senate that attacked General George Marshall as a communist plotter. For Dad this was the most hateful of the Senator's many slanders. That a man who had devoted his entire life to the service of his country could be smeared as a traitor in the Senate of the United States was almost unbelievable to Dad. In his press conference a few days later he treated the charge with contempt and said, 'No comment.'

Excerpt from *Harry S. Truman* by Margaret Truman, 1972

#### SOURCE I

A modern British historian comments on McCarthyism:

McCarthy knew nothing about Communists in the State Department, but he did know that mud sticks, especially if you throw a lot of it. It is doubtful that he ever thought

he was doing much harm .... For him it was enough that he had secured his re-election, that money flowed in from anti-communist enthusiasts that he could spend as he pleased and that he could keep the entire political establishment of the United States in perpetual uproar. He had fun .... First the Truman and then the Eisenhower administration trembled before him; and the press let itself be used as his megaphone. It was as squalid an episode as any in American history.

From *The Pelican History of the United States of America* by Hugh Brogan, 1986

- \* 1 Look at source B. What is the message of the cartoon?
- \* 2 Why would the HUAC investigate the US film industry?
- \* 3 Research the trial and conviction of the Rosenbergs, accused of spying against the USA.
- \* 4 Read Source D. Why were so many Americans prepared to believe McCarthy in 1950?
- \* 5 What part did television play in ending McCarthy's witch-hunt?
- \* 6 Look at Source G. Why was this cartoon published in 1954?
- \* 7 In Source H, President Truman's daughter attacks McCarthy. To what extent do you believe Truman was responsible for the conditions that allowed McCarthy to become influential?
- \* 8 Study Source I. What other factors not mentioned in this extract help to explain the success of McCarthy in the early 1950s?

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