

# The 1950s Part One: McCarthy and the Red Scare

By Alan Brinkley, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.09.17

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Joseph Welch (left), the chief Senate counsel representing the United States Army and a partner at Hale and Dorr, with Senator Joe McCarthy of Wisconsin (right) at the Senate Subcommittee on Investigations' McCarthy-Army hearings, June 9, 1954. United States Senate

## *The first in a three-part series*

In 1954, an angry group of men gathered in a hearing room in a Senate office building, officially to mediate a dispute. But in fact, it was to do battle before the world.

On one side was Senator Joseph McCarthy and his staff, bolstered by the support of millions of adoring citizens connected to the event through television, radio and the newspapers. On the other side were representatives of the combined forces of the presidency, the Army, the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, and members of the press and the legal profession.

These two sides battled for the five days in what became known as the Army-McCarthy hearings. Finally, McCarthy staggered from the contest discredited. With McCarthy's fall came the beginning of the end of one of the great Red Scares of the time.

## **Government promotes a fear of communism**

The Red Scares were when government officials and others promoted a fear of communism in the United States. Communism is a political and economic system controlled by a single-party government, and wealth is divided equally. People worried communism would overthrow U.S. democracy and capitalism. People were afraid of being called communists or being associated with communists.

McCarthy was first elected to the Senate in Wisconsin in 1946 and began searching for a way to make himself stand out among the other senators. At a speech in West Virginia in 1950, he claimed to have a list of people serving in government who were members of the Communist Party.

Over time, the list fluctuated widely, but never once did McCarthy identify anyone who was convicted. But, he attracted devoted followers who saw him as courageous.

McCarthy was welcomed by Republicans to help break the 20-year Democratic lock on the presidency. But after the election of Republican Dwight Eisenhower to the presidency in 1952, McCarthy's tactics became an embarrassment. His claims of communist influence in the military particularly enraged Eisenhower, who had spent most of his life in the Army. The Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954 discredited McCarthy in large part because of the role of the Eisenhower administration.

## **States pass laws to stop communist activities**

McCarthy was only one of many who helped create the great fear. The Red Scare was visible in almost every area of American life. It was produced and largely sustained by government, even if it ultimately spread beyond the government. Anti-communism became official government policy not just in Washington, D.C., but at every level of government.

Forty-four out of the 48 state governments in the United States passed laws between 1949 and 1955 to stop communist activities. But it was in the federal government that the Red Scare developed most rapidly and decisively.

In 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began investigating Hollywood. HUAC was established early in World War II to prevent a domestic dictatorship, but was unclear about its mission after the war. The members of HUAC were mostly Republicans and some Democrats. HUAC decided to investigate communist infiltration of the film industry, which it believed was full of communists.

## The Hollywood Ten trials

The trials of the Hollywood Ten — a group of screenwriters charged with communist leanings — generated enormous publicity. That was partly, of course, because the accused were from Hollywood, but also because they themselves were determined to generate as much publicity as possible. In the end, it did little to help them. Among them were a group of famous writers, including Dalton Trumbo, Ring Lardner and others.

In 1948, Whitaker Chambers, an editor of Time magazine, announced that in 1937 he had passed classified documents from the U.S. government to its main rival, the Soviet Union, a communist superpower. The man who had given him the documents, he said, was Alger Hiss, who had been a high-ranking official in the State Department. Hiss, who was now out of government, denied the charges, and most people seemed to believe him. But Chambers produced evidence that damaged Hiss' claim of innocence. Richard Nixon, a young congressman from California and a member of HUAC who would later become president of the United States, pursued Hiss with great determination. Hiss was finally convicted and sentenced to a short term in prison. The Hiss case seemed to support that many Americans in powerful positions were in fact secret communists.

## The Rosenbergs are convicted of treason

Then, in 1950, a British atomic scientist named Klaus Fuchs turned himself in, admitting that he had been passing all the atomic secrets to the Soviets. Fuchs' confession sparked investigations that led to a lower-middle-class Jewish couple in New York: Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The Rosenbergs were charged with having been the connectors through whom Fuchs' secrets, and the secrets of others, had been passed to the Soviets. The Rosenbergs were Communist Party members, so sympathy for them was limited from the beginning. Ultimately, they were convicted of treason and sentenced to death.

The great fear slowly declined, but remained into the 1960s and well beyond for those who believed that communism was not just in the Soviet Union, but also in the United States as well.

*Alan Brinkley is a professor of American history at Columbia University. He is the author of several books, including "Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression" (1982), which received the National Book Award for History; "The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War" (1994); "Liberalism and its Discontents" (1998); "Franklin D. Roosevelt" (2009); and "John F. Kennedy" (2012).*

## Quiz

- 1 Read the paragraph from the section "Government promotes a fear of communism."

*McCarthy was welcomed by Republicans to help break the 20-year Democratic lock on the presidency. But after the election of Republican Dwight Eisenhower to the presidency in 1952, McCarthy's tactics became an embarrassment. His claims of communist influence in the military particularly enraged Eisenhower, who had spent most of his life in the Army. The Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954 discredited McCarthy in large part because of the role of the Eisenhower administration.*

Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from this paragraph?

- (A) Democrats held Eisenhower responsible for McCarthy's actions.
  - (B) McCarthy changed his tactics after Eisenhower became president.
  - (C) In time, Republicans came to regret their support for McCarthy.
  - (D) Eisenhower was angry that there was communist influence in the military.
- 2 Which section of the article highlights the idea that the strongest anti-communist efforts were led by the federal government?
- (A) "Government promotes a fear of communism"
  - (B) "States pass laws to stop communist activities"
  - (C) "The Hollywood Ten trials"
  - (D) "The Rosenbergs are convicted of treason"
- 3 Read the sentence from the section "States pass laws to stop communist activities."

*HUAC decided to investigate communist infiltration of the film industry, which it believed was full of communists.*

Which option is the BEST definition of the word "infiltration" as used in the sentence above?

- (A) to exercise power in a group
- (B) to gain political advantage in a group
- (C) to cause harm to a group
- (D) to secretly become part of a group

- 4 Read the paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-3].

*These two sides battled for the five days in what became known as the Army-McCarthy hearings. Finally, McCarthy staggered from the contest discredited. With McCarthy's fall came the beginning of the end of one of the great Red Scares of the time.*

Which of the following BEST explains what the word "discredited" means in the paragraph above?

- (A) unsteady
- (B) dismissed
- (C) embattled
- (D) disgraced