Discussion Guide

Directions: Discuss the following questions with your partner(s).

1. Why was the Cold War after World War II such a frightening place? Why did Americans believe that the Soviet Union and communism was “on the march” around the world?

2. Were there communist subversives committing treason in the American government? Could the danger of spies selling secrets to the Soviet Union be controlled while also supporting constitutional rights and the rule of law in the United States? Explain your answer.

3. Was the “red scare” of the 1940s and 1950s a product only of Joseph McCarthy? Which other individuals or groups contributed to government investigation of communist subversion during those decades? What constitutional rights seemed endangered by those laws and investigations?

4. How morally responsible is Joseph McCarthy responsible for the red scare or “McCarthyism” during the Cold War? Is a person responsible only for his or her own actions or should they bear a general responsibility for larger related events over which they don’t have direct control?

5. How was Joseph McCarthy reckless in his accusations of a communist conspiracy to undermine American institutions and policy in the Cold War? Do you think he can be described as a “demagogue” who was primarily seeking his own interests? Defend your answer with evidence.

6. Why do you think other government officials and the American people turned against Senator McCarthy? Did they show courage in battling him or rejecting his accusations? What constitutional principles and civic virtues did they stand for in denouncing McCarthy?