The world was a very dangerous place in 1950. The free world had combined forces to defeat the fascist war machines of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan during World War II in which tens of millions of soldiers and civilians were killed. In 1945, a new threat emerged in the form of the Soviet Union and communism expanding around the globe. The Soviets established a firm grip over the countries of Eastern Europe and ruthlessly installed puppet governments. They also tried to influence elections in Western Europe and elsewhere. In 1948, the Soviets closed off western access to Berlin in occupied Germany, and a war almost ensued when Americans instituted an airlift to break the blockade. In 1949, the Soviet Union exploded an atomic bomb that set off a nuclear arms race, and Mao Zedong established a communist dictatorship in China. This Cold War created great tensions between the two superpowers and caused great fear in the United States of war, communist expansion, and nuclear annihilation.

During the early 1950s, Joseph McCarthy, a Senator from Wisconsin, became well-known for his rousing Americans to fear that Communist subversives were spying for the Soviet Union and damaging the American fight against Communism around the globe. McCarthy’s name has become synonymous with “McCarthyism,” which was characterized as a “witch-hunt” or “red scare” against Communists in America. Thousands of government employees, union members, Hollywood actors, military members, educators, and members of the Communist Party lost their jobs, were blacklisted, called to testify in congressional hearings, and sometimes convicted and jailed. McCarthyism generated great fear in the United States and sometimes led to the violation of civil liberties such as freedom of speech and thought.

Perhaps calling the red scare “McCarthyism” is unfair because it places the blame on one person’s shoulders. In fact, attempts to rout out subversives in government had a long recent history and was carried out by both political parties. A red scare had taken place under the Wilson administration after World War I because of fear generated by the communist Russian Revolution. More recently, Congress organized the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1938 which held hearings about communist subversion, passed the Hatch Act (1939) that banned Communists from working in government jobs, and passed the Smith Act (1940) which banned political groups advocating the violent overthrow of the United States. In 1947, President Harry Truman signed an Executive Order creating a loyalty review board to investigate suspected subversives in the federal government. Truman vetoed the Internal Security Act, or McCarran Act (1950), which forced Communist Party members to register with the government, and large majorities in Congress overrode the veto.
FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and his agents investigated communist subversives in the United States. But, if McCarthy did not create the climate of fear, he contributed to it and benefited politically.

When McCarthy and other Americans looked at the events during the start of the Cold War, they feared that communist subversives threatened American national security from within. Their fears were legitimate and justified by several acts of real subversion. The cases of Klaus Fuchs, the Rosenbergs, and Alger Hiss demonstrated that Americans in high positions of government were spying for the Soviet Union. The national government investigated the treasonous activities according to the rule of law and preserved the constitutional principles of due process and trial by jury. Several espionage rings for the Soviets were uncovered, and Manhattan Project scientist Klaus Fuchs was arrested for selling atomic secrets to the Soviets. In addition, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted and executed for participating in a Soviet spy ring. Most famously, spy Alger Hiss was convicted of perjury based upon evidence hidden in a pumpkin by accuser, Whitaker Chambers.

McCarthy was a relatively unknown until he delivered a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, on February 9, 1950, warning of communist subversion and treason in the State Department. He said he had a list of alleged Communists who worked in the State Department. When the press gave him tremendous attention for his accusations, McCarthy continued the attack. He sincerely believed that Communists and spies were infiltrating the federal government—and he was correct that spies endangered national security—but he was irresponsible with the charges he leveled. The number of spies on his supposed list kept changing, and he began to lie and exaggerate for the media attention and increased political power.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee created a subcommittee to investigate McCarthy's allegations. McCarthy browbeat and bullied witnesses who appeared before the Tydings Committee. Anyone who pleaded the Fifth Amendment (the right to remain silent) and refused to answer questions was accused of being guilty of communist beliefs, party membership, or subversion. The outbreak of the Korean War, in which communist North Korea invaded South Korea in June 1950, added to the tense political climate. Finally, the committee report concluded that McCarthy's accusations were "a fraud and a hoax," but he continued his crusade.

McCarthy's attack on communist spies took a reckless turn when he accused the World War II Army Chief of Staff and later Secretary of State George C. Marshall of "invariably serving the world policy of the Kremlin." A cross-section of liberal and conservative Americans was outraged by McCarthy's charges against Marshall, and many in the media began calling the senator a demagogue. When anyone attacked him, however, McCarthy called them a communist. McCarthy was trying to use the popular anti-communist issue for his own political fame and power. It increasingly seemed as if he were pursuing his own self-interest rather than protecting the public or even telling the truth. He was also drinking heavily and showed increasing signs of impaired judgment. McCarthy's irresponsible charges undermined the legitimate anti-communist cause in the United States that advocated strength against the Soviet Union and uncovering spies in the government.

FBI Director Hoover and President Dwight Eisenhower both distanced themselves from McCarthy and worked against him behind-the-scenes. "I won't go down into the gutter with that guy," Eisenhower said. The president also asserted "it is imperative that we protect the basic rights of loyal American citizens" while honestly combating real subversion. CIA Director Allen Dulles refused to let his employees testify at McCarthy's hearings. Still, McCarthy sought the spotlight wherever he could find it, making wild accusations in committee hearings, and trying to block the nomination of an anti-communist appointee at the State Department.

McCarthy's final downfall occurred in 1954
when he investigated lax security in the Army for contributing to communist subversion. He made horrific allegations, at one point accusing an Army general who had fought heroically at Normandy on D-Day of covering-up communist spies. When one of his aides was drafted, McCarthy and his staff tried to get special privileges and assignments for him. In June, while being questioned in hearings to determine his role in his staff member’s special privileges, McCarthy accused the lawyer of sheltering a young lawyer in his law firm. McCarthy called the young man a communist. The lawyer angrily shot back: “Little did I dream you could be so reckless and so cruel as to do an injury to that lad….Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator. You have done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency.”

A few months later, the Senate voted to censure Joseph McCarthy by a vote of 67 to 22. Within a few years, the senator died of complications resulting from severe alcoholism. While the Cold War and fear of communism continued for decades, McCarthy seemed a symbol of the hysteria during the early 1950s and used the issue for his own interest. The demagogue was a tragic figure who subverted constitutional principles of due process and created an unhealthy civic culture of fear and distrust.

---

**Defining Civic Virtues: Demagoguery**

To lead others astray into injustice because you can control or manipulate them through moving words or a vision.
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?
Virtue In Action: Class Activity

With your partner, read the speech on pages 8-9 and answer the Primary Source Discussion Guide questions. Be prepared to report on your responses to those questions.

Sources & Further Reading


This indicates the swiftness of the tempo of Communist victories and American defeats in the cold war. As one of our outstanding historical figures once said, ‘When a great democracy is destroyed, it will not be because of enemies from without, but rather because of enemies from within.’

The truth of this statement is becoming terrifyingly clear as we see this country each day losing on every front….

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 or members of minority groups 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 in the Government we can give.

This is glaringly true in the State Department. There the bright young men who are born with silver spoons in their mouths are the ones who have been worst….

This, ladies and gentlemen, gives you somewhat of a picture of the type of individuals who have been helping to shape our foreign policy. In my opinion the State Department, which is one of the most important government departments, is thoroughly infested with Communists.

I have in my hand fifty-seven cases of 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.

One thing to remember in discussing the Communists in our Government is that we are not dealing with spies who get thirty pieces of silver to steal the blueprints of a new weapon. We are dealing with a far more sinister type of activity because it permits the enemy to guide and shape our policy….

As you hear this story of high treason, I know that you are saying to yourself, ‘Well, why doesn’t the Congress do something about it?’ Actually, ladies and gentlemen, one of the important reasons for the graft, the corruption, the dishonesty, the disloyalty, the treason in high Government positions—one of the most important reasons why this continues is a lack of moral uprising on the part of the 140,000,000 American people….

As you know, very recently the Secretary of State [Dean Acheson] proclaimed his loyalty to a man guilty of what has always been considered as the most abominable of all crimes—of being a traitor to the people who gave him a position of great trust.
The Secretary of State in attempting to justify his continued devotion to the man who sold out the Christian world to the atheistic world, referred to Christ's Sermon on the Mount as a justification and reason therefore, and the reaction of the American people to this would have made the heart of Abraham Lincoln happy.

When this pompous diplomat in striped pants, with a phony British accent, proclaimed to the American people that Christ on the Mount endorsed Communism, high treason, and betrayal of a sacred trust, the blasphemy was so great that it awakened the dormant indignation of the American people.

He has lighted the spark which is resulting in a moral uprising and will end only when the whole sorry mess of twisted, warped thinkers are swept from the national scene so that we may have a new birth of national honesty and decency in Government.”
Primary Source Discussion Questions

1. What is the greatest threat to the United States, according to Joseph McCarthy?

2. What are the characteristics of those who are betraying America? How does this support the idea that an appeal to differences of social class shaped McCarthy’s demagogic message?

3. Are the American people to blame for the communist subversion, according to Joseph McCarthy? Explain your answer.

4. How does religion shape Joseph McCarthy’s views and appeal?

5. Does McCarthy’s vision and speech advance or undermine constitutional principles and civic virtues? Explain your answer.
Demagoguery

Directions

Demagogues present a challenge to republican self-government because they manipulate a popular idea to persuade the people to act unjustly and keep their own power. Make a list of the ways that people can fight back against demagogues with various forms of technology, media, and social media today. Explain briefly how each answer would combat a demagogue. Be prepared to share your answers with the class.

“… of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by... commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.”

–ALEXANDER HAMILTON, FEDERALIST #1