

## Fear of Communism in the United States (1945-1960)

Even as President Truman was struggling to push through his Fair Deal, the nation was undergoing a change that he could neither direct nor control: a growing fear of communism. In 1947 a public opinion poll showed that Americans favored a friendly policy toward the Soviet Union. By 1948, however, 76 percent believed the Soviet Union was out to rule the world. What accounted for this change in attitude?

For one thing, Cold War events made Americans suspicious. They watched the Soviets bring most of Eastern Europe under their influence, abolishing capitalism and suppressing religion wherever they gained control. As communist influence spread around the world, Americans wondered when they might have to defend against it at home.

### **Hunting for Communist Spies and Traitors**

Many Americans became convinced that the Soviet Union would attack the United States. Even worse, they feared, the United States might fall to communism through **subversion**, being overthrown by traitors and spies lurking within the government. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover encouraged fear. There was, he said, a "force of traitorous Communists, constantly gnawing away like termites at the very foundations of American society."

Rumors about traitors first circulated in 1945, when government agents found secret State Department documents in the office of *Amerasia*, a magazine sympathetic to Chinese and Russian communism. Then, in June 1946 the Canadian government uncovered a Soviet spy ring. The spies included more than twenty Canadians who had occupied "positions of trust" in government. According to Canadian sources, the Soviets had spy rings in other nations, too.

Although Truman thought the fear of spies in the government was exaggerated, he knew he would be a target for critics if he ignored the possibility. Thus, in March 1947 he created a loyalty review program. Between 1947 and 1951 the government investigated 3 million of its own employees, searching for anyone with ties to a group suspected of plotting harm to the country.

More than 2,000 government employees resigned in connection with the investigations, many because they objected to the investigations on principle. Only 212 were fired after the review found "reasonable grounds . . . that the person involved is disloyal." Those who were fired often were not told who had accused them or what they supposedly had done. No cases of spying were uncovered.

Secretary of State Dean Acheson later wrote that the reviews themselves had been the real threat because they violated the rules of fair trial.

*"It was not realized how dangerous was the practice of secret evidence and secret informers, how alien to all our conceptions of justice and the rights of the citizen."*

In this atmosphere of suspicion, Congress gave the CIA authority to gather information about foreign threats. To protect the nation against internal subversion, Congress passed a series of laws, including the 1950 McCarran Act. This act required Communist organizations to register with the government. It also provided for the investigation of any group suspected of being un-American and permitted the arrest, without proof, of people suspected of disloyalty.

Truman vetoed the act, calling it "the greatest danger to freedom of press, speech, and assembly since the Sedition Act of 1798." Congress, however, passed the act over his veto.

### ***Committee on Un-American Activities.***

Meanwhile, in the House of Representatives, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) had joined the battle. Established in 1938, the committee first investigated the activities of Nazis, Fascists, and Communists. Now HUAC's focus was mainly on "Communists and all who promote the Communist line."

In 1947 HUAC focused its spotlight on the motion picture industry, calling movie stars, directors, and screen writers to appear. Afraid of being branded as Communist sympathizers, film executives soon blacklisted, or refused to hire, ten of the witnesses, who had refused to answer questions on the grounds that HUAC had no right to examine a person's political or religious beliefs.

One of HUAC's most controversial investigations was of Alger Hiss. Hiss had been a State Department official from 1935 to 1947. According to testimony by Whittaker Chambers, a former spy for the Soviet Union, Hiss had given him copies of documents containing military secrets to turn over to Soviet agents.

Hiss denied the charge and sued Chambers for libel. Nevertheless, Hiss was brought to trial in 1949. He could not be charged with spying because too much time had passed. However, although he continued to protest his innocence, he was convicted of lying under oath.

With the guilty verdict, Truman's insistence that the Communist threat was largely imaginary came back to haunt him. HUAC member Richard M. Nixon, a Republican congressman who had been most vigorous in his pursuit of Hiss, charged that Truman and the Democrats were more interested in hiding "embarrassing facts than in finding out who stole the documents."

### The Rosenberg Trial

While HUAC investigated Hiss, other unsettling events were unfolding. In October 1949 the Chinese Communists won that nation's long civil war and proclaimed the People's Republic of China.

Then, in September 1949 Truman made an unexpected announcement: The Soviets had developed their own atomic bomb. The United States' monopoly on the weapon had vanished.

Americans wondered how the Soviet Union had managed to discover the secrets of the bomb so quickly. Many suspected that they had had help. These suspicions seemed confirmed when the British arrested Klaus Fuchs [FYOOKS], a German-born physicist who had worked on building the American atomic bomb, and charged him with giving atomic secrets to the Soviets.

Fuchs's arrest led to the arrest in the United States of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg on similar charges. Claiming they were being tried for their political beliefs and had committed no crime, the Rosenbergs were convicted, nonetheless. Later, in June 1953, they would be executed despite lingering doubts about their guilt.

## Joe McCarthy and the Politics of Fear

The climate of fear was ripe for exploitation, which was not long in coming. On February 9, 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy, a Wisconsin Republican, gave a speech in West Virginia. "I have here in my hand," he said, "a list of 205 . . . names that were known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping the policy in the State Department."

Around the country and before the Senate committee investigating his charges, McCarthy repeated his theme. Traitors in the United States were responsible for the success of communism around the world, he said, especially in China.

McCarthy named names. As one person after another was brought before the committee, many observers thought it was clear that McCarthy's accusations were based on flimsy or even manufactured "evidence." Yet unproven accusations were enough to ruin people's lives because friends and employers of the accused were afraid to associate with them any longer. Anyone who voiced criticisms or suggested changes in American society risked being called a Communist. Such use of unsupported accusations to intimidate people has come to be known as **McCarthyism**.

Few people had the courage to speak up against McCarthyism. One who dared was Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine. In June 1950 she declared:

*"The American people are sick and tired of being afraid to speak their minds lest they be politically smeared as Communists or Fascists by their opponents. Freedom of speech is not what it used to be in America."*

Smith and six other Republican senators signed a Declaration of Conscience against such accusations. Their action did not stop McCarthy, however. His tirades against supposed Communists would continue to spread uncertainty for several years.

## The End of McCarthyism

Meanwhile Senator McCarthy continued his attacks on supposed Communists in government. In 1953 he finally went too far.

As head of a Senate subcommittee, McCarthy began an investigation of the United States Army. One of McCarthy's aides, G. David Schine, had been drafted that fall, and McCarthy claimed the Army was holding Schine "hostage" to hinder the investigation. The Army countered that McCarthy had tried to get special treatment for Schine. These charges were aired in Senate hearings televised to the nation in the spring of 1954. An audience of more than 20 million watched in fascination.

The Army selected for its counsel Boston lawyer Joseph Nye Welch. As McCarthy rudely interrupted the proceedings and made one unsupported accusation after another, Welch quietly persevered. Then, when Welch was cross-examining a McCarthy aide, McCarthy attacked Welch, accusing him of harboring a Communist in his law firm, and naming the man.

Welch was outraged. He accused McCarthy of "reckless cruelty" in trying to ruin the career of a promising young lawyer. "Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?" There was a hush in the hearing room.

Then Senators, lawyers, witnesses, spectators, and reporters broke into wild applause. Welch had finally said to McCarthy's face what many people had been thinking in private.

The hearings continued for thirty-six days. But the public had seen enough to get a true gauge of McCarthy's character. His reign of terror was over. In December 1954 the full Senate voted to "condemn" McCarthy for conduct that "tended to bring the Senate into dishonor and disrepute."

McCarthy lost most of his power in Washington, D.C., and soon dropped out of the headlines. He did not attend the Republican convention in 1956, and he died the following year.

