

## The Second Red Scare: McCarthyism

The Cold War was obviously at the center of U.S. foreign policy; however, it also influenced the nation domestically, sometimes in ways not foreseen. In 1947 Republicans pressured President Truman to establish a Loyalty Review Board to investigate current and prospective federal employees for possible affiliations with radical groups. Thousands consequently lost their jobs. Four years later the federal government prosecuted American Communist party leaders under the Smith Act (1940), which made it illegal to promote the overthrow of the U.S. government or belong to an organization that advocated this intention. In 1951 the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the act in *Dennis v. United States*. Earlier, in 1938, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had been formed to investigate political "subversives." It was resuscitated during the Cold War, in part because of the exposure of Soviet sympathizers such as Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. The Rosenbergs were accused of providing atomic bomb information to the Soviets during World War II when the USSR was America's ally, thereby, according to federal prosecutors, accelerating the Soviet A-bomb program. Although it was peacetime, the nation was in the grips of the red scare, and the "loss" of China to Mao Zedong's communists and the Korean War all weighed heavily in the government's decision to electrocute the two convicted spies on June 19, 1953.

The most famous case to come before HUAC involved a former State Department official and adviser to President Roosevelt at the Yalta Conference named Alger Hiss. Hiss's accuser, Whittaker Chambers, claimed that Hiss had not only been a communist sympathizer in the 1930s; he had also transmitted secret information to the Soviets. Hiss was convicted of perjury in 1950, in large measure because of the efforts of a young California congressman named Richard M. Nixon. The case led some to question whether there were other Soviet "sympathizers" in public and private life.

HUAC ultimately became a postwar tool whereby anyone who had been even sympathetic to radical causes (and there were quite a few given the disenchantment with capitalism during the Great Depression) could be called to Washington to recant their suspected political allegiance and inform on neighbors, friends, and colleagues. Some refused and suffered dearly. Numerous politicians took advantage of the anticommunist hysteria that swept the nation after the war, but no one did it as effectively and reprehensibly as Wisconsin's junior Republican senator, Joseph R. McCarthy. Searching for a campaign issue on which to run for reelection, McCarthy found that making unsubstantiated claims and accusations about communist infiltration into every segment of American life generated for him considerable publicity. One week he would claim there were 250 communist sympathizers in the U.S. State Department; the following week the number would arbitrarily change. Before long McCarthy was one of the most powerful and popular political figures in the nation. Few in or out of government would challenge him, for to do so would invariably invite the charge that that person was "soft" on communism. McCarthy even accused George Marshall, the former U.S. Army chief of staff and Truman's secretary of state and defense, of taking part in a communist conspiracy. Not even President Eisenhower, Marshall's former comrade in the war, would defend him. Some Republicans personally rejected McCarthy's tactics, but as his victims tended to be Democrats, they said nothing—with the exception of Senators Margaret Chase Smith and Ralph Flanders, both of whom publicly repudiated their colleague.

Over the course of McCarthy's crusade, many lives and careers were ruined, among them entertainers, screenwriters, teachers, and government employees. Not until Senator McCarthy's "witch hunt" was televised (during the Senate's 1954 investigation into possible communist infiltration of the U.S. Army; there was none) did the American people see firsthand the abusive and arbitrary verbal tactics McCarthy used to assault his victims. Many did not like what they saw. The American public, at one time supportive of the showy senator, turned against him. Later that year the Senate censured McCarthy, finally ending the demagogue's crusade. McCarthy died three years later, leaving in his wake thousands of shattered lives and a legacy of unfounded hysteria.