

Reading Guide – McCarthyism and the Red Scare

Today we begin the second unit of the course: “Enemies from Within: The Culture and Politics of Security.” The primary goal of the unit is to examine how ideas about security (both national and individual) shaped American politics and culture in the nuclear age. **Session 6** we focus on the phenomenon dubbed “McCarthyism” and the short period of intense anti-communism and repression that overtook American politics during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Assigned Materials

- Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents* 2nd ed. (2002) 1-3; 31-47; 63-79; 104-106.
- Joseph R. McCarthy, “Enemies from Within,” speech delivered in Wheeling, West Virginia, February 9, 1950.
- Paul Robeson, “You are the Un-Americans, and You Ought to be Ashamed of Yourselves,” Testimony before HUAC, June 12, 1956.

Questions to Consider

Ellen Schrecker is an expert on McCarthyism and the post-WWII red scare. The experts you read from her book, *Age of McCarthyism*, offer an introduction to the period and provide background on the scandals that led to heightened fear of communist infiltration. The Schrecker reading also examines the responses of Senator McCarthy and other government representatives, as well as institutional actions that were taken to combat the “spread of communism” at home.

As you read about the (sometimes real, sometimes imaginary) threats Americans faced during the early years of the cold war, try to arrive at an explanation for the intense political repression that surfaced during this era. Why, as Schrecker puts it, did normally thoughtful and responsible people participate in perpetuating political injustice? To what extent was the red scare a real threat? Were anti-communist crusaders like the members of HUAC justified in their actions? Was redbaiting an unscrupulous tactic deployed by careerist politicians (McCarthy, Nixon) to grab power? A Republican plot to discredit the Democrats? Something else? Are political tests for employment, economic sanctions, and other measures discussed by Schrecker acceptable responses to perceived threats to national security? What balance should be struck between individual rights and freedom and the desire for security? Finally, what impacts did McCarthyism have on American life? Are any of these impacts still with us?

As you read the two primary sources for **Session 6**, pay close attention to language. What kinds of rhetorical strategies does McCarthy use to incite fear and encourage action? How about Robeson? What strategies are available to him, and how does he respond to HUAC? How would you describe the “atmosphere” or tone of the Robeson hearing?

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