

## Topic page:

# McCarthyism

Period of political persecution during the 1950s, led by US senator Joe [McCarthy](#), during which many public officials and private citizens were accused of being communists or communist sympathizers. Although McCarthy was officially censured by the Senate for misconduct in 1954 (most of his evidence was fabricated), his claims induced an atmosphere of suspicion and paranoia that destroyed many careers. The term has come to signify any type of reckless political persecution or witch-hunt.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, when [Cold War](#) tensions were mounting, many Americans were alarmed by the spread of communism both abroad and at home. Overseas, China became communist and the USSR more militarily aggressive; at home Soviet spy cases, such as those against Alger [Hiss](#) and Julius and Ethel [Rosenberg](#), caused great scandal. The US government began investigating federal workers and creating lists of organizations suspected of communist activity.

Senator McCarthy, meanwhile, sought publicity to revive flagging support for his re-election. In 1950, at a Republican women's meeting in Wheeling, West Virginia, he claimed to know the identities of 205 Department of State officials with communist links. Although groundless, his allegations provided a fearful US public with an explanation for the spread of communism and sparked mass anti-communist hysteria.

Although the Senate Foreign Relations Committee investigated McCarthy's allegations, it did not uncover any evidence at all of communists in the Department of State. Nevertheless, McCarthy made further accusations and began a nationwide campaign to hunt down communists and communist sympathizers. Those who appeared before congressional committees were confronted with circumstantial evidence and intimidation. Many people accused others to save their own careers. Those who tried to criticize the government's methods were labelled communist sympathizers. 'Blacklisting' of suspected communists also ruined many careers, especially in the entertainment industry. Even President Dwight [Eisenhower](#) initiated a new loyalty programme to prove that he, too, was committed to rid the country of communists.

McCarthyism finally began to wane after the end of the Korean War in 1953. In 1954 a hearing on McCarthy's allegations of suspected communists in the US Army was televised nationally. In person his allegations rang hollow and seemed brutal and crude. He was further discredited when the Senate officially censured him for misconduct. The US Supreme Court made a series of decisions 1955-58 that helped to protect the civil rights of people accused of having communist links.

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[McCarthyism](#)

## Definition

**McCarthyism** from *Chambers 21st Century Dictionary*

**noun** the policy of hunting down and removing from public employment all people suspected of having links with Communism.

### Derivative

**McCarthyite** *adjective* belonging or relating to this purge, or to any manic purge of dissident factions in a political party, etc.

**noun** someone who supports or practises McCarthyism.

[1950s: named after the US Republican senator Joseph R McCarthy (1909-57), who headed a fierce campaign to hunt out and interrogate suspected Communists in the US in the early 1950s.]



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[McCarthyism](#). (2010). In *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather guide*. Retrieved from <http://www.credoreference.com/topic/mccarthyism/>

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