A Decade of Fear
How 'McCarthyism' turned American against American during the Cold War

On February 9, 1950, a relatively obscure United States Senator from Wisconsin delivered a speech to the Republican Women's Club of Wheeling, West Virginia.

Interest in the speech was so low—after all, Senator Joseph McCarthy had only recently been voted by the capital press corps as the worst Senator in Washington—that no audio recording was made.

But according to a local newspaper the next day, McCarthy dropped a bombshell: "The State Department is infested with Communists," he said. "I have here in hand a list of 205—a list of names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department." (The number of people he claimed to have on his “list” changed from 57 people, to 81, to 205, and was never actually seen.)

With the U.S. locked in a tense Cold War with the Soviet Union, news of McCarthy's accusation against the State Department of President Harry Truman sent shock waves across the nation. It catapulted McCarthy to national prominence overnight, and eventually made his name synonymous with a decade-long period of investigations—labeled "witch hunts" by his critics—to uncover Communist infiltration in American life.

In fact, the government's efforts to stop the spread of Communism at home began well before McCarthy's rise. In 1917, soon after the Bolshevik revolution that would turn Russia into the Soviet Union, thousands of alleged Communists in the U.S. were arrested and deported during what became known as the Red Scare. By the end of World War II in 1945, the Soviet Union controlled most of Eastern Europe and installed Communist “puppet regimes” in countries like Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and East Germany.

In 1947, President Truman, in response to critics who said his administration wasn't being tough enough in containing Communism, ordered "loyalty orders" of executive-branch employees. The same year, Congress began a high-profile investigation of Hollywood when the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) sought to purge the movie industry of people whose Communist sympathies might influence popular films.

Senator Joseph McCarthy conducted a “witch hunt” on all those expected of being associated with, or having sympathy for, the Communist Party. The over-zealous, almost paranoid actions of the senator came to be known as “McCarthyism”, which came to mean recklessly accusing people of disloyalty without any evidence. McCarthy’s allegations of the State Department were just the tip of the iceberg. His accusations were repeated to larger and larger audiences with increasing contempt over the coming months, bringing accusations to other government officials and politicians, and eventually to entertainers.

As his fame and power grew, so did his anti-Communist fervor. At the height of his power in 1953, McCarthy became chairman of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations and used the platform to make further charges of Communist spying. He found mostly flimsy evidence of Communist infiltration in the Voice of America (the American overseas radio network), the Army Signal Corps, and finally the Army itself.

It was his clash with the Army that would lead to his downfall. Early in 1954, McCarthy and his chief counsel, Roy M. Cohn, were accused of improperly using their influence to get preferential assignments for a former McCarthy aide, David Schine, who had been drafted into the military.
The Army-McCarthy Hearings

The Senate convened the Army-McCarthy hearings, which lasted 36 days and were broadcast live on television. The most famous exchange came when the Army's lawyer, Joseph N. Welch, challenged Cohn to deliver McCarthy's list of 130 subversives working in defense plants. McCarthy intervened, suggesting that if Welch was so concerned about Communism he ought to look into one of his own associates, a young man who had once belonged to a leftist association of lawyers.

"Until this moment, Senator, I never gauged your cruelty or your recklessness," Welch interjected. "Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator. You've done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?"

The hearings, coupled with two penetrating documentaries by Edward R. Murrow on his TV program, See It Now, doomed McCarthy. Murrow was one of the few public figures willing to speak out against McCarthyism, using See It Now as a forum to investigate and broadcast McCarthy as a man who was simply stoking fear and smearing anyone in his path as a pathetic grasp for power. This criticism was met with wide public support and helped lead to his downfall.

"We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty." Murrow said, in a warning that has been echoed repeatedly since then, from debates over the war in Vietnam to reconciling national security with civil liberties in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. "The actions of the junior Senator from Wisconsin have caused alarm and dismay amongst our allies abroad, and given considerable comfort to our enemies. And whose fault is that? Not really his. He didn't create this situation of fear; he merely exploited it-and rather successfully. No one man can terrorize a whole nation unless we are all accomplices. We must remember that we should not walk in fear from one another, for we do not descend from fearful men…but from men who were willing to defend causes which demanded change and were at the time unpopular."

"McCarthy did nothing but harm," says historian Richard Powers, "and besides the lives he wrecked, he also discredited American anti-Communism, which was for the most part a realistic view of a serious threat to the country, but a threat to the country from outside, not from within the country."

Despite all the hysteria, McCarthy never proved his conspiracy charges. Indeed, not a single conspirator was found. All his allegations repeatedly turned out to be empty, his enormous political power waned and his supporters abandoned him. After disgracing several generals, congressmen, and even President Eisenhower, the Senate passed a vote of censure against McCarthy in 1954. McCarthy died of liver failure three years later.

After reading, answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper in complete sentences.

1. Who did McCarthy accuse of being communist in his speech in Wheeling, WV?
2. According to the article, what things had happened since the end of WWII that had fueled the Red Scare?
3. What is McCarthyism?
4. Who did McCarthy end up accusing of communism? How did this affect him?
5. In his documentary about McCarthy, how did Edward Murrow characterize the situation with McCarthy?