

Are you now, or have you ever been...?

McCarthyism and the Threat to Democracy

Fall, 2022

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This seminar is about the McCarthyism era in the U.S., spanning the years from the late 1930's through the 1950's and beyond. The era is named for Joseph McCarthy, the junior senator from Wisconsin, but whose arc of notoriety and, many would say, infamy, lasted only five years, from 1950 to 1954. We hope, as the seminar progresses, the distinction between the man and the "ism" will become clear.

McCarthyism touched every corner of American life. No one was safe from suspicion. People were fired, ostracized, blacklisted, and often jailed not only because they were (or thought to be) communists or sympathizers, but also because of who they spoke to, what they read, or who their friends and relatives were. People attempting to assert their First or Fifth Amendment protections were often considered guilty of Communist leanings during hearings, trials and even in the workplace. In other words, the protection of civil liberties and democracy itself was secondary to protecting America from the "clear and present danger" that communism supposedly presented.

This extraordinary period has been the subject of examination by many scholars with the consequence of having an abundance of materials with which to work. And not unexpectedly, there have emerged a number of different interpretations. New light has been shed on the threats that Communism posed in the U.S., the players, the role the Supreme Court, the damage done to important institutions, and the long-term consequences.

There is certain to be comparisons between McCarthyism (and McCarthy himself) to our last president and tactics and strategies he used before, during, and after, his term. The number of parallels is often stunning. However, we will try to remain focused on the McCarthyism era as much as we can. In the last session, time will be set aside for a broader discussion, in which we can talk more about those comparisons and what they may teach us.

In exploring McCarthyism and the lessons it may teach us in 2022, each week we will look at one of the larger issues of the era. Examples of the "larger" issues may include: Roots of McCarthyism, Atomic Espionage, the Rise and Fall of American Communism, and the Investigative Techniques used during the era. Within these broader topics two participants will give brief presentations on sub-topics that relate to each other as well as to the broader topic of the day. For example, if the umbrella topic was the Investigative Techniques, the two presentations might be on (1) activities of the House Unamerican Activities Committee (HUAC) and (2) the efforts of the FBI. In this way the two presentations in each session offer the chance to explore the interactive complexity and multiple dimensions of the events and activities that characterized the McCarthyism era.

In order to have the time for what we hope will be the most robust discussions possible, we will have the two presentations during the first hour each week, followed by the discussion and questions related to those presentations and the umbrella topic as a whole during the second hour.

Resources

There are many books about McCarthyism published between the mid 1950's and the present day, and thousands of references to various aspects of McCarthyism on the internet. Three books which may be particularly helpful, but not required, are: "The Age of McCarthyism: A brief documentary history," 2d edition, by Ellen Schrecker (Bedford, 2002); "McCarthyism, The Great Red Scare: A documentary history," by Albert Fried, (Oxford, 1996). Both of these books offer an interpretive analysis of the era as well as supporting documents such as testimony, correspondences, etc. The third book is a short biography of McCarthy and his times: "Shooting Star: The Brief Arc of Joe McCarthy," by Tom Wicker (Harcourt, 2006). Used copies of all these books are widely available online and in the library.

Other resources are available. The moderators will assist in pointing you in the right direction to find what you need.

Finally, as appropriate, in a given week we will distribute a small number of readings for the subsequent week. We hope these readings will add context to the upcoming presentations, and serve to enhance the discussions. They will not be required readings, but we will strongly encourage participants to read them in preparation for each session.