

# Anti-Communism in the 1950s

by Wendy Wall

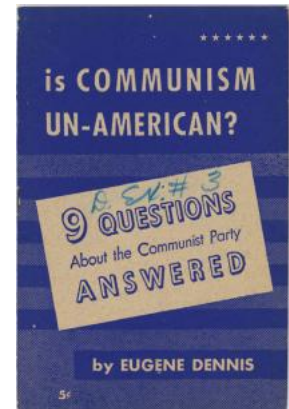
In 1950, fewer than 50,000 Americans out of a total US population of 150 million were members of the Communist Party. Yet in the late 1940s and early 1950s, American fears of internal communist subversion reached a nearly hysterical pitch. Government loyalty boards investigated millions of federal employees, asking what books and magazines they read, what unions and civic organizations they belonged to, and whether they went to church. Hundreds of screenwriters, actors, and directors were blacklisted because of their alleged political beliefs, while teachers, steelworkers, sailors, lawyers, and social workers lost their jobs for similar reasons. More than thirty-nine states required teachers and other public employees to take loyalty oaths. Meanwhile, some libraries pulled books that were considered too leftist from their shelves. The banned volumes included such classics as *Robin Hood*, Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The postwar Red Scare is often called "McCarthyism," a name derived from one of the era's most notorious anti-Communists, Senator Joseph McCarthy. Yet the anti-Communist crusade of the late 1940s and 1950s extended both in time and scope well beyond the activities of the junior senator from Wisconsin. Its roots can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century. As far back as 1848, when Karl Marx published the *Communist Manifesto*, many Americans viewed communism as an alien ideology. The Bolshevik Revolution only added to such anxieties, fueling an earlier Red Scare in 1919.

Postwar anti-Communism was rooted even more directly in the political culture of the 1930s. During the Depression, many Americans became disillusioned with capitalism and some found communist ideology appealing. Others were attracted by the visible activism of American Communists on behalf of a wide range of social and economic causes, including the rights of African Americans, workers, and the unemployed. Still others, alarmed by the rise of the Nationalists in Spain and the Nazis in Germany, admired the Soviet Union's early and staunch opposition to fascism. (This opposition ended abruptly, if temporarily, with the announcement of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in late August 1939.) In 1935, Joseph Stalin announced that he would allow Communists around the globe to ally with liberals and non-communist leftists in a broad anti-fascist coalition. All of these developments swelled the membership of the US Communist Party from some 7,500 at the start of the decade to an estimated 55,000 by its end. More importantly, many Americans who did not join the party sympathized with what they saw as its goals. They joined dozens of other groups with tangential connections to the Communists: unions, theatrical troupes, lawyer's guilds, ethnic organizations, and political committees devoted to causes ranging from anti-fascism to civil rights. Many victims of the postwar Red Scare were hounded for activities they had engaged in a decade or more before.

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If the Depression decade boosted the profile of international communism in the United States, it also sparked an anti-Communist backlash. Some of those who warned of a growing "red menace" during the 1930s feared Soviet influence in the US, but most hoped to use anti-communist language to discredit



Cover of *Is Communism Un-American: 9 Questions about the Communist Party Answered*, by Eugene Dennis (New York, New Century Publishers, 1947). (National Archives)

labor and social activism and New Deal policies. Ironically, anti-Communists were sometimes aided by liberals and leftists whose primary fear was fascist subversion. In any case, nearly all of the tactics deployed by anti-Communists in the decade after World War II had a trial run in the late 1930s. This period saw the renewal of FBI spying, the adoption of loyalty oaths for teachers and a political litmus test for federal employees, and passage of the first peacetime sedition law since 1798. In 1938, anti-Communists and anti-fascists in Congress joined forces to create the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which would become one of the key institutional centers of postwar anti-Communism.

Hitler's surprise invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 turned Washington and Moscow into wartime allies, and for a time domestic anti-Communism waned. But as the war ended and the alliance frayed, a series of events fanned the banked embers of anti-Communism into flames. In the spring of 1945, acting on orders from Moscow, US Communists reversed their policy of reconciliation with the West and adopted a militantly anti-capitalist stance. Meanwhile, authorities in the United States and Canada uncovered evidence of Soviet espionage, evidence that suggested Americans had been involved in passing classified secrets. Finally, Republicans and some conservative Democrats saw in anti-Communism a powerful campaign issue and a weapon that could be used to curb union and civil rights activism and New Deal policies. During the 1946 mid-term elections, for instance, Senator Robert Taft accused President Truman of seeking a Congress "dominated by a policy of appeasing the Russians abroad and of fostering communism at home."

To fend off such attacks from the right—and to build domestic support for his Cold War foreign policy—President Truman in March 1947 issued an executive order creating a Federal Loyalty-Security Program. A greatly enlarged version of a program originally instituted in 1939, the program gave loyalty review boards the power to fire federal employees when "reasonable grounds" existed for belief that they were disloyal. Evidence of disloyalty included not only treasonous activities, but "sympathetic association" with a long list of organizations deemed by the Attorney General to be "Communist, fascist, or totalitarian." These organizations ranged from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to the National Negro Congress. In practice, people could lose their jobs for being on the wrong mailing list, owning suspect books or phonograph records, or associating with relatives or friends who were politically suspect. Those accused almost never learned the source of the allegations against them, and the criteria for dismissal were expanded in 1951 and again in 1953. Tens of thousands of federal employees—including disproportionate numbers of civil rights activists and gays—were fully investigated under the loyalty-security program, and some 2700 were dismissed between 1947 and 1956. Thousands more resigned "voluntarily" before the program's demise in the early 1960s. By legitimizing the use of political litmus tests for employment, the federal loyalty-security program paved the way for the use of similar political tests by state and local governments and private employers. Between the late 1940s and the early 1960s, school systems, universities, movie studios, social welfare agencies, ports, companies with defense contracts, and many other employers used background checks, loyalty oaths, and other means to weed out employees deemed politically undesirable.

If 1947 marked the start of the Federal Loyalty-Security program, it also saw the resuscitation of HUAC. In October of that year, the committee was catapulted back into the headlines after years in obscurity when it launched an investigation of communist influences in the film industry. HUAC summoned a dazzling array of actors, screenwriters, and directors to testify at public hearings, asking them about their own involvement with the party and pressing them to name others with Communist ties. Ten witnesses—including the famous director Edward Dmytryk and Oscar-winning screenwriters Dalton Trumbo and Ring Lardner, Jr.—refused to cooperate on the grounds that answering the committee's questions would legitimize inquiry into political beliefs and associations. The "Hollywood Ten" were convicted for contempt

of Congress and served short prison terms. HUAC's investigation led to the development of extensive entertainment industry "blacklists," which made it difficult or impossible for those suspected of leftist sympathies to find work. These blacklists persisted into the early 1960s. Meanwhile, HUAC went on the road, holding hearings in cities across the US over the course of the next decade and investigating teachers, musicians, union organizers, and other groups. HUAC also inspired others. By the 1950s, two Senate subcommittees and dozens of committees at the state and local levels were also investigating "un-American activities."

The Red Scare was well underway by the end of 1947, but a series of events in late 1949 and 1950 fed the anti-communist frenzy. In September 1949 Americans learned that the Soviet Union had successfully tested an atomic bomb, years earlier than most experts had thought possible. In December, Mao's Communist army captured mainland China, prompting headlines about the "loss" of China. In June 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, and the resulting Korean War soon devolved into a prolonged stalemate. Many Americans thought that only a fifth column working to undermine the US from within could explain this series of setbacks.

Such fears were reinforced by several high-profile spy cases. In 1949, Alger Hiss, a former State Department official, was accused of passing secrets to the Soviet Union during the 1930s; the statute of limitations for treason had run out, but a jury convicted Hiss of perjury. The following year, Britain revealed that a high-ranking physicist named Klaus Fuchs had spied for the Soviets while working on the Manhattan Project. Finally, in 1951 a federal judge found Julius and Ethel Rosenberg guilty of passing atomic secrets to Soviet agents, and both were eventually sent to the electric chair. Hiss and the Rosenbergs maintained their innocence and their cases became cause célèbres for many liberals. Evidence obtained since the collapse of the Soviet Union has strengthened the case against Hiss and Julius Rosenberg, while suggesting that Ethel's participation was minimal. Still, scholars continue to debate the guilt of all three.

One of those who took advantage of the rising hysteria was a young senator from Wisconsin named Joseph McCarthy. Seizing an opportunity to improve his political fortune, McCarthy gave a speech to the Women's Republican Club of Wheeling, West Virginia, in February 1950 in which he claimed to hold in his hand a list of 205 Communists in the State Department. (In later versions of the speech, he changed the number to 81 and then 57.) The very concreteness of this charge—and the many others McCarthy hurled over the next few years—set the Wisconsin senator apart from other red baiters and he quickly captured headlines. McCarthy cared little about the accuracy of his accusations, and he made heavy use of intimidation and innuendo. Nevertheless, his complete disregard for the truth only made him more powerful and frightening. Few dared to challenge McCarthy directly, and many Republicans who despised him found him useful. (President Eisenhower told aides that he would not "get into the gutter with that guy.") After Republicans won control of Congress in 1952, McCarthy took over a Senate subcommittee and he used this perch to investigate federal agencies like Voice of America and the Army Signal Corps.

McCarthy, like members of HUAC and many other red baiters, greatly exaggerated the domestic communist threat. Still, the party's policy of secrecy, its top-down control, its attempt to win converts, and its ties to the Soviet Union alarmed even many liberals. "Cold War liberals" like Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey, union leader Walter Reuther, and historian and presidential advisor Arthur Schlesinger Jr. deplored the excesses of anti-Communism, but agreed with many of its basic tenets. Such liberals generally supported New Deal policies and an array of social reforms, but also believed that the best way to protect the nation from both Communists and anti-Communist zealots was to purge schools, unions, reform groups, and professional organizations of those with ties to the party. Thus, while their

language was more restrained than that of McCarthy and others they decried, Cold War liberals frequently supported some anti-Communist sanctions.

Anti-Communism continued into the 1960s, but after 1954 it lost much of its fevered pitch. The turning point came when Senator McCarthy began to investigate Communists in the Army, and powerful Republicans (including the President) decided he had finally gone too far. A special Senate subcommittee was formed to investigate McCarthy's tactics and ABC broadcast the hearings live, the first time political hearings had been televised nationally. The Army-McCarthy hearings dominated national television for three months and exposed McCarthy's bullying tactics. Much of the credit for this goes to Joseph Welch, the feisty and folksy Boston lawyer hired by the Army. When McCarthy red-baited one of Welch's young associates, Welch responded: "Until this moment, Senator, I think I had never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness. . . . Have you no sense of decency sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?" The question resonated with Americans. A few months later the Senate voted overwhelmingly to censure McCarthy and his influence evaporated. The worst of the Red Scare was over.

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