

# The effects of public opinion on joseph mccarthy history essay



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Joseph McCarthy proved to be one of America's most respected and feared senators. His over-ambitious attitude seemed to highlight the mindset of the American people during the Red Scare. He tried to develop some form of fear into each American's heart so that they would be aware of a "takeover" from the Communists. He was very manipulative and used events happening in America to arouse American support. The age of "McCarthyism" began long before McCarthy's involvement. There was much speculation to what led to the actual outbreak and coining of the term McCarthyism, many believe it to lie in the First Red Scare where Communism first erupted in Russia.

McCarthy aroused a certain mindset into the American public, which moreover led to the aggressive tactics in which many Americans were being questioned. The American people were beginning to be criticized and tried for being Communists. It seemed as though McCarthy held a strong hold on the U. S. government and thus influenced the way things were run. He enjoyed arousing the United States citizens to jump on his anti-communist wagon, which was successful to a large extent, until McCarthy began stretching the truth. Public support was instrumental in the rise of and falls of Joseph McCarthy. Public opinion was what spurred both his success as an arouser and downfall, as to when he took it too far. McCarthy led a very erratic life. It can be inferred that the actions that occurred throughout his life can be labeled as capricious and unpredictable.

Joseph McCarthy's parents were of the Catholic religion, they had little to no educational background. McCarthy was the fifth child of nine. Many historians describe McCarthy in different ways. Some state that McCarthy grew up shy and inactive amongst his peers while other historians argue

McCarthy was very confident. The U. S. entered war in 1942, World War II was a global struggle that included the most dominant powers of the world. Soon after, McCarthy was instructed into the United States Marine Corps. He seemed to show his brilliance and intelligence after he became second lieutenant of the Marine Corps after only a basic training session. McCarthy then ran for the Republican Senate position in Wisconsin while still as the Marine Corps lieutenant. He resigned and then focused his attention towards the Senate position. Although McCarthy is not a respected household name in the United States, his achievements reach far greater than many other leading figures. His milestones are undeniable and his charisma allows individuals to label him one of the most controversial figures of the 20th century.

Public opinion was a driving force in America, whether you were perceived as a hero or a villain was based on public opinion. The question asked by many historians today is to what extent did American public opinion contribute to Joseph McCarthy's rise and fall. As McCarthy's popularity grew immensely, so did his reputation as a hard-headed politician. Joseph McCarthy was highly regarded as one of the United States most controversial figures. His contribution to the Second Red Scare (1947-1954) sparked a crusade against foreigners as well as suspected Communist spies. Although McCarthy's antics seem extreme to us today, the decisions he made in the 1940's seemed acceptable to the general public. The reason behind the public's immediate approval of McCarthy may have roots in the First Red Scare (1917-1918). American attitude was leaning towards self interest and protection of

America at all costs, playing right into the hands of U. S. Senator Joseph McCarthy.

The age of "McCarthyism" began long before McCarthy's involvement. Many factors contributed to McCarthyism, some of them dating back to the years of the First Red Scare inspired by Russia's communist ideals emerging as a recognized political force. During the post-World War II era of McCarthyism, Americans were suddenly being accused of being Communists or having affiliations with Communists. These Americans faced brutal interrogations in panels. Americans, who lacked evidence by even a little, were accused. Although the Red Scare the Americans were deeply concerned about, it seemed as if McCarthy took things to a whole new level. With the thriving public behind him, McCarthy went on the attack. Americans McCarthy both thrived and created public opinion. He enjoyed arousing the United States citizens to jump on his anti-communist wagon, which was successful to a large extent, until McCarthy began stretching the truth.

The American public was without a doubt frightened from the results of the First Red Scare. The First Red Scare began during World War I from 1917-1918. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia as well as the vie for power in Russia caused much distress in America because it was unpredictable of what was going to happen, and the United States did not want to get involved. The First Red Scare's origins lie in subversive of both foreign and leftist elements of the United States. In 1917, Woodrow Wilson, the president of the United States established the Committee of Public Information to arouse a distrust towards foreigners. It is greatly shown that during this time, Americans didn't just mistrust the Communists but Germans as well. There <https://assignbuster.com/the-effects-of-public-opinion-on-joseph-mccarthy-history-essay/>

was a deep sense of xenophobia that came about during this time. The effort was also greatly helped by Congress who passed the Espionage Acts (1917) as well as the Sedition Acts (1917). The Espionage Act focused around the idea of making it a crime to basically slur the military and navy of the United States. The United States at this time was very protective and thus didn't want any Americans defaming their own country. This was a time of anti-foreign experience, something that the Espionage Act tried to focus on. The Sedition Act was much like the Espionage act whereas any disloyalty to America would be regarded as a crime. The First Red Scare consisted of many strikes staged by labor unions who protested with marches. During this time, there was not much violence or arrests. Those who gathered in labor unions, including strikers were labeled as communists because they were trying to start a coup to the dismay of the American government. Due to the bedlam created by Communist threats, there were many attacks that came along with the Red Scare. On June 2nd, 1914 a bomb partially destroyed the front of Attorney-General Alexander Mitchell Palmer's house. More Communist ideals arose in a well known trial in America involving foreigners. The Sacco and Vanzetti trial was a touchy subject in America. The Red Scare, without a doubt, affected all Americans as a worldwide hatred against foreigners erupted. Sacco and Vanzetti were seemingly robbed of a fair trial, because of them being foreigners. This event only showed how McCarthy's conquest in the anti-foreign sentiment was growing stronger and stronger and would thus lead to even greater disastrous events.

Joseph McCarthy illustrated an impressive political career. His rise to senator though, was faced with tough opposition. In his run to the Senate spot,

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McCarthy had to overcome Robert M. La Follette. In his campaign, McCarthy did not hold back as he ravaged on La Follette from all sides. McCarthy instigated a dramatic shift from Progressivism to McCarthyism, " which was set in motion when McCarthy defeated an icon of American liberalism and ended one of the nation's most remarkable dynasties" (Johnson 57) with the defeat of La Follette. McCarthy " played to the press" (Johnson 77) meaning he courted the press, going out of his way to make friends with reporters, and establishing close relationships with photographers. Despite his efforts, McCarthy was perceived in two different lights during his early years in the Senate: " The first, and more popular, version is that he was a flop. By 1950 he had been 'voted worst U. S. Senator in one poll of the press crops [...]" while the other version is that " McCarthy was one of the brightest and popular members of the freshman class, charming and 'handsome in a dark, square jawed way'" (Herman 51). McCarthy's rise to fame came with his constant intrusion into situations where he was simply not needed. In the closing days of World War II, the German army overwhelmed several hundred American soldiers near the Belgian village of Malmedy. More than seventy of the disarmed survivors were gunned to death. After, seventy-three of the German Nazi members were found guilty by an American war-crimes trial, and forty-three of them were sentenced to be hanged. McCarthy, got himself involved by " throw[ing] himself right into the hearing and on the side of the S. S. defendants and against the U. S. Army. He badgered witnesses, yelled at other senators, made series of unsupportable and often demonstrably false statements, and finally and dramatically walked out claiming the committee was trying to 'whitewash' the Army" (Cohen 47). Although McCarthy wished to " clean up" Communistic

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influences in America, it seemed like McCarthy unintentionally sided with the Communists. His determination on trails caused many individuals to realize McCarthy's demonic demeanor even while putting Americans on trial.

McCarthy's reputation soon became evident, even a household name. His antics caused his young political career to be placed in serious danger. McCarthy's fame hit an all time high with his "I Have In My Hand" speech, where McCarthy stated, "While I cannot take the time to name all of the men in the State Department who have been named as members of the Communist Party and members of a spy ring, I have here in my hand a list of 205...a list of names that were known to the Secretary of State...and who nevertheless are still working and shaping the policy of the State Department" (Cohen 81). The term "McCarthyism" was derived from a cartoonist by the name of Herbert Block. Block emphasized the word around the idea of mindless accusation. McCarthyism was basically another way of accusing without evidence. McCarthy's kickoff of the Communist "hunt", thus began his reign as one of America's most powerful men.

The Smith Act of 1940 was a law that made it a criminal offense for anyone to organize any association which teaches, advises or encourages such an overthrow, or for anyone to become a member of or to affiliate with any such association. Once McCarthy gained the full attention of the American public, he used to instill fear into the hearts of Americans. His compelling speeches aroused the American mindset and pushed towards the utter destruction of "Communism" in America. Once in power, it was easy for McCarthy to captivate the hearts and minds of the American people. His concern for maintaining Democracy in America at the expense of Communists appealed

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greatly to the general public. The House of Un-American Activities was an investigative committee of the United States House of Representatives. The HUAC condemned many individuals including a group of individuals famous for being placed in the "Hollywood Blacklist". Ring Lardner Jr., a famous Hollywood screenwriter featured in "Virgin Island" and "M\*A\*S\*H", was identified by the HUAC as a communist:

"But with the cold war tensions mounting all the time, with Harry Truman's loyalty-oath program patterned after HUAC, with the advent of Senator McCarthy on the scene, with the conviction of Communist party leaders under the Smith Act, with the arrest and conviction of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, the Hollywood we returned to from prison in 1951 was a much more hostile environment. The HUAC hearings were resumed, and each one of the scores of people named was added to the blacklist unless he proved his patriotism by naming others" (McGilligan 413).

McCarthy, although not much involved in the HUAC, still played a significant role as the instigator. He was the ringleader, where he oversaw much of the actions of the HUAC and aided them in their efforts. McCarthy, in a way, violated many American rights. McCarthy violated an individual's right to free speech and freedom of the press. On top of that, he also violated freedom of religion. Due to the fact that Communism was identified as atheistic, "those regarded as insufficiently religious-and the devil take you if you were an atheist-were assailed as bordering on 'godless Communism'" (Johnson 287).

McCarthy's questionings were often criticized for the abusing comments McCarthy made and the aggressiveness in which he attacked suspected

Communists. Paul Robeson was the victim in this case where he was  
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viciously instigated by McCarthy. Robeson was an American actor of film and stage, All-American and professional athlete and writer, who was also noted for his wide-ranging social justice activism. Robeson was indeed a communist but this passage highlights McCarthy's vicious character, not the fact that Robeson was a communist:

McCarthy's actions became even more extreme to the point where he focused his attacks on the United States Army. McCarthy started digging deep into the Army Signal Corps where he attempted to find evidence of any suspected Communists or Communist ideals. McCarthy's investigations led him to nothing. It can be inferred by many that McCarthy's fame with the public had dropped dramatically. The public was in disbelief of the audacity for McCarthy to attack the army. By insulting the U. S. army, Joseph McCarthy put himself in a predicament. Senator McClellan held a decisive stand for the army, and placed McCarthy in a trap. "[McCarthy] was genuinely convinced that any fair investigation would pin the blame on the Army, not on him" (Herman 257). This further led to the U. S. Army vs. McCarthy hearings were held for the purpose of investigating conflicting accusations between the U. S. Army and Senator McCarthy. The Army accused McCarthy and his chief counsel, Roy Cohn, of pressuring the Army to give superior treatment to G. David Schine, who was a former McCarthy aid and a friend of Cohn's. McCarthy counter-charged that this accusation was falsely made, in retaliation for his recent aggressive investigations of suspected Communists and security risks in the Army. Chaired by Senator Karl Mundt, the hearings were convened in 1954. The hearings received

considerable press coverage, including live television broadcasts, and are widely believed to have contributed to McCarthy's decline in popularity.

In August, 1954, a Senate committee was formed to investigate possible censure of McCarthy. On September 27, the committee released a unanimous report calling McCarthy's behavior as a committee chairman "inexcusable," "reprehensible," "vulgar and insulting." On December 2, 1954, the full Senate, by a vote of 67-22, passed a resolution condemning McCarthy for abusing his power as a senator. Though he remained in the Senate, McCarthy now had little power and was ignored by the Congress, the White House, and most of the media. The media also played an integral role in McCarthy's fall. Television's most respected man Edward R. Murrow presented a McCarthy "documentary on his popular show "See it Now", which provided, through skillful film editing, a devastating critique of McCarthy and his methods" (Bayley 193). The show produced clips of McCarthy speaking his half-truths, and distortions and then followed them with Murrow's explanations of McCarthy's logic, and descriptions of how the facts were manipulated. The only support for McCarthy was from parts of the nation where McCarthy's activities had been given the least coverage in newspaper, and from the only part of the country that did not have access to live television coverage of the damaging Army-McCarthy trials (Bayley 212). The media's powerful influence on his career is shown here again; however in this instance it ruined him.

McCarthy's evidence used on trial was sketchy. He presented rather dubious information and thus caused skepticism amongst the American public.

McCarthy used false evidence where his team cropped a picture "showing <https://assignbuster.com/the-effects-of-public-opinion-on-joseph-mccarthy-history-essay/>

Secretary Stevens standing alone with Private Schine at Maguire Airforce Base near Fort Dix" (Goldston 158). Apparently, this picture illustrated that "Stevens was trying to be especially nice to and considerate to Private Schine by agreeing to pose alone with him, thus hoping to influence McCarthy into calling off his investigation hounds" (Goldston 158). The next day, Defense Attorney for the Army, Welch, proved that the photo had been cropped showing dishonesty on McCarthy's part. His numerous scandals allowed the American public to doubt whether McCarthy took Communist infiltration in the American public too far.

As McCarthy's power in Congress eventually died down, so did the support from his fellow Americans. The "Red Scare" effect was also dying down in America. There were still Americans who were alert in the fight with the Red Scare but the general population began to realize that maybe Communist threats in America were coming to an end. Everyone wanted to believe that this was the end except for one man; Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy's overwhelming demand for power was detrimental to American society. Many Americans were beginning to realize that McCarthy didn't provide any evidence to show that Communism was erupting in America, causing many people to doubt McCarthy.

"He had always been a heavy drinker, and there were times in those seasons of discontent when he drank more than ever. But he was not always drunk. He went on the wagon (for him this meant beer instead of whiskey) for days and weeks at a time. The difficulty toward the end was that he couldn't hold the stuff. He went to pieces on his second or third drink. And he did not snap back quickly" (Rovere 21)

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Although Joseph McCarthy lived a life of power and dominance, his reign ended just as quickly as it began. His sudden windfall consisted of the accusation of suspected Communists with no real proof, but due to the events in the First Red Scare, Americans were fear-stricken and accepted all of McCarthy's ideals. Though McCarthy only wished to protect and aid the American people during this tumultuous time, his response to the fear was not justifiable to any extent. Though many people argue that McCarthy was only taking necessary safety measures, others argue that he threatened the freedom of the American people by restricting their rights. Because of his rash actions and his willingness to compromise the Amendments and freedoms of the American people, many people today view McCarthy with disdain. Today, the term McCarthyism refers to actions unappreciated widely by the American public. It illustrates McCarthy's outright disgusting actions towards many Americans. Therefore reflecting the negativity associated with McCarthy's actions during the Second Red Scare.