**Fighting Communism at Home How did the Cold War affect 1950s culture?**

##### The Second Red Scare

Even while enjoying the economic prosperity in the United States during the 1950s, many Americans were aware of increasing tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1949, the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb. The Soviet Union and the United States also spied on each other extensively and had many secret programs aimed at weakening the other’s government. Many Americans were scared. They feared a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. They also felt threatened by communist spies working for the Soviet Union, who were living in the United States and plotting to destroy the country. This panic was called the Second Red Scare.

Like the first Red Scare in 1919, anticommunism and suspicion of Soviet spying became driving forces in U.S. politics. Some U.S. political leaders during the 1950s became concerned that the economic programs of the New Deal were motivated by communism because they provided government assistance to struggling citizens. They also suspected other political or social movements of being communist. According to government files, starting in the 1950s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), led by Director J. Edgar Hoover, investigated many well-known artists, intellectuals, politicians, and activists with perspectives that challenged mainstream American culture.

##### Spies Among Us?

In the mid-1940s, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were members of the American Communist Party. Some acquaintances of the Rosenbergs accused them of providing the Soviet Union with secret information that could help Soviet scientists build an atomic bomb. The federal government charged the Rosenbergs with espionage.

The trial was controversial. The only clear evidence of the charges was the testimony of four people who were also accused of being involved in the spy ring. At least one of those accusers later admitted that he had lied in his testimony. Both Julius and Ethel Rosenberg denied the accusations that they were involved in a spy ring, but they were convicted in 1951 and executed in 1953. The executions prompted demonstrations around the country. The demonstrators believed the Rosenbergs had been framed. Protests against the verdicts continued even after their deaths. Soviet records released in the 1990s, however, indicated that Julius Rosenberg was, in fact, a spy.

##### Government Loyalty Programs

Some lawmakers and citizens worried that communist conspirators had infiltrated the U.S. government and were plotting a communist revolution. In 1947, President [Harry S. Truman](https://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Acommon/cbee0dd7-d274-4da7-a964-a5eca72c790f) launched a loyalty review program, which investigated government employees’ loyalty to the United States. Any government employee who was believed to support communism faced being fired.

In 1948, a little-known congressional committee called the [House Un-American Activities Committee](https://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Acommon/237d7829-cf3d-4d2b-bb7f-2cdd1427a388) (HUAC) began investigating a former State Department official named Alger Hiss for ties to the Communist Party. Hiss had been a powerful and influential figure in Washington, DC, and had accompanied President Franklin D. Roosevelt to the Yalta Conference. Now, he was accused of being a communist and a spy. The investigation was led by U.S. Representative Richard Nixon of California.

The confrontational hearings in the investigation were broadcast on television. Hiss denied all charges. The man who accused Hiss of being a communist, Whittaker Chambers, admitted to lying, but other evidence still seemed to implicate Hiss. He was not convicted of espionage, but Hiss was convicted of perjury and spent 44 months in prison. He maintained his innocence for the rest of his life. In the 1990s, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and National Security Agency (NSA) released secret Soviet messages intercepted during World War II that contained strong evidence that Hiss was, in fact, a spy.

### McCarthyism How did Senator Joseph McCarthy influence American life?

After the successful conviction of Hiss, the [House Un-American Activities Committee](https://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Acommon/237d7829-cf3d-4d2b-bb7f-2cdd1427a388) became more powerful. HUAC persuaded Congress to pass the Subversive Activities Control Act of 1950, also called the McCarran Internal Security Act. President Truman vetoed the bill, but Congress overrode the veto. The act declared:

There exists a world Communist movement which, in its origins, its development, and its present practice, is a world-wide revolutionary movement whose purpose it is, by treachery, deceit, infiltration into other groups (governmental and otherwise), espionage, sabotage, terrorism, and any other means deemed necessary, to establish a Communist totalitarian dictatorship in the countries throughout the world through the medium of a world-wide Communist organization.

—The Subversive Control Act

To stop communism from gaining power in the United States, the law required communist groups to register their activities with the government. It also allowed the government to arrest anyone suspected of intending to overthrow or threaten the government. The act created a Subversive Activities Control Board to investigate charges against groups.

Both HUAC and the Subversive Activities Control Board used their investigations to publicly attack anyone accused of communism. Accused communists were given an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to the United States by “naming names,” or revealing the names of their coconspirators. Accused communists, even if they had no ties to the Communist Party or any activist group, were encouraged to identify friends, neighbors, or coworkers who might be communists. Various other loyalty programs spread to smaller institutions. By the mid-1950s, labor unions, churches, universities, and businesses began their own investigations of members and employees. Many of these loyalty programs created and shared blacklists, or lists of people who were suspected of communist ties. People who were blacklisted could not get work. As with the government loyalty program, there were no trials before a person was placed on a blacklist.

##### McCarthyism

Joseph McCarthy added to these fears of communism. In 1946, the citizens of Wisconsin elected McCarthy to the U.S. Senate. During his election campaign, he repeatedly accused his opponent of communist ties. Four years later, McCarthy gave a speech during which he claimed that he had a list of 205 “card carrying” communists who were working for the U.S. State Department. His popularity and power grew, and in 1952, he became chair of a powerful Senate committee that could investigate government offices and officials.

McCarthy’s accusations became even more forceful. He never produced firm evidence or a list of names, but his investigations damaged the accused officials and other witnesses at the trials. Many lost their jobs and reputations. His tactics, which many considered reckless, were called [*McCarthyism*](https://app.discoveryeducation.com/techbook2%3Acommon/8c2cfd99-cfc7-441e-8ec2-30291b961ff6). Eventually, McCarthy began accusing high-ranking military officials of being communists.

McCarthy’s attacks were so successful and so damaging that few people were willing to fight against him, regardless of their position. In March 1954, respected TV news reporter Edward Murrow took a risk on his weekly program, *See It Now*, when he attempted to expose McCarthy’s deceptive practices. Meanwhile, McCarthy’s attacks on the military drew criticism from President Eisenhower, who refused to cooperate with investigations and secretly worked against McCarthy. Eventually, the Senate censured, or condemned, McCarthy, and he lost much of his power and influence.