**McCarthyism**

**McCarthyism: The Cold War at Home.** As the Cold War progressed, and as the presence of Soviet spies operating in the West, including in the United States, became known, many Americans began to see Communism as an immediate threat to their way of life. With revelations of the spying of Klaus Fuchs, who had smuggled atomic bomb secrets out of New Mexico, and as Alger Hiss and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were revealed to be spies, a fear gripped much of America. Thus by 1950 the time was ripe for a demagogue to seize the issue of anti-Communism and turn it to his own ends. What resulted was one of the most disgraceful episodes in American politics. That trend had already begun with the blacklisting of anyone in Hollywood or other areas of the country about whom it could be claimed that they had the slightest degree of sympathy for the Communist movement. Hundreds of lives were disrupted. (See Guilty by Suspicion starring Robert De Niro, 1991.)

Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, who had served with the Marines in World War II, though he had seen no combat, was elected to the Senate in 1946. (He later lied about his military record, claiming to have seen action.) Looking for an issue on which to run for reelection in 1952, McCarthy hit on the idea of anti-Communism, which he certainly did not have to invent. He launched his “project” with a speech in February, 1950. The press zeroed in on McCarthy’s charges, which sounded serious (though they were in fact fabricated), and McCarthyism was born.

Taking the already present suspicion and fear of the Soviets to new levels, McCarthy went on a frantic chase after Communist conspirators, who he claimed existed in virtually every corner of American life. With little or no evidence, he carried out what can only be called a witch hunt, ruining lives and reputations in the process and eventually bringing himself into disgrace.

McCarthy attacked all branches of government, including the State Department and the U.S. Army, the latter of which proved more than a match for McCarthy’s recklessness. In a series of televised hearings, McCarthy and aide Roy Cohn (many called him McCarthy’s hatchet-man) tangled with a tough Army lawyer named Joseph Welch. Welch put Cohn on the spot over some doctored photographs. When McCarthy tried to protect his protégé by slandering a lawyer in Welch’s law firm, Welch turned on McCarthy with a withering indictment. He accused the Senator in front of television cameras of being shameless and dishonorable, as spectators applauded.

The first Senator to attack McCarthyism on the floor of the Senate was Republican Margaret Chase Smith of Maine. She called for an end a smear tactics in her “Declaration of Conscience” speech, although she did not mention McCarthy by name. McCarthy was eventually censured by the Senate. An alcoholic, McCarthy died in 1957, but much of the damage done by the Senator and his aides such as Roy Cohn could not be repaired. One such casualty was J. Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic
bomb, whose top-secret security clearance was suspended in 1953 because of his alleged leftist sympathies during the 1930s.