

THE SOUL OF AMERICA

KNOW OUR PAST.
SHAPE OUR FUTURE.

LESSON FOUR

**Senator McCarthy and the
Press: Reason Triumphs
Over Passion**



OVERVIEW

Essential Questions

- What factors, and which voices, shape our understanding of the McCarthy-era Communist scare?
- What evidence do historians draw from in order to create a historical argument?
- How does this case study support Jon Meacham’s thesis about the “soul of America?”

In this lesson, students will study the rise and fall of Senator Joseph McCarthy in order to illuminate the relationships between the people of the United States, the press, and Congressional leadership. In 1950, within the context of the House Un-American Committee’s investigations to root out Communist influences in America, Senator McCarthy began a campaign that fanned popular fears by claiming he had evidence that Communists were infiltrating the U.S. State Department. Making false accusations, he gained power and notoriety, and also ruined the reputations and careers of many innocent people. Those who questioned him became targets of his devastating investigations. The profound bravery of a few strong individuals willing to speak out in the press and in Congress finally brought his conspiracy-fueled and sensationalistic campaign to an end in 1954.

Objectives

Students will:

- Critically view documentary film clips and interview segments
- Analyze primary source materials as historical evidence to research the McCarthy Era
- Articulate the complex relationships between the government, the people, and the press
- Connect what they learn about the history of the rise and fall of Joseph McCarthy to a current event

Materials

- Equipment to screen the video segments
- Clip from **THE SOUL OF AMERICA**: (1:47:45 - 1:52:33)
- Copies of Handouts:
 - One: Note Catcher - McCarthy Era
 - Two: The Rise of McCarthy Resources
 - Three: The Fall of McCarthy Resources

Length

One 55-minute class period

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is important to situate the McCarthy Era (1950–54) within the context of other domestic and international events occurring during this period. Students can examine these influential factors by listening to additional interview segments compiled in the making of **THE SOUL OF AMERICA**, and by reading relevant source materials identified for this topic.

→ **Fear of Communism After the First and Second World Wars:**

Interview Archive, Jon Meacham (Interview 2)
(01:49:44:15-01:51:53) The Red Scare of 1919–20 and the demonization of the other

Primary Resource: “Pointing Their Pens: Herblock and Fellow Cartoonists Confront the Issues: The Red Scare” <https://loc.gov/exhibits/pointing-their-pens-editorial-cartoons/red-scare.html>

→ **The House Un-American Activities Committee:**

The Truman Library Archive

Background information: <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/education/presidential-inquiries/house-un-american-activities-committee>

Primary Resources Document Set: https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/public/2019-03/HUAC_DocumentSet.pdf

→ **The Role of the Press in a Democracy**

Interview Archive, Jon Meacham (Interview 2)
(01:51:55:17 - 1:55:25) Attacks on the press during times of fear, and the five elements that shape an era

Interview Archive, Jon Meacham (Interview 1)
(01:52:13:20 - 01:57:20) The role of changing technology

“ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT SHIFTS WE’VE LIVED THROUGH IS THE MOVE FROM A LITERATE, READING PRINT CULTURE, WHICH IS THE WORLD OF JEFFERSON AND LINCOLN; TO RADIO, WHICH WAS FDR AND CHURCHILL; TO TELEVISION, WHICH WAS KENNEDY AND REAGAN. AND NOW DIGITAL AND CABLE, WHICH IS TRUMP. IT IS INCREASING THE LIKELIHOOD THAT PEOPLE WILL NOT ENGAGE WITH TEXTS-- THEY WILL SIMPLY ENGAGE EMOTIONALLY, AND THAT CREATES A POLITICAL MARKETPLACE THAT IS EVER FARTHER FROM REASON AND EVER CLOSER TO PASSION, WHICH IS EXACTLY WHAT THE FOUNDERS WERE WORRIED ABOUT...WE CAN LEARN A LOT BY STUDYING THE MCCARTHY ERA. I THINK THE FALL OF MCCARTHY IS AN INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT CASE STUDY IN HOW REASON CAN ULTIMATELY TRIUMPH OVER PASSION.”

- JON MEACHAM

ACTIVITY



Opening

Do a quick classroom poll:

- Where do you get your news about what is happening in the world?

Ask a few volunteers to share more about their choice:

- Why do you choose that source?
- Do you trust what you hear from it? Why or why not?
- If you hear something surprising or suspicious, how do you go about checking to see if it's true?

As a large group, discuss:

- Why does reading the news matter?
- What is the role of journalism in our society?



Analyzing the Historical Perspective of *The Soul of America*

Watch a clip from the **THE SOUL OF AMERICA**, and an Interview Segment with Jon Meacham. Ask the students to use **Handout 1: Note Catcher - McCarthy Era** to help students watch the film clip actively and with critical eyes.

Clip: 1:47:45 - 1:52:33 (8:02 mins)

Interview Segment:

Interview Archive (Interview 3) 01:23:19:08 - 1:26:45
The Fall of McCarthyism and Lesson of the McCarthy Era

After watching the clip and the interview segments, offer students a few minutes to finish the questions on their note catchers.



Analyzing Historical Evidence

In order to analyze the historical evidence presented in the film, students will investigate excerpts from [The Interview Archive](#) and other primary resources to investigate one of the suggested topics.

As students are reviewing the primary resources ask them to assess the historical evidence using the following questions as guidance:

- Where and when is the evidence from?
- Who wrote or produced it?
- Why was it produced?
- Do we know anything about the context in which it was produced?

Students will learn more about the arc of McCarthy's rise to power and eventual Senate censure, using historical evidence that they will present back to the class on the following questions:

- What did you learn in your investigations that deepens or changes your understanding of the McCarthy Era?
- What did you learn in your investigations that sheds a new or different light on the relationship between the government, the press, and the people?

As they conduct their research, encourage students to record data such as an author's citations and the names of other people, places, or events mentioned, and use those to further their research.

Teacher Note: The suggested evidence for each topic is meant as an introduction, and students are encouraged to use what they learn to seek out further evidence and information.



The Rise of McCarthy (First two documents included in Handout Two)

- Document: Senator Joseph McCarthy's "[Enemies from Within](#)," Wheeling, WV February 9, 1950
- Document: [The President's News Conference at Key West](#), Key West, FL, March 30, 1950
- Document: Margaret Chase Smith, "[Declaration of Conscience](#)," Floor of the Senate, June 1, 1950

The Fall of McCarthy (First two included in Handout Three)

- Audio + Transcript: [Edward R. Murrow on CBS' See It Now](#), April 13, 1954
- Article about Palmer Hoyt's series of speeches against McCarthy: <https://extras.denverpost.com/opinion/persp0206a.htm>
- Document: [Committee Report on the Censure of Senator Joseph McCarthy](#), November 8, 1954



Exit Ticket: Echoes and Connections to Today

Discuss as a class or assign as a short reflective writing assignment:

- How does the McCarthy Era support Jon Meacham's historical argument about the soul of America? In his interview on McCarthy Jon Meacham observes, "McCarthy sold papers. He was a good story." What does this idea reveal about the relationship between the press and politics? How do you think the era influenced the way journalism operates today?

HANDOUT ONE:

Note Catcher- McCarthy Era

What were the McCarthy investigations about?

How does Senator McCarthy use the press to his advantage?

What is Senator McCarthy's motivation?

Why is he able to stay in power as long as he does?

What arguments do the journalists use against McCarthy:

- Palmer Hoyt:

- Edward R. Murrow:

What brought about the end of the McCarthy Era?

HANDOUT TWO:

The Rise of McCarthy Resources

Excerpt of Speech of Joseph McCarthy, Wheeling, West Virginia, February 9, 1950

Ladies and gentlemen, tonight as we celebrate the one hundred forty-first birthday of one of the greatest men in American history, I would like to be able to talk about what a glorious day today is in the history of the world. As we celebrate the birth of this man who with his whole heart and soul hated war, I would like to be able to speak of peace in our time—of war being outlawed—and of world-wide disarmament. These would be truly appropriate things to be able to mention as we celebrate the birthday of Abraham Lincoln.

Five years after a world war has been won, men's hearts should anticipate a long peace—and men's minds should be free from the heavy weight that comes with war. But this is not such a period—for this is not a period of peace. This is a time of "the cold war." This is a time when all the world is split into two vast, increasingly hostile armed camps—a time of a great armament race.

Today we can almost physically hear the mutterings and rumblings of an invigorated god of war. You can see it, feel it, and hear it all the way from the Indochina hills, from the shores of Formosa, right over into the very heart of Europe itself.

The one encouraging thing is that the "mad moment" has not yet arrived for the firing of the gun or the exploding of the bomb which will set civilization about the final task of destroying itself. There is still a hope for peace if we finally decide that no longer can we safely blind our eyes and close our ears to those facts which are shaping up more and more clearly . . . and that is that we are now engaged in a show-down fight . . . not the usual war between nations for land areas or other material gains, but a war between two diametrically opposed ideologies.

The great difference between our western Christian world and the atheistic Communist world is not political, gentlemen, it is moral. For instance, the Marxian idea of confiscating the land and factories and running the entire economy as a single enterprise is momentous. Likewise, Lenin's invention of the one-party police state as a way to make Marx's idea work is hardly less momentous.

Stalin's resolute putting across of these two ideas, of course, did much to divide the world. With only these differences, however, the east and the west could most certainly still live in peace.

The real, basic difference, however, lies in the religion of immorality . . . invented by Marx, preached feverishly by Lenin, and carried to unimaginable extremes by Stalin. This religion of immorality, if the Red half of the world triumphs—and well it may, gentlemen—this religion of immorality will more deeply wound and damage mankind than any conceivable economic or political system.

Karl Marx dismissed God as a hoax, and Lenin and Stalin have added in clear-cut, unmistakable language their resolve that no nation, no people who believe in a god, can exist side by side with their communistic state.

Karl Marx, for example, expelled people from his Communist Party for mentioning such things as love, justice, humanity or morality. He called this "soulful ravings" and "sloppy sentimentality." . . .

Today we are engaged in a final, all-out battle between communistic atheism and Christianity. The modern champions of communism have selected this as the time, and ladies and gentlemen, the chips are down—they are truly down.

Lest there be any doubt that the time has been chosen, let us go directly to the leader of communism today—Joseph Stalin. Here is what he said—not back in 1928, not before the war, not during the war—but 2 years after the last war was ended: "To think that the Communist revolution can be carried out peacefully, within the framework of a Christian democracy, means one has either gone out of one's mind and lost all normal understanding, or has grossly and openly repudiated the Communist revolution." . . .

Ladies and gentlemen, can there be anyone tonight who is so blind as to say that the war is not on? Can there be anyone who fails to realize that the Communist world has said the time is now? . . . that this is the time for the show-down between the democratic Christian world and the communistic atheistic world?

Unless we face this fact, we shall pay the price that must be paid by those who wait too long.

Six years ago, . . . there was within the Soviet orbit, 180 million people. Lined up on the antitotalitarian side there were in the world at that time, roughly 1.6 billion people.

Today, only six years later, there are 800 million people under the absolute domination of Soviet Russia—an increase of over 400 percent. On our side, the figure has shrunk to around 500 million. In other words, in less than six years, the odds have changed from 9 to 1 in our favor to 8 to 5 against us.

This indicates the swiftness of the tempo of Communist victories and American defeats in the cold war. As one of our outstanding historical figures once said, “When a great democracy is destroyed, it will not be from enemies from without, but rather because of enemies from within.” . . .

The reason why we find ourselves in a position of impotency is not because our only powerful potential enemy has sent men to invade our shores . . . but rather because of the traitorous actions of those who have been treated so well by this Nation. It has not been the less fortunate, or members of minority groups who have been traitorous to this Nation, but rather those who have had all the benefits that the wealthiest Nation on earth has had to offer . . . the finest homes, the finest college education and the finest jobs in government we can give.

This is glaringly true in the State Department. There the bright young men who are born with silver spoons in their mouths are the ones who have been most traitorous. . . .

I have here in my hand a list of 205 . . . a list of names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department. . . .

As you know, very recently the Secretary of State proclaimed his loyalty to a man guilty of what has always been considered as the most abominable of all crimes—being a traitor to the people who gave him a position of great trust—high treason. . . .

He has lighted the spark which is resulting in a moral uprising and will end only when the whole sorry mess of twisted, warped thinkers are swept from the national scene so that we may have a new birth of honesty and decency in government.

The President’s News Conference at Key West

Q. Mr. President, do you think Senator McCarthy is getting anywhere in his attempt to win the case against the State Department?

THE PRESIDENT. What’s that ?

Q. Do you think that Senator McCarthy can show any disloyalty exists in the State Department?

THE PRESIDENT. I think the greatest asset that the Kremlin has is Senator McCarthy.

Q. Would you care to elaborate on that?

THE PRESIDENT. I don’t think it needs any elaboration—I don’t think it needs any elaboration.

Q. Brother, will that hit page one tomorrow !

Q. If you think we are going to bust down the fence on what you have got later, that’s a pretty good starter.
[Laughter]

Q. Mr. President, could we quote that one phrase, “I think the greatest asset the Kremlin has is Senator McCarthy”?

THE PRESIDENT. Now let me give you a little preliminary, and then I will tell you what I think you ought to do. Let me tell you what the situation is.

We started out in 1945, when I became President, and the two wars were still going on, and the Russians were our allies, just the same as the British and the French and Brazil and the South American countries. And we won the war together.

We organized the United Nations in April 1945, and one of the first questions that was asked me, after I was sworn in at 7:09 o’clock on the 12th of April, was whether or not the San Francisco conference on the United Nations should go ahead. And I said it certainly will. It went ahead and we finally succeeded in getting a charter and getting it agreed to by I think 51 nations, if I remember correctly.

Then our objective was to—as quickly as possible—get peace in the world. We made certain agreements with the

Russians and the British and the French and the Chinese. We kept those agreements to the letter. They have nearly all been—those agreements where the Russians were involved—been broken by the Russians. And it became perfectly evident that they had no intention of carrying out the fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter and the agreements which had been made at Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam. And it became evident that there was an endeavor on the part of the Kremlin to control the world.

A procedure was instituted which came to be known as the cold war. The airlift to Berlin was only one phase of it. People became alarmed here in the United States then, that there might be people whose sympathies were with the Communist ideal of government—which is not communism under any circumstances, it is totalitarianism of the worst brand. There isn't any difference between the totalitarian Russian Government and the Hitler government and the Franco government in Spain. They are all alike. They are police state governments.

In 1947 I instituted a loyalty program for Government employees, and that loyalty procedure program was set up in such a way that the rights of individuals were respected.

In a survey of the 2,200,000 employees at that time, I think there were some 205—something like that—who left the service. I don't know—a great many of them left of their own accord.

Q. How many, Mr. President?

THE PRESIDENT. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 205. Does anybody remember those figures exactly? It's a very small figure.

Q. Very small.

THE PRESIDENT. An infinitesimal part of 1 percent. We will get the figures for you. And then, for political background, the Republicans have been trying vainly to find an issue on which to make a bid for the control of the Congress for next year. They tried "statism." They tried "welfare state." They tried "socialism." And there are a certain number of members of the Republican Party who are trying to dig up that old malodorous dead horse called "isolationism." And in order to do that, they are perfectly willing to sabotage the bipartisan foreign policy of the United States. And this fiasco which has been going on in the Senate is the very best asset that the Kremlin could have in the operation of the cold war. And that is what I mean when I say that McCarthy's antics are the best asset that the Kremlin can have.

Now, if anybody really felt that there were disloyal people in the employ of the Government, the proper and the honorable way to handle the situation would be to come to the President of the United States and say, "This man is a disloyal person. He is in such and such a department." We will investigate him immediately, and if he were a disloyal person he would be immediately fired.

That is not what they want. They are trying to create an issue, and it is going to be just as big a fiasco as the campaign in New York and other places on these other false and fatuous issues.

With a little bit of intelligence they could find an issue at home without a bit of trouble!

Q. What would it be, Mr. President?

THE PRESIDENT. Anything in the domestic line. I will meet them on any subject they want, but to try to sabotage the foreign policy of the United States, in the face of the situation with which we are faced, is just as bad as trying to cut the Army in time of war.

Q. On that question we were just kidding.

THE PRESIDENT. And that gave me a chance to give you an answer. To try to sabotage the foreign policy of the United States is just as bad in this cold war as it would be to shoot our soldiers in the back in a hot war.

I am fed up with what is going on, and I am giving you the facts as I see them.

Q. Mr. President, do you consider the Republican Party as a party?

THE PRESIDENT. The policy of the Republican Party has endorsed the antics of Mr. McCarthy.

Q. That affects the bipartisan—

THE PRESIDENT. That's what it is for—that's what it is for. They are anxious for the return of isolationism.

Q. Do you think that this has torpedoed, then, the bipartisan

THE PRESIDENT. It is an endeavor to torpedo the bipartisan foreign policy. They are not going to succeed, because the levelheaded Republicans do not believe that at all, as [noted] Mr. Stimson, Senator Vandenberg, Senator Saltonstall, and a dozen others I could name, who know exactly what is going on and are trying their best to

cooperate. And I am going to try to help them prevent it going under.

Q. Well, Mr. President, to carry that out to its logical conclusion, when these people come up for reelection, with the grace of God and so on, there is nothing that the Democratic Party can do except simply to sit on the sidelines and say, "Well?"

THE PRESIDENT. Well, it's too bad. It's a dangerous situation, and it has got to be stopped. And every citizen in the United States is going to find out just exactly what the facts are when I get through with this thing.

Q. You will stand up on one side, and they will stand up on the other?

THE PRESIDENT. There's only one side that the people will stay on, and that is the side that will lead to peace. That is all we are after. This is just another fiasco to find an issue. This is not it.

Q. Mr. President, would you like to name any others besides Senator McCarthy who have participated in this attempt to sabotage our foreign policy ?

THE PRESIDENT. Senator Wherry.

Q. Yes, sir?

THE PRESIDENT. Senator Bridges.

Q. Yes, sir?

THE PRESIDENT. That's about as far as I care to go.

Q. Okay, sir.

Q. Now, what I forgot to say was would you like to say anything about Mr. Acheson and Mr. Lattimore, and—what's his name—the Ambassador at Large?

THE PRESIDENT. Jessup. I think I made myself perfectly clear that I think Dean Acheson will go down in history as one of the great Secretaries of State. You know very well that Mr. Jessup is as able and distinguished a citizen as this country has ever produced. Lattimore is a member of the faculty of Johns Hopkins University and is a very well informed person on foreign affairs.

Owen Lattimore, former official of the Office of War Information.

Q. You don't believe he is a spy?

THE PRESIDENT. Why of course not. It's silly on the face of it.

Q. Mr. President, don't you think the American people recognize this for what it is?

THE PRESIDENT. There is no doubt about it. I am just emphatically bringing it to their attention.

Q. For direct quotes, could we have that, "I think the greatest asset—

THE PRESIDENT. I would rather you would say that the greatest asset the Kremlin has is the present approach of those in the Senate who are trying to sabotage the bipartisan foreign policy.

Q. Could we have that read back to us?

THE PRESIDENT. Sure. Jack?

Mr. Romagna. I'm all balled up.

THE PRESIDENT. Take your time—take your time.

[As the White House Official Reporter pondered, the President rephrased the statement.]

The greatest asset that the Kremlin has is the partisan attempt in the Senate to sabotage the bipartisan foreign policy of the United States.

Q. This may seem redundant, but this is just for the record. The partisan effort, of course, is the effort by the Republicans in the Senate

THE PRESIDENT. Well now, I didn't say that, "partisan effort." Leave it at that. Draw your own conclusions.

HANDOUT THREE:

The Fall of McCarthy

Transcript: Edward R. Murrow, Response to Senator Joseph McCarthy

Last week, Senator McCarthy appeared on this program to correct any errors he might have thought we made in our report of March 9th.

Since he made no reference to any statements of fact that we made, we must conclude that he found no errors of fact. He proved again that anyone who exposes him, anyone who does not share his hysterical disregard for decency and human dignity and the rights guaranteed by the Constitution, must be either a Communist or a fellow traveler.

I fully expected this treatment. The Senator added this reporter's name to a long list of individuals and institutions he has accused of serving the Communist cause. His proposition is very simple: Anyone who criticizes or opposes McCarthy's methods must be a Communist. And if that be true, there are an awful lot of Communists in this country.

For the record, let's consider briefly some of the Senator's charges. He claimed, but offered no proof, that I had been a member of the Industrial Workers of the World. That is false. I was never a member of the IWW, never applied for membership. Men that I worked with in the Pacific Northwest in western Washington in logging camps will attest that I never had any affiliation or affinity with that organization.

The Senator charged that Professor Harold Laski, a British scholar and politician, dedicated the book to me. That's true. He is dead. He was a socialist — I am not. He was one of those civilized individuals who did not insist upon agreement with his political principles as a pre-condition for conversation or friendship. I do not agree with his political ideas. Laski, as he makes clear in the introduction, dedicated the book to me not because of political agreement but because he held my wartime broadcast from London in high regard —and the dedication so reads.

Senator McCarthy's principal attack on me was an attack on the Institute of International Education, of which I was Assistant Director and am now a trustee, together with such people as John Foster Dulles, Milton Eisenhower, Ralph J. Bunche, Virginia Gildersleeve, Philip Reed, to name just a few. That Institute sponsored, acted as the registering agent for summer schools in foreign countries, including England, France, and Germany, and one in the Soviet Union in 1934. It has arranged in all some 30,000 exchanges of students and professors between the United States and over 50 foreign countries.

The man primarily responsible for starting this Institute was Nicholas Murray Butler in 1919. Its work has been praised as recently as 1948 by President Eisenhower. It has been denounced by the Soviet Press and radio as a center of international propaganda for American reaction, and I have been labeled by them as a "reactionary radio commentator."

The Senator alleged that we were doing the work of the Russian Secret Police, training spies. We were in fact conducting normal cultural and educational relations with foreign nations. The Moscow summer session was cancelled in 1935 by the Russian authorities.

I believed 20 years ago and I believe today that mature Americans can engage in conversation and controversy, the clash of ideas, with Communists anywhere in the world without becoming contaminated or converted. I believe that our faith, our conviction, our determination are stronger than theirs, and that we can compete—and successfully, not only in the area of bombs but in the area of ideas.