

NIGHTMARE IN RED: MCCARTHY ERA IN PERSPECTIVE

1 Two Eras and Some Victims

FOR MANY the McCarthy era stands as the grimmest time in recent memory. Beset by Cold War anxieties, Americans developed an obsession with domestic communism that outran the actual threat and gnawed at the tissue of civil liberties. For some politicians, hunting Reds became a passport to fame—or notoriety. It was the focal point of the careers of Wisconsin Senator Joseph R. McCarthy; of Richard Nixon during his tenure as Congressman, Senator, and Vice President of the United States; of several of Nixon's colleagues on the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC); of Senator Pat McCarran and other members of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee; and of a phalanx of understudies at the national, state, and local levels.

A new vocabulary entered political discourse. “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?” “I refuse to answer on grounds that the answer may tend to incriminate me.” “Fifth-Amendment Communist!” “Soft on communism....” “Witch-hunt!” “McCarthyism!” In the barrage of accusations that rumbled through the late 1940s and early 1950s, reputations were made or ruined, careers blasted or created, lives and families shattered.

It is tempting to locate “McCarthyism” only in the realm of high politics—as the combined sum of national news headlines, noisy rhetoric, and congressional inquiries. Yet it was more than that. The anti-Communist drive touched thousands of lesser figures: a printer in the U.S. Government Printing Office, linguists and engineers at the Voice of America overseas broadcasting service, a Seattle fireman, local public housing officials, janitors, even men's room attendants. Long before the “McCarthy era,” loyalty oaths affected teachers. Lawyers, other professionals, and, in Indiana, even wrestlers had to document their loyalty. Colleges policed students' political activities. Labor leaders and unions rose or fell according

to their sympathy or hostility toward communism. Entertainers faced a “blacklist.” Ordinary people responded to the anti-Communist fervor by reining in their political activities, curbing their talk, and keeping their thoughts to themselves.

Yet paradoxically these bleak years are also remembered as happy times. America emerged from World War II with her continental expanse untouched by the ruin visited on other lands. An “arsenal of democracy,” the nation had provided materiel for a global battlefield, food and fiber for friend and conquered foe. The joblessness that haunted the 1930s vanished. Though the postwar economy had its fits and starts, and prosperity did not drizzle on every garden, pessimists were confounded as the good times persisted.

With \$140 billion in pent-up wartime savings, Americans went on a buying spree. New autos rolled off assembly lines too slowly to slake demand; some customers bribed dealers in order to buy a car. Freezers, refrigerators, and soon televisions flowed out of factories and into homes. Americans bought 20,000 new consumer culture.

The landscape changed beyond recognition as new suburbs sprawled out from the central cities, woven to the workplace by highways. Freshly erected, moderately priced homes—such as the famous Levittown developments—sprang up like new crops in the potato fields they displaced. The family car and single-family home became the norm.

The social landscape changed as well. Though poverty persisted, affluence was far more visible. There were recessions, but no depression. Products found buyers. Buyers had jobs. Thanks to the GI Bill, veterans, many from blue-collar homes, went to college, entered professions, and attained white-collar status. They moved with their families to the thronging new suburbs and became, for good or ill, “organization men,” the sociologists’ term for those secure and swaddled servants of giant corporations.

For growing numbers life was comfortable. Most lived better and longer, sharing the American dream of homeownership and enjoying the fruits of social mobility. Science and

technology promised to eradicate ancient problems. By 1955 Jonas Salk had perfected the vaccine that conquered the dread disease of poliomyelitis, fear of which had for years prompted parents to keep their children indoors away from beaches and crowds during the August heat. No longer.

The spokesmen for corporate America offered a sales message, both for the “free enterprise system” and for its products, that was relentlessly upbeat. “Progress is our most important product,” said General Electric’s TV commercials. However self-serving such slogans were, the era’s prosperity did make converts even of some who had found fault with the economic system in the bleaker 1930s. The era still had its critics, though. Some argued that America’s material wealth masked spiritual and civic poverty. Others lamented the tawdriness of mass culture as reflected in the American passion for automobiles—“insolent chariots,” one critic called them. As government subsidized highways for autos, public transportation withered. While the family home embodied the American dream, some commentators worried that it bred privatism. On the other hand, William Levitt, pioneer of Levittown developments, ventured that no homeowner could be a Communist. “He has too much to do.” Juvenile delinquency was much deplored. Some linked it to communism; others, later, to the newer menace of rock and roll. There were various national scandals. Politicians took deep freezes, vicuña coats, money. College sports and, later, TV quiz shows were blemished by cheating. A deeper blot was the nation’s complacency about “race relations.”

Some spokesmen thought that the cure for these ills lay in religious renewal. In the 1950s Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* and other books with potent, if not profound, religious messages became bestsellers. The Reverend Billy Graham’s monster revival meetings earned him fame and welcome at Dwight D. Eisenhower’s White House. Previously unchurched, the President decided that attending Sunday service befitted his role as national leader. Congress stapled the phrase “under God” to the Pledge of

Allegiance. Hollywood star Jane Russell claimed that when you get to know God, “you find He’s a Livin’ Doll.”

Yet beneath such froth lurked authentic anxieties that the new religiosity was bent on tranquilizing. As the Cold War jelled, particularly after 1949, the prospects of nuclear war grew worrisome. Newspapers published city maps with concentric circles showing levels of destruction expected from a nuclear blast. Schoolchildren learned in drills to crawl under their desks in the event of a bombing. Some were uneasy. In New York, Dr. Peale met a child terrified by the H-bomb. He calmed her with the simple positive thought that God would not let a bomb fall on New York. Popular magazines strove to put the new weapons in a less threatening everyday context. Look burbled that the H-bomb—about the size of a living room—was “one of the cheapest forms of destruction known to man.”¹

The pulpit was not the only place, nor theology the only language, for probing flaws in American life. Social scientists sermonized too. Even as Americans enjoyed the bounty produced by the structured, bureaucratic corporate society in which they worked, lived, and consumed, they were its captives—or so they were told. Individual autonomy had become a casualty of the organization, which allegedly drained people’s souls and sapped their independence even as it filled their bank accounts. ‘Organization men’ chose security in a corporate womb over entrepreneurial risk, preferred a slot in Personnel (“working with people”) to Sales, exalted “teamwork” and “togetherness,” and disparaged lone-wolf individualism as antisocial. Lost was the spirit of adventure. Universities graduated and corporations buffed “well-rounded” people who were “other-” rather than “inner-directed” and who were guided by “radar” to pick up cues from peers rather than moved by a “gyroscope” to act according to principles or conscience. Some feared that these corporate clones, dressed alike in gray flannel suits, were dully marching toward a conformist society.

Not everyone accepted the extreme criticisms. Even William F. Whyte, Jr., whose book *The Organization Man* spread much of the critical vocabulary, warned against labeling Americans as conformists. Yet others thought the charge accurate, and many held political forces, particularly “McCarthyism,” at least partly to blame for the conformity. If Dwight D. Eisenhower, the genial, grandfatherly “Ike,” presided over the era’s political imagery, Joseph R. McCarthy, the menacing, barrel-chested Wisconsin Senator, was an equally potent symbol. From 1950 through 1954, McCarthy personified the search for Communist influence throughout American life.

That charges of selling out to communism should be leveled against President Harry S. Truman seems at first glance bizarre. After all, his administration (with “bipartisan” Republican help) had resisted Soviet expansion; sent help to Greece and Turkey in 1947 in response to the President’s enunciation of the “Truman Doctrine” calling for aid to “free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures”; framed the Marshall Plan to save Western Europe’s frail governments and economies; flown over a Soviet blockade to succor West Berlin in the 1948–49 airlift; restored the draft and joined NATO, an “entangling alliance”; built the H-bomb; planted military bases around the globe; and adopted a loyalty program to guard government from Communist infiltration. These acts, however, did not fully armor Truman and the Democrats from charges of “softness on communism.” The rising fear of communism at home intertwined with the growing vexations and complexities of the struggle with communism abroad.

Scholarly debate over the Cold War’s origins remains a lively art, but in the 1950s few Americans doubted whom to blame. They saw Communists in East Europe abusing rival political groups; even other leftists mysteriously vanished or were “liquidated.” As the Soviets rolled back the Nazis in 1944–45, they treated ruthlessly the goods, governments, and lives of the peoples who lay in their path. Much that was not nailed down—and much that was—

became “war booty” shipped back to the USSR. In Rumania, Bulgaria, and Poland, opposition parties were suppressed, civil liberties violated, the press gagged. Stalin ignored a commitment ostensibly made at Yalta to hold free elections in Poland.

Americans had not fought the war out of pure idealism; one thinks of cartoonist Bill Mauldin’s weary, stubbled GIs, impatient of cant and seeking only a hot meal and dry socks. Still, a catalog of basic freedoms could be found in documents ranging from the 1941 Atlantic Charter (notably, its endorsement of self-determination, to which the Allies had adhered) to Norman Rockwell’s famous Saturday Evening Post covers. In Eastern Europe, these basic freedoms crumbled beneath the heel of a boot.

Many historians agree that some menacing Soviet moves came as responses to real or perceived threats by the West. As precedent for its unilateral moves in Rumania, for instance, Russia could cite the West’s similar dealings with conquered Italy. Disputes over reparations and Germany’s future further complicated relations among the “Big Three”—the U.S., the USSR, and Great Britain. In February 1948, Czech Communists, with Soviet aid, seized control of the government. This event horrified Americans and led to the approval of Marshall Plan aid by Congress, a rearmament program, and a war scare. Yet, some have argued, the Czech coup could be seen as a defensive reaction by the Soviets, who interpreted facets of the West’s “containment” policy as hostile.

Whatever the true origins of the Cold War, most Americans came to view the USSR as an aggressive power and threat to peace. Fears of Communist influence at home increasingly counterpointed the rising concern with Soviet aims abroad. Historians of the Cold War have asked whether Stalin’s totalitarianism at home necessitated a “totalitarian” foreign policy. Equally one could ask whether the twin development of America’s anti-Communist foreign policy and the excesses of its containment of communism at home was preordained or avoidable. It was logical, but was it inevitable?

Although chroniclers grant that the McCarthy era owed much to the Cold War, they agree on little else. Some, like Robert Griffith, in *The Politics of Fear*, have emphasized that members of the right wing of the Republican Party, “as they scrapped and clawed their way toward power,” were most responsible for making anti-communism the dominant theme in American politics. These conservatives were moved by a loathing of the New Deal and a frustration at the repeated defeats their party had suffered in national elections, notably Truman’s upset victory in 1948. McCarthyism not only thrived on and deepened the conflict between the two parties but also exacerbated the struggle between conservative and moderate factions in the GOP.²

On the other hand, some social scientists in the 1950s (and after) attributed the virulence of the anti-Communist upsurge to social strains, to developments that made certain segments of society susceptible to McCarthyism. Some groups (Catholics, Germans, nouveaux riches, Texas oilmen) may have supported McCarthy because his attacks on the State Department and other institutions offered vicarious revenge upon an “Establishment” that had long kept them in their place. Or perhaps McCarthy’s charges represented a form of “neo-isolationism,” a means by which groups such as German- and Irish-Americans could vent their resentments against a generation of Democratic interventionist (and anti-German and pro-British) foreign policies.

More recently, some historians have said that Truman, the Democrats, and the liberals were contributors to McCarthyism, not just its victims. Did not Truman’s 1947 federal loyalty program formulate language and methods that, in more extreme form, were taken up by the McCarthyites? (And further, it is suggested, the loyalty order came so soon after his Truman Doctrine address that it appeared to be a means of reinforcing to Congress the gravity of the Communist threat.) Truman and his allies also red baited Henry A. Wallace and the Progressive Party in 1948, thus—according to the theory—legitimizing a practice that

Republicans would turn upon Democrats. And Truman's strident anti-Communist rhetoric on behalf of his foreign policy created an idiom for his critics when that policy met reverses.³

This book adheres to the thesis that the origins of McCarthyism lay largely among the grievances and ambitions of conservative politicians (mostly but not solely of the Republican Party). It also shares a recently emergent viewpoint that McCarthyism was a political phenomenon that extended well beyond the antics of Senator McCarthy—indeed, well beyond the boundaries of conventional politics. What gave the “ism” its bite was the political dynamic that obtained at mid-century, accentuated by the anxieties germinated by the Cold War. However, anti-communism derived its persistence from a deeply rooted cluster of values shared by much of American society, a set of views antithetical to Communist doctrines and friendly to private property and political democracy (albeit sometimes oblivious to imperfections in the latter).

The once-popular sociological explanations of McCarthyism do not withstand empirical testing, but they do correctly hint at the cultural basis of the mid-century Red Scare. As Seymour Lipset and Earl Raab have argued, McCarthy's anti-communism “was a banner around which various segments of the population could marshal their preservatist discontents and their generalized uneasiness.” Many Americans were bewildered by the deep social and political changes at work in the twentieth century. Many such changes occurring in the neighborhood, the nation, and the world could, consistent with the strength of America's anti-Communist consensus, be attributed to Communist scheming.⁴

Thus a profound cultural aversion to communism also underlay McCarthyism. It was this detestation that gave politicians broad leeway to pursue anti-Communist endeavors. A related factor was the nation's underdeveloped appreciation of the importance of civil liberties for repudiated minorities. Public opinion polls gave evidence of the high threshold levels of

political intolerance in the 1930s—a time of rising international tension but long before the alarums of the Cold War.

Indeed, to understand the “ism,” the Right which gave it birth, and the decade of the 1950s, we must first examine the 1930s, the energetic Left of that decade, and its real and imagined legacies.

IF IN THE 1950s Americans took prosperity as the natural order of things, veterans of the 1930s remembered life as more precarious. That grim decade strongly affected their attitudes and behavior. Some workers who remembered the hard times stuck with unloved jobs because they cherished the security of seniority. Memory prompted Depression survivors to scrimp, to test their ability to do without long after hardship had vanished. They harassed their children to eat every last bite of vegetables. Conversely, others escaped memories of deprivation by piling up material goods or by smothering their children in luxuries.

For many the Depression signaled the final collapse of capitalism that Marx had predicted. By 1932 unemployment gripped almost one-third of the workforce. As jobs were lost, home mortgages were foreclosed, and farms were taken, the Depression seeped upward, eroding the middle class and nibbling at the wealthy. As circles of suffering widened, some doubled up with family; others retreated back to the farm. Sometimes husbands left to scrounge for work or aimlessly tramp across the continent; sometimes women and children rode the boxcars as well. (A few railroads even coupled on extra cars.) There were suicides, but numb despair was more widespread.

The times welcomed radicalism, and homegrown saviors hawked cures. Fascism found a few adherents. Socialism also had advocates. Though not alone on the left end of the spectrum, the most conspicuous agitators for radical change were the Communists. They

offered theory from Marx, a blueprint in the successful Bolshevik Revolution, and a commitment to action attractive to those tired of pale reform and empty palaver.

The bankruptcy of the status quo, the obvious need for change, and the Marxists' steely certitude produced a heady elixir. In time of paralysis, communism promised movement. "We had élan," remembered veteran Communist Al Richmond. "We had the exhilarating sense of being on the offensive, ideologically and morally." Sidney Lens, who moved from Trotskyism to independent radicalism, recalled the 1930s as an age when "history was ready for quantum leaps. And in that setting all that was necessary, we felt, was to have the 'correct line.'" Finding it, the tiniest grouplet might hope to ride the wave of the future as had the Bolsheviks in 1917. Their hands, Communists told each other, were on "the throttle of history."

Commitment was reward in itself. One could be part of a greater whole. Even though this doctrine taught atheism, a parallel with the fervor of religion was obvious. Save for the church, wrote novelist Richard Wright, "there was no agency in the world so capable of making men feel the earth and the people upon it as the Communist Party." The Party provided both a politics and a society. "Your life as a Communist was everywhere," said one Party member, "in the shop, at home, at meetings, in the neighborhood. You were always being a Communist." "I felt myself," another recalled, "both as someone living in a small, coherent community and as part of something global."⁵

There were hazards. Marxism-Leninism might mark out history's direction, but perplexing daily developments required constant adjustments. To misread, to adopt the wrong line, was to risk being flattened by history's locomotive. The tight link between theory and action raised the ante for Communists and magnified the importance of disputes over the meaning of events and the proper Party policy. Hence, splits among believers were

extraordinarily bitter. Soviet Communists violently fought all heresies, and the struggle was copied by the parties of other nations.

On the American Left, splinter groups formed, divided, subdivided. Thus from the thin ranks of the Trotskyites exited a faction led by Hugo Oehler and Tom Stamm. Then Stamm split with Oehler. Members of one tiny sect picketed its founders' home with signs insisting that "Mr. and Mrs. Field are no longer Fieldites." At its 1940 convention, the main body of American Trotskyites fissioned, the breach dramatically signaled when one leader, James Cannon, warned another: "Very well, Comrade Schachtman, we will seize power without you!" The intensity and the heat of their debates often blinded leftists to the irrelevance (or humor) of their theological disputes.

Though conditions were ripe for radicalism, the early 1930s found the Communist Party (CP or CPUSA) weak and isolated. Two groups inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution had spun out of the Socialist Party in 1919. United in 1921, Communists emerged from underground in battered shape. Their troubles continued as they duplicated the splits that convulsed the Soviet Communist Party. By the mid-1930s, leadership of the CPUSA had passed to Earl Browder, a bland, unfrightening former accountant.

In the 1920s, the CP had had but dim appeal to American workers. It made only a few inroads in the labor movement in mass-production industries (often at the shop level—in automobile plants, for instance) neglected by the craft-oriented American Federation of Labor (AFL). The Party could boast a small, seasoned nucleus of organizers whose day would come when labor grew more militant in the Depression.

But even in the 1930s, much of the Party's growth was of a "revolving door" variety; many who entered stayed only briefly. In the so-called Third Period from 1928 to 1934, the CPUSA assured its isolation by stressing doctrinal purity, assuming the imminent collapse of capitalism and the coming revolution, and disavowing cooperation with others on the Left.

The Communists strove to build revolutionary unions to compete with their AFL counterparts. They dismissed Socialists as tools of the class enemy, as “social fascists.” They scorned the New Deal, which the Party’s veteran leader William Z. Foster described as a “government serving the interests of finance capital and moving toward the fascist suppression of the workers’ movement.”⁶

In keeping with this strategy, Communists harassed the meetings of left-wing rivals. When Socialists rallied in New York City in 1934 to protest the Austrian government’s repression of Vienna’s Socialists, Communists threw chairs down from the balcony and broke up the gathering. The same line prevailed in other nations. German Reds took a blasé attitude toward the rise of nazism and shunned alliance with other leftists; their slogan, “After Hitler, us.”

This line proved foolhardy, and several Communist parties groped in new directions. In 1935 came the change. The growing threat of nazism prompted the USSR to reorient the world Communist movement. (A joke mocking the CPUSA’s dependence on Moscow’s orders asked: why is the Communist Party like the Brooklyn Bridge? Answer: both are entirely suspended by cables.) The Communist Third International, the Comintern, laid down a new line—a united front against fascism. Communists would now cooperate with once-despised Socialists, liberals, and other “progressives,” including New Dealers.

As a result, the CPUSA’s influence increased in the United, or Popular, Front period of 1935–39. Communists played a crucial part in the success of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Since they had always pushed for industrial rather than craft unions, their approach meshed with CIO strategy. John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers and a leader of the CIO, eagerly hired Reds as organizers. (Who got the bird, he asked cynically, “the hunter or the dog?”) Courageous, tenacious, and able, they helped build unions like the United Auto Workers and United Electrical Workers. They controlled many

CIO locals, dominated such unions as the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, and nearly captured the UAW. Though enemies deplored the CP's use of devious organizational tactics, the Communists earned their spurs by being more effective and militant unionists than their rivals, and where they retained power, they often did so because they delivered what the rank and file wanted.

In politics the Communists also abandoned exclusivist purity for a policy of coalition building. They embraced the democratic symbolism of the decade. Earl Browder called communism "the Americanism of the twentieth century." During the time of the Popular Front, the Party enticed intellectuals chiefly by its stalwart anti-fascism. The full employment in the USSR, in contrast to the breadlines in the U.S., impressed some observers, as did the liberal-sounding 1936 Soviet Constitution. To be sure, Stalinist realities—such as the violent collectivization of Soviet agriculture, which led to vast starvation and suffering, and Stalin's bloody and paranoid purge of his party—limited the allure of the "Soviet experiment." Yet through all this, Stalin loomed as the only real counterweight to Hitler.

In 1936 the Spanish Civil War became a burning issue to foes of fascism. Germany and Italy sent soldiers, tanks, and planes to Franco while the democracies pursued a neutrality that crippled the Spanish Republic. Only Russia aided the Loyalists, but not without costs: Soviet commissars subverted the Republic and liquidated leftist rivals. As members of the American Lincoln Brigade, American Communists fought in Spain as well. Many died there.

The democracies also dithered when Italy attacked Ethiopia in 1935 and Japan renewed war in China in 1937. At Munich in 1938, Britain and France appeased Hitler with a generous slice of Czechoslovakia. With some reason, Stalin concluded that the Western powers were more anti-Soviet than anti-Nazi. Since he too could play Realpolitik, he agreed to the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939. Nazism's great foe thus pledged peace and amity

with it and, when Hitler invaded Poland to ignite World War II, gobbled up a third of that hapless country.

However one rationalized the Nazi-Soviet Pact, it deeply embarrassed the CPUSA and disillusioned many members and fellow travelers. Before the Pact, the Party had steered one of its major front groups, the American League for Peace and Democracy (ALPD), from pacifism to support of collective security. After the Pact, they scuttled the ALPD and set up the American Peace Mobilization to oppose U.S. involvement in the war. One Communist greeted news of the Pact with the cynical remark that “Hitler’s a socialist too.” On June 21, 1941, the American Peace Mobilization picketed the White House with signs declaiming: “The Yanks are Not Coming.” On June 22, Hitler’s Panzers rolled into Russia. The front group, swiftly renamed the American People’s Mobilization, now clamored for aid to Britain and the USSR. An “imperialist” conflict had become a “People’s war.”

Communists also flipfopped on labor issues. In 1941 Communistled unions struck several defense plants. (Though critics claimed the strikes had purely political aims, there were legitimate labor grievances.) Once Russia and America entered the war, unions controlled by Communists eagerly obeyed the no-strike pledge (opposed by most other leftists) and tolerated erosion of labor’s hard-won gains. Since black demands for equal treatment in defense plants threatened to slow rearmament, Communists initially opposed A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington Movement, abandoning their role as advocates of racial equality. The Daily Worker called Randolph a “fascist helping defeatism.”

Despite these bewildering hairpin turns, American entry into World War II rescued the CPUSA. Hitler’s invasion of the USSR had galvanized the Left’s sympathy. (To playwright Lillian Hellman, the news meant: “The Motherland has been attacked.”) Even some on the Right like General Douglas MacArthur were moved by Soviet valor. Yet only the glue of a common enemy held the Soviet-American alliance together. Trust was limited. The Russians

had signed one pact with Hitler. Why not again? (They did approach the Germans in 1942.) Conversely, the Soviets were angered by their allies' tardiness in attacking Hitler's forces and wondered if it was part of an attempted sellout or a ploy to make them bear the brunt of the fighting.

Despite such mutual suspicions, Americans knew the Soviet alliance was crucial to victory. The USSR suffered far greater losses than any of its allies: fifteen to twenty million dead, 80 percent of the industrial base of the areas scorched by the war. The Russians also inflicted more damage on the Nazis than did any other nation. At Stalingrad, on the great bend of the Volga where it sweeps toward the Don, the Soviets blunted and smashed Hitler's eastward drive and began grinding up his armies. While the British and Americans faced ten German divisions in Italy, the USSR confronted nearly two hundred.

Pulling out every diplomatic stop to assure victory, Stalin abolished the Comintern in 1943. The American Communist Party dissolved itself into the Communist Political Association in 1944. Earl Browder preached class collaboration, even offering to shake J. P. Morgan's hand if the banker would support Soviet-American amity. Told he would fit in nicely with members of the ultra-conservative National Association of Manufacturers, Browder said, "I'm awfully glad to hear that."

Focused on winning the war, the Communists retreated from previous militant stands. If workers' demands clashed with the war effort, the former must yield. Browder touted "incentive pay" in war industries, the very piecework system against which the CIO had fought. When the Mine Workers struck, Daily Worker editor Louis Budenz toured the coal fields to organize back-to-work movements, a campaign usually undertaken by the owners. The convergence of Soviet and U.S. aims enabled the Communists to wrap themselves in the flag and helped them reach a new, albeit short-lived, peak in membership during the war.⁷

Even outside the Party, the war inspired a gush of euphoria about Russia. In his bestselling *Mission to Moscow*, Joseph E. Davies, former U.S. Ambassador to the USSR, sugarcoated unpleasant realities. He described Stalin lyrically: “His brown eye is exceedingly kindly and gentle. A child would like to sit on his lap and a dog would sidle up to him.” Similarly, *Life* compared Stalin’s dread secret police, the NKVD, to J. Edgar Hoover’s storied gangbusters. (After Hoover’s secret violations of civil liberties were revealed in the 1970s, the comparison seemed less ludicrous.) The *New York Times* announced that Marxism was out in Russia. “The capitalist system, better described as the competitive system, is back.”⁸

Always suspicious of schemes to create “Utopia in a day” and horrified at the human price paid for Soviet progress, President Franklin D. Roosevelt remained skeptical about the Soviet system. Yet he also thought he could deal man to man with Stalin. By offering friendship and yielding to Soviet claims in areas of traditional Russian (and Soviet) national interest in Europe and Asia, he believed he could maintain Big Three unity and bring the USSR into the postwar system of collective security he sought to build.

Thus, during the war and for a year or so after it, an unstable mix of optimism and antipathy characterized American opinion about Russia. Among policymakers, a comparable balance existed between those hoping for the best from the Soviets and those fearing the worst. After FDR’s death in April 1945, the latter group gradually won dominance in the councils of the new President, Harry S. Truman.

As the policy elite’s suspicions of the USSR hardened, those of the “man in the street” kept pace. In a September 1945 poll, 39 percent described the USSR as “peaceloving.” Two years later, just 12 percent held that view, while the number labeling the Soviets “aggressive” rose from 38 to 66 percent. At one point in the war, 55 percent thought the USSR would cooperate with the United States. In March of 1946, the figure fell to 35 percent; it rebounded to 45 percent in May, sagged to 32 percent in October, then rose to 43 percent the next

January. Although clearly public opinion was at times mercurial and contrary, it generally leaned toward increasingly negative perceptions.

Indeed, some historians argue that public opinion is a vaporous commodity that political leaders can and, in the case of Truman and the “Communist threat,” did shape. But others assert that it was the politicians who felt pressured by constituents whose views of the Soviets and of American Communists were hardening. Members of Congress, perhaps closer to grassroots opinion and usually more suspicious of Communists at home and abroad, also influenced the stance of the Truman Administration.

In any case, by the late 1940s, politicians, plain folk, and many powerful institutions (the Catholic Church, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, segments of the labor movement, and numerous others) had coalesced in an anti-Communist consensus. Products of that widely held anti-communism included various applications of the foreign policy of containment and a series of measures against domestic Communist influence. There was some public skepticism about the wisdom of certain foreign policies; there was far less about the need for stringent anti-communism at home.

This consensus served as both cause and effect in the rise of the anti-communism that transfigured public life at mid-century. That politics generated vast amounts of emotion and heat. It also produced a vocabulary, a lore, a set of symbols. The overall phenomenon—“McCarthyism”—is so often characterized in abstract terms that its meaning remains fuzzy. To sense the emotional bite of the Communist issue and to understand both how it affected life for those who ran afoul of it and how it shaped the nation’s political culture, it is useful to look at specific cases.