The Cold War at Home

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<td>Americans today remain vigilant about unfounded accusations.</td>
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One American's Story

Tony Kahn made the neighbors uncomfortable because they thought his father, Gordon Kahn, was a Communist. In 1947, Gordon Kahn was a successful screenwriter. However, when a congressional committee began to investigate Communists in Hollywood, Kahn was blacklisted—named as unfit to hire. Later, in 1951, he was scheduled to testify before the committee himself.

To save himself, Gordon Kahn simply had to name others as Communists, but he refused. Rather than face the congressional committee, he fled to Mexico. Tony Kahn remembers how the Cold War hurt him and his family.

**A Personal Voice**  
**TONY KAHN**

"The first time I was called a Communist, I was four years old. . . . I'll never forget the look in our neighbors' eyes when I walked by. I thought it was hate. I was too young to realize it was fear."

—from *The Cold War Comes Home*

The members of the Kahn family were among thousands of victims of the anti-Communist hysteria that gripped this country in the late 1940s and early 1950s. By the end of the period, no one was immune from accusations.

**Fear of Communist Influence**

In the early years of the Cold War, many Americans believed that there was good reason to be concerned about the security of the United States. The Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and the Communist takeover of China shocked the American public, fueling a fear that communism would spread around the world. In addition, at the height of World War II, about 80,000 Americans claimed membership in the Communist Party. Some people feared that the first loyalty of these American Communists was to the Soviet Union.
LOYALTY REVIEW BOARD  Strongly anti-Communist Republicans began to accuse Truman of being soft on communism. Consequently, in March 1947, President Truman issued an executive order setting up the Federal Employee Loyalty Program, which included the Loyalty Review Board. Its purpose was to investigate government employees and to dismiss those who were found to be disloyal to the U.S. government. The U.S. attorney general drew up a list of 91 “subversive” organizations; membership in any of these groups was grounds for suspicion.

From 1947 to 1951, government loyalty boards investigated 3.2 million employees and dismissed 212 as security risks. Another 2,900 resigned because they did not want to be investigated or felt that the investigation violated their constitutional rights. Individuals under investigation were not allowed to see the evidence against them.

THE HOUSE UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITIES COMMITTEE
Other agencies investigated possible Communist influence, both inside and outside the U.S. government. The most famous of these was the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). HUAC first made headlines in 1947, when it began to investigate Communist influence in the movie industry. The committee believed that Communists were sneaking propaganda into films. The committee pointed to the pro-Soviet films made during World War II when the Soviet Union had been a United States ally.

HUAC subpoenaed 43 witnesses from the Hollywood film industry in September 1947. Many of the witnesses were “friendly,” supporting the accusation that Communists had infiltrated the film industry. For example, the movie star Gary Cooper said he had “turned down quite a few scripts because I thought they were tinged with Communist ideas.” However, when asked which scripts he meant, Cooper couldn’t remember their titles.

Ten “unfriendly” witnesses were called to testify but refused. These men, known as the Hollywood Ten, decided not to cooperate because they believed that the hearings were unconstitutional. Because the Hollywood Ten refused to answer questions, they were sent to prison.
In response to the hearings, Hollywood executives instituted a **blacklist**, a list of people whom they condemned for having a Communist background. People who were blacklisted—approximately 500 actors, writers, producers, and directors—had their careers ruined because they could no longer work.

**THE MCCARRAN ACT** As Hollywood tried to rid itself of Communists, Congress decided that Truman's Loyalty Review Board did not go far enough. In 1950, Congress passed the McCarran Internal Security Act. This made it unlawful to plan any action that might lead to the establishment of a totalitarian dictatorship in the United States. Truman vetoed the bill, saying, "In a free country, we punish men for the crimes they commit, but never for the opinions they have." But Congress enacted the law over Truman's veto.

**Spy Cases Stun the Nation**

Two spy cases added to fear that was spreading like an epidemic across the country. One case involved a former State Department official named Alger Hiss.

**ALGER HISS** In 1948, a former Communist spy named Whittaker Chambers accused Alger Hiss of spying for the Soviet Union. To support his charges, Chambers produced microfilm of government documents that he claimed had been typed on Hiss's typewriter. Too many years had passed for government prosecutors to charge Hiss with espionage, but a jury convicted him of perjury—for lying about passing the documents—and sent him to jail. A young conservative Republican congressman named Richard Nixon gained fame for pursuing the charges against Hiss. Within four years of the highly publicized case, Nixon was elected vice president of the United States.

Hiss claimed that he was innocent and that Chambers had forged the documents used against him. However, in the 1990s, Soviet cables released by the National Security Agency seemed to prove Hiss's guilt.

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**NOW & THEN**

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THE ROSENBERGS Another spy case rocked the nation even more than the Hiss case, partially because of international events occurring about the same time. On September 3, 1949, Americans learned that the Soviet Union had exploded an atomic bomb. Most American experts had predicted that it would take the Soviets three to five more years to make the bomb. People began to wonder if Communist supporters in the United States had leaked the secret of the bomb.

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When asked if they were Communists, the Rosenbergs denied the charges against them and pleaded the Fifth Amendment, choosing not to incriminate themselves. They claimed they were being persecuted both for being Jewish and for holding radical beliefs. The Rosenbergs were found guilty of espionage and sentenced to death. In pronouncing their sentence, Judge Irving Kaufman declared their crime “worse than murder.” To him, they were directly responsible for one of the deadliest clashes of the Cold War.

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“IT’S OK—WE’RE HUNTING COMMUNISTS”

The fear of Communist subversion affected the entire society. People were so suspicious that almost any unusual opinion might be labeled “un-American.” The climate of suspicion was most severe in the years 1947–1954, but it lasted throughout the 1950s.

SKILLBUILDER Analyzing Political Cartoons
1. What organization does the car represent?
2. What does the cartoon imply about the methods of this organization?

SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R24.

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McCarthy Launches His “Witch Hunt”

The most famous anti-Communist activist was Senator Joseph McCarthy, a Republican from Wisconsin. During his first three years in the Senate, he had acquired a reputation for being an ineffective legislator. By January 1950, he realized that he was going to need a winning issue in order to be reelected in 1952. Looking for such an issue, McCarthy charged that Communists were taking over the government.

MCCARTHY’S TACTICS Taking advantage of people’s concerns about communism, McCarthy made one unsupported accusation after another. These attacks on suspected Communists in the early 1950s became known as McCarthyism. Since that time, McCarthyism has referred to the unfair tactic of accusing people of disloyalty without providing evidence. At various times McCarthy claimed to have in his hands the names of $7, 81, and 205 Communists in the State Department. (He never actually produced a single name.) He also charged that the Democratic Party was guilty of “20 years of treason” for allowing Communist infiltration into the government. He was always careful to do his name-calling only in the Senate, where he had legal immunity that protected him from being sued for slander.

The Republicans did little to stop McCarthy’s attacks because they believed they would win the 1952 presidential election if the public saw them purging the nation of Communists. But one small group of six senators, led by Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, did speak out.

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MCCARTHY’S DOWNFALL. Finally, in 1954, McCarthy made accusations against the U.S. Army, which resulted in a nationally televised Senate investigation. McCarthy’s bullying of witnesses alienated the audience and cost him public support. The Senate condemned him for improper conduct that “tended to bring the Senate into dishonor and disrepute.” Three years later, Joseph McCarthy, suffering from alcoholism, died a broken man.

OTHER ANTI-COMMUNIST MEASURES
Others besides Joseph McCarthy made it their mission to root communism out of American society. By 1953, 39 states had passed laws making it illegal to advocate the violent overthrow of the government, even though such laws clearly violated the constitutional right of free speech. Across the nation, cities and towns passed similar laws.

At times, the fear of communism seemed to have no limits. In Indiana, professional wrestlers had to take a loyalty oath. In experiments run by newspapers, pedestrians on the street refused to sign petitions that quoted the Declaration of Independence because they were afraid the ideas were communist. The government investigated union leaders, librarians, newspaper reporters, and scientists. It seemed that no profession was safe from the hunt for Communists.

ASSessment

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.
   - HuAC
   - Hollywood Ten
   - Blacklist
   - Alger Hiss
   - Ethel and Julius Rosenberg
   - Joseph McCarthy
   - McCarthyism

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES
   Re-create the web below on your paper and fill in events that illustrate the main idea in the center.

   Anti-Communist fear gripped the country.

   Which event had the greatest impact on the country?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. HYPOTHESIZING
   If you had lived in this period and had been accused of being a Communist, what would you have done? Think About:
   - the Hollywood Ten, who refused to answer questions
   - the Rosenbergs, who pleaded the Fifth Amendment

4. ANALYZING MOTIVES
   Choose one of the following roles: Harry Truman, a member of HuAC, Judge Irving Kaufman, or Joseph McCarthy. As the person you have chosen, explain your motivation for opposing communism.

5. ANALYZING VISUAL SOURCES
   What does this cartoon suggest about McCarthy’s downfall?