

Joseph McCarthy: Democrats and Communists (1950)

As suggested by the following speech delivered to a Republican women's club in Wheeling, West Virginia, Senator Joseph McCarthy from Wisconsin became a master at making outlandish charges about domestic subversion – and getting away with it. He declared that the United States was losing the cold war because the Truman administration was infested with scores of known communists; moreover, he claimed to have the names of 205 of them. Those who questioned his methods found themselves the subject of vicious attacks and smear campaigns. In July 1950 a Senate subcommittee chaired by Maryland Democrat Millard Tydings dismissed McCarthy's charges as "a fraud and a hoax." McCarthy thereupon turned on Tydings and helped undermine his reelection campaign.

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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....

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 camps – a time of a great armaments race....

At war's end we were physically the strongest nation on earth—and at least potentially the most powerful intellectually and morally. Ours could have been the honor of being a beacon in the desert of destruction, a shining living proof that civilization was not yet ready to destroy itself. Unfortunately, we have failed miserably and tragically to arise to the opportunity.

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 selling this Nation out, 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 the worst.... In my opinion the State Department, which is one of the most important government departments, is thoroughly infested with Communists.

I have in my hand 205 cases of individuals who would appear to be either card carrying members or certainly loyal to the Communist party, but who nevertheless are still helping to shape our foreign policy.

One thing to remember in discussing the Communists in our Government is that we are dealing with spies who get 30 pieces of silver to steal the blueprints of a new weapon. We are dealing with a far more sinister type of activity because it permits the enemy to guide and shape our policy.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. According to McCarthy, what forces were arrayed against each other in 1950?
2. In what respects did McCarthy's remarks have a populist theme?
3. Why do you think McCarthy stressed the economic motivations of supposed communists working in the State Department? Did this contradict any of his earlier assertions?