In the 1940s, Ruth Goldberg belonged to the Parent-Teacher Association in Queens, New York. In 1947 she agreed to run for PTA president, but the campaign turned nasty. Because Goldberg had associated with people with left-wing interests, a rumor spread through the neighborhood that she was a Communist. Suddenly Goldberg’s quiet life became terrifying. Callers threatened her, and the local priest denounced her in his sermons. One afternoon, Goldberg’s eight-year-old son came home in tears. A playmate had told him, “You know, your mother’s a Red. She should be put up against a wall and shot.”

Looking back much later, Goldberg saw the PTA campaign as part of a bigger and more complex pattern of distrust and hatred. “It was a small thing, but it was an indication of what had happened with the Cold War, with this Red specter—that somebody like me could be a danger to a community.”

—adapted from *Red Scare*

### A New Red Scare

During the 1950s, thousands of ordinary people—from teachers to autoworkers to high government officials—shared Ruth Goldberg’s disturbing experience. Rumors and accusations of Communists in the United States and of Communist infiltration of the government tapped into fears that the Communists were trying to take over the world.
The Red Scare began in September 1945, when a clerk named Igor Gouzenko walked out of the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa, Canada, and defected. Gouzenko carried documents revealing a massive effort by the Soviet Union to infiltrate organizations and government agencies in Canada and the United States with the specific goal of obtaining information about the atomic bomb.

The Gouzenko case stunned Americans. It implied that spies had infiltrated the American government. Soon, however, the search for spies escalated into a general fear of Communist subversion. **Subversion** is the effort to secretly weaken a society and overthrow its government. As the Cold War intensified in 1946 and early 1947, Americans began to fear that Communists were secretly working to subvert the American government.

**GOVERNMENT**

The Loyalty Review Program In early 1947, just nine days after his powerful speech announcing the Truman Doctrine, the president established a **loyalty review program** to screen all federal employees. Rather than calm public suspicion, Truman’s action seemed to confirm fears that Communists had infiltrated the government and helped increase the fear of communism sweeping the nation.

Between 1947 and 1951, over 6 million federal employees were screened for their loyalty—a term difficult to define. A person might become a suspect for reading certain books, belonging to various groups, traveling overseas, or even seeing certain foreign films. About 14,000 employees were subject to intensive scrutiny from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Some 2,000 employees quit their jobs during the check, many under pressure. Another 212 were fired for “questionable loyalty,” though no actual evidence against them was uncovered.

**HUAC** Although the FBI helped screen federal employees, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was not satisfied. In 1947 Hoover went before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Formed in 1938 to investigate both Communist and Fascist activities in the United States, HUAC was a relatively minor committee until Hoover catapulted it to prominence.

Hoover urged HUAC to hold public hearings on Communist subversion. The committee, Hoover said, could reveal “the diabolic machinations of sinister figures engaged in un-American activities.” Once Communists were identified, he explained, the public would isolate them and end their influence. Hoover’s aim was to expose not just Communists but also “Communist sympathizers” and “fellow travelers.” Under Hoover’s leadership, the FBI sent agents to infiltrate groups suspected of subversion and wiretapped thousands of telephones.

**Alger Hiss** In 1948 Whittaker Chambers, a *Time* magazine editor and former Communist Party member, testified to HUAC that several government officials were also former Communists or spies.

The most prominent government official named by Chambers was Alger Hiss, a lawyer and diplomat who had served in Roosevelt’s administration, attended the Yalta conference, and taken part in organizing the United Nations. After Hiss sued him for libel, Chambers testified before a grand jury that in 1937 and 1938 Hiss gave him secret documents from the State Department. Hiss denied being either a spy or a member of the Communist Party, and he also denied ever having known Chambers.

The committee was ready to drop the investigation until Representative Richard Nixon of California convinced his colleagues to continue the hearings to determine whether Hiss or Chambers had lied. As the committee continued to question Hiss, he admitted that he had indeed met Chambers in the 1930s. When Chambers continued to claim that Hiss was a Communist, Hiss sued him, claiming that his accusations were unfounded and malicious.

To defend himself, Chambers produced copies of secret documents along with microfilm that he had hidden in a hollow pumpkin on his farm. These “pumpkin papers,” Chambers claimed, proved that

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**Picturing History**

**Convicted of Conspiracy** Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were convicted of transmitting atomic secrets to Soviet Russia. **What sentence did they receive?**

![Image of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg]
he was telling the truth. A jury agreed and convicted Hiss of perjury, or lying under oath.

The Rosenbergs Another sensational spy case centered around accusations that American Communists had sold the secrets of the atomic bomb. Many people did not believe that the Soviet Union could have produced an atomic bomb in 1949 without help. This belief intensified the hunt for spies.

In 1950 the hunt led to Klaus Fuchs, a British scientist who admitted sending information to the Soviet Union. His testimony led the FBI to arrest Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a New York couple who were members of the Communist Party. The government charged them with heading a Soviet spy ring.

The Rosenbergs denied the charges but were condemned to death for espionage. Many people believed that they were not leaders or spies, but victims caught up in the wave of anti-Communist frenzy. Appeals, public expressions of support, and pleas for clemency failed, however, and the couple was executed in June 1953.

Project Venona The American public hotly debated the guilt or innocence of individuals like the Rosenbergs who were accused as spies. There was, however, solid evidence of Soviet espionage, although very few Americans knew it at the time. In 1946 American cryptographers working for a project code-named “Venona” cracked the Soviet spy code of the time, enabling them to read approximately 3,000 messages between Moscow and the United States collected during the Cold War. The messages confirmed extensive Soviet spying and sent federal investigators on a massive hunt. To keep the Soviets from learning how thoroughly the United States had penetrated their codes, authorities chose not to make the intercepted messages public. Not until 1995 did the government reveal Project Venona’s existence. The Venona documents provided strong evidence that the Rosenbergs were guilty.

The Red Scare Spreads Following the federal government’s example, many state and local governments, universities, businesses, unions, and churches began their own efforts to find Communists. The University of California required its 11,000 faculty members to take loyalty oaths and fired 157 who refused to do so. Many Catholic groups became strongly anticommunist and urged their members to identify Communists within the church.

The Taft-Hartley Act required union leaders to take oaths that they were not Communists, but many union leaders did not object. Instead they launched their own efforts to purge Communists from their organizations. The president of the CIO called Communist sympathizers “skulking cowards” and “apostles of hate.” The CIO eventually expelled 11 unions that refused to remove Communist leaders from their organization.

Reading Check Explaining What was the purpose of the loyalty review boards and HUAC?
“A Conspiracy So Immense”

In 1949 the Red Scare intensified even further. That year, the Soviet Union successfully tested an atomic bomb, and China fell to communism. To many Americans these events seemed to prove that the United States was losing the Cold War. Deeply concerned, they wanted an explanation as to why their government was failing. As a result, many continued to believe that Communists had infiltrated the government and remained undetected.

In February 1950, soon after Alger Hiss’s perjury conviction, a little-known Wisconsin senator gave a political speech to a Republican women’s group in West Virginia. Halfway through his speech, Senator Joseph R. McCarthy made a surprising statement:

“While I cannot take the time to name all the men in the State Department who have been named as members of the Communist Party and members of a spy ring, I have here in my hand a list of 205 that were known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping the policy of the State Department.”

—quoted in The Fifties

By the next day, the Associated Press had picked up the statement and sent it to papers all over the country. When McCarthy arrived at the Denver airport, reporters crowded around him and asked to see his list of Communists in the state department. McCarthy replied that he would be happy to show them the list, but unfortunately, it was packed in his bag on the plane. In fact, the list never appeared. McCarthy, however, continued to make charges and draw attention.

McCarthy’s Charges

Born in 1908 near Appleton, Wisconsin, Joseph R. McCarthy studied law and served in World War II before his first run for the Senate. McCarthy’s 1946 political campaign sounded the keynote of his career. Without making any specific charges or offering any proof, McCarthy accused his opponent, Robert M. La Follette, Jr., of being “communistically inclined.” Fear of communism, plus McCarthy’s intense speeches, won him the election.

After becoming a senator, McCarthy continued to proclaim that Communists were a danger both at home and abroad. To some of his audiences, he distributed a booklet called “The Party of Betrayal,” which accused Democratic Party leaders of corruption and of protecting Communists. Secretary of State Dean Acheson was a frequent target. According to McCarthy, Acheson was incompetent and a tool of Stalin. He wildly accused George C. Marshall, the former army chief of staff and secretary of state, of disloyalty as a member of “a conspiracy so immense as to dwarf any previous such ventures in the history of man.”
McCarthy was not alone in making such charges. In the prevailing mood of anxiety about communism, many Americans were ready to believe them.

The McCarran Internal Security Act In 1950, with the Korean War underway and McCarthy and others arousing fears of Communist spies, Congress passed the Internal Security Act, usually called the McCarran Act. Declaring that “world Communism has as its sole purpose the establishment of a totalitarian dictatorship in America,” Senator Pat McCarran of Nevada offered a way to fight “treachery, infiltration, sabotage, and terrorism.” The act made it illegal to “combine, conspire, or agree with any other person to perform any act which would substantially contribute to . . . the establishment of a totalitarian government.” The law required all Communist Party and “Communist-front” organizations to register with the United States attorney general and publish their records. The act also created other restrictions for Communists. For example, they could not get passports to travel abroad.

The McCarran Act did not stop there. In case of a national emergency, it allowed the arrest and detention of Communists and Communist sympathizers. Unwilling to punish people for their opinions, Truman vetoed the bill, but Congress easily passed it over his veto in 1950. Later Supreme Court cases, however, ensured that the McCarran Act would never be very effective.

McCarthy’s Tactics After the 1952 election gave the Republicans control of Congress, McCarthy became chairman of the Senate subcommittee on investigations. Using the power of his committee to force government officials to testify about alleged Communist influences, McCarthy turned the investigation into a witch hunt—a search for disloyalty based on flimsy evidence and irrational fears. His tactic of damaging reputations with vague and unfounded charges became known as McCarthyism.

McCarthy’s theatrics and sensational accusations drew the attention of the press, which put him in the headlines and quoted him widely. When he questioned witnesses, McCarthy would badger them and then refuse to accept their answers. His tactics left a cloud of suspicion that McCarthy and others interpreted as guilt. Furthermore, people were afraid to challenge him for fear of becoming targets themselves.

McCarthy’s Downfall In 1954 McCarthy began to look for Soviet spies in the United States Army. Alerted to his intentions, the army conducted its
own internal investigation and found no spies or any suspicion of espionage. Furious at the denial, McCarthy took his investigation onto television. He questioned and challenged officers in a harsh voice, harassing them about trivial details and accusing them of misconduct.

During weeks of televised Army-McCarthy hearings in the spring of 1954, millions of Americans watched McCarthy bully witnesses. His popular support started to fade. Finally, to strike back at the army lawyer, Joseph Welch, McCarthy brought up the past of a young lawyer in Welch’s firm who had been a member of a Communist-front organization during his law school years. Welch, who was fully aware of the young man’s past, now exploded at McCarthy for possibly ruining the young man’s career: “Until this moment, I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness. . . . You have done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?”

Spectators cheered. Welch had said aloud what many Americans had been thinking. One senator on the committee, Stuart Symington of Missouri, was also repelled: “The American people have had a look at you for six weeks. You are not fooling anyone.” McCarthy had lost the power to arouse fear. Newspaper headlines repeated, “Have you no sense of decency?”

Later that year, the Senate passed a vote of censure, or formal disapproval, against McCarthy—one of the most serious criticisms it can level against a member. His influence gone, McCarthy faded from public view. Although he remained in the Senate, he had little influence. He died in 1957, a broken and embittered man.

Reading Check Evaluating What were the effects of McCarthyism?

Life During the Early Cold War

The Red Scare and the spread of nuclear weapons had a profound impact on life in the 1950s. Fear of communism and of nuclear war dominated life for ordinary Americans as well as for government leaders throughout the era.

Facing the Bomb Already upset by the first Soviet atomic test in 1949, Americans were shocked when the USSR again successfully tested the much more powerful hydrogen bomb, or H-bomb, in 1953. This was less than a year after the United States had tested its own H-bomb.

Americans prepared for a surprise Soviet attack. Schools set aside special areas as bomb shelters. In bomb drills, students learned to duck under their
desks, turn away from the windows, and cover their heads with their hands. These “duck-and-cover” actions were supposed to protect them from a nuclear bomb blast.

“Duck-and-cover” might have made people feel safe, but it would not have protected them from deadly nuclear radiation. According to experts, for every person killed outright by a nuclear blast, four more would die later from fallout, the radiation left over after a blast. To protect themselves, some families built backyard fallout shelters and stocked them with canned food.

Popular Culture in the Cold War Worries about nuclear war and Communist infiltration filled people’s imaginations. Cold War nightmares soon appeared in films and popular fiction.

Matt Cvetic was an FBI undercover informant who secretly infiltrated the Communist Party in Pittsburgh. His story captivated magazine readers in the Saturday Evening Post in 1950 and came to the screen the next year as I Was a Communist for the FBI. Another suspense film, Walk East on Beacon (1951), features the FBI’s activities in an espionage case. In 1953 television took up the theme with a series about an undercover FBI counterspy who was also a Communist Party official. Each week, I Led Three Lives kept television viewers on edge.

In 1954 author Philip Wylie published Tomorrow! This novel describes the horrific effects of nuclear war on an unprepared American city. As an adviser on civil defense, Wylie had failed to convince the federal government to play a strong role in building bomb shelters. Frustrated, he wrote this novel to educate the public about the horrors of atomic war.

At the same time these fears were haunting Americans, the country was enjoying postwar prosperity and optimism. That spirit, combined with McCarthyism, witch hunts, fears of Communist infiltration, and the threat of atomic attack, made the early 1950s a time of contrasts. As the 1952 election approached, Americans were looking for someone or something that would make them feel secure.

How did the Cold War affect life in the 1950s?

1. Define: subversion, perjury, censure, fallout, fallout shelter.
2. Identify: loyalty review program, Alger Hiss, McCarran Act, McCarthyism.
3. Explain: the goals of Project Venona.
4. Review Facts: What did the McCarran Act propose to do?
6. Interpreting: Why did McCarthy initially receive a lot of support for his efforts to expose Communists?
7. Organizing: Use a graphic organizer to list the causes and effects of the new Red Scare.
8. Analyzing Photographs: Study the photograph on page 794 of the Army-McCarthy hearings. From their postures, how would you describe the attitude of army lawyer Joseph Welch toward Senator Joseph McCarthy? Do you think Welch respects McCarthy’s presentation?
9. Persuasive Writing: Imagine you are a newspaper editor during the McCarthy hearings. Write an editorial supporting or condemning Senator McCarthy. Defend your position.

Cold War Words The development of nuclear weapons and artificial satellites created not only new anxieties but also new words and expressions.

“Sputnik,” the name of the Soviet satellite, started its own language trend, as words gained a -nik ending for a foreign-sounding effect. One new word, beatnik, described a young person influenced by the style of Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Another word, peacenik, was used to describe a peace activist.

The atomic bomb test on Bikini Atoll gave the Nuclear Age two new words: fallout, the term for the harmful radiation left over after an atomic blast, and bikini, a skimpy swimsuit that French designers promised would produce an “explosion” on the beach.