

Student Handout
Oakland Museum of California
What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era
Lesson Plan #1
From the Quiet Decade to Social Revolution:
How the Vietnam War Transformed California

From Schrecker, Ellen. *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Marwin's Press, 1994, (pp. 92-94).

The Legacy of McCarthyism

In the late 1950s a group of graduate students at the University of Chicago wanted to have a coffee vending machine installed outside the Physics Department for the convenience of people who worked there late at night. They started to circulate a petition to the Buildings and Grounds Department, but their colleagues refused to sign. They did not want to be associated with the allegedly radical students whose names were already on the document.

This incident and it is not unique exemplifies the kind of timidity that came to be seen, even at the time, as the most damaging consequence of the anti-Communist furor. Since political activities could get you in trouble, prudent folk avoided them. Instead, to the despair of intellectuals, middle-class Americans became social conformists. A silent generation of students populated the nation's campuses, while their professors shrank from teaching anything that might be construed as controversial. "The Black Silence of Fear" that Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas deplors in Document 22 seemingly blanketed the nation, and meaningful political dissent had all but withered away.

Was McCarthyism to blame? Obviously the congressional hearings, loyalty programs, and blacklists affected the lives of the men and women caught up in them. But beyond that, it is hard to tell. The statistics are imprecise. Ten thousand people may have lost their jobs. Is that few or many? It may well be useful to reflect on an earlier debate among historians about the application of sanctions, in this case the apparently low number of whippings administered under slavery, to realize that it may not be necessary to whip many slaves to keep the rest of the plantation in line.

Quantification aside, it may be helpful to look at the specific sectors of American society that McCarthyism touched. Such an appraisal, tentative though it must be, may offer some insight into the extent of the damage and into the ways in which the anti-Communist crusade influenced American society, politics, and culture. We should keep in mind, however, that McCarthyism's main impact may well have been in what did not happen rather than in what did, the social reforms that were never adopted, the diplomatic initiatives that were not pursued, the workers who were not organized into unions, the books that were not written, and the movies that were never filmed.



The most obvious casualty was the American left. The institutional toll is clear. The Communist party, already damaged by internal problems, dwindled into insignificance and all the organizations associated with it disappeared. The destruction of the front groups and the left-led unions may well have had a more deleterious impact on American politics than the decline of the party itself. With their demise, the nation lost the institutional network that had created a public space where serious alternatives to the status quo could be presented. Moreover, with the disappearance of a vigorous movement on their left, moderate reform groups were more exposed to right-wing attacks and thus rendered less effective.

In the realm of social policy, for example, McCarthyism may have aborted much-needed reforms. As the nation's politics swung to the right after World War II, the federal government abandoned the unfinished agenda of the New Deal. Measures like national health insurance, a social reform embraced by the rest of the industrialized world, simply fell by the wayside. The left liberal political coalition that might have supported health reforms and similar projects was torn apart by the anti-Communist crusade. Moderates feared being identified with anything that seemed too radical, and people to the left of them were either unheard or under attack. McCarthyism further contributed to the attenuation of the reform impulse by helping to divert the attention of the labor movement, the strongest institution within the old New Deal coalition, from external organizing to internal politicking.

The impact of the McCarthy era was equally apparent in international affairs. Opposition to the cold war had been so thoroughly identified with communism that it was no longer possible to challenge the basic assumptions of American foreign policy without incurring suspicions of disloyalty. As a result, from the defeat of third-party presidential candidate Henry Wallace in the fall of 1948 until the early 1960s, effective public criticism of America's role in the world was essentially nonexistent. Within the government, the insecurities that McCarthyism inflicted on the State Department lingered for years, especially with regard to East Asia. Thus, for example, the campaign against the loss of China left such long-lasting scars that American policymakers feared to acknowledge the official existence of the People's Republic of China until Richard Nixon, who was uniquely impervious to charges of being soft on communism, did so as president in 1971. And it was in part to avoid a replay of the loss-of-China scenario that Nixon's Democratic predecessors, Kennedy and Johnson, dragged the United States so deeply into the quagmire of Vietnam.

The nation's cultural and intellectual life suffered as well. While there were other reasons that TV offered a bland menu of quiz shows and westerns during the late 1950s, McCarthy-era anxieties clearly played a role. Similarly, the blacklist contributed to the reluctance of the film industry to grapple with controversial social or political issues. In the intellectual world, cold war liberals also avoided controversy. They celebrated the "end of ideology," claiming that the United States' uniquely pragmatic approach to politics made the problems that had once concerned left-wing ideologists irrelevant. Consensus historians pushed that formulation into the past and described a nation that



had supposedly never experienced serious internal conflict. It took the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War to end this complacency and bring reality back in.

Ironically, just as these social commentators were lauding the resilience of American democracy, the anti-Communist crusade was undermining it. The political repression of the McCarthy era fostered the growth of the national security state and facilitated its expansion into the rest of civil society. On the pretext of protecting the nation from Communist infiltration, federal agents attacked individual rights and extended state power into movie studios, universities, labor unions, and many other ostensibly independent institutions. The near universal deference to the federal government's formulation of the Communist threat abetted the process and muted opposition to what was going on.

Moreover, even after the anti-Communist furor receded, the antidemocratic practices associated with it continued. We can trace the legacy of McCarthyism in the FBI's secret COINTELPRO program of harassing political dissenters in the 1960s and 1970s, the Watergate-related felonies of the Nixon White House in the 1970s, and the Iran-Contra scandals in the 1980s. The pervasiveness of such wrongdoing reveals how seriously the nation's defenses against official illegalities had eroded in the face of claims that national security took precedence over ordinary law. McCarthyism alone did not cause these outrages; but the assault on democracy that began during the 1940s and 1950s with the collaboration of private institutions and public agencies in suppressing the alleged threat of domestic communism was an important early contribution.

