

Grades: 9-12

American Experience, “McCarthy”

McCarthy chronicles the rise and fall of Joseph McCarthy, the Wisconsin senator who came to power after a stunning victory in an election no one thought he could win. Once in office, he declared that there was a vast conspiracy threatening America — emanating not from a rival superpower, but from within. Free of restraint or oversight, he conducted a crusade against those he accused of being enemies of the state, a chilling campaign marked by groundless accusations, bullying intimidation, grandiose showmanship and cruel victimization. With lawyer Roy Cohn at his side, he belittled critics, spinning a web of lies and distortions while spreading fear and confusion. After years in the headlines, he was brought down by his own excesses and overreach. But his name lives on linked to the modern-day witch hunt we call “McCarthyism.”

After watching this episode, choose from the following questions and/or tasks to extend your learning

Question Box 1

- What is this program “saying”? Cite evidence to support your analysis.
- What are the program’s supporting claims that support the central message?
- What is the author trying to say through the TV program? What makes you believe this?
- What evidence does the TV show director give to support his or her central idea?

Question Box 2

- Many people were called to testify and “name names.” How would you have responded if you were subpoenaed to testify before congress?
- How would you have responded if you were a Senator or Congressman/woman?
- What evidence does the TV show director give to support his or her central idea?
- What is this program “saying”? Cite evidence to support your analysis.
- Which details support the key idea? Look for the who? What? When? Where? Why? How much? How many?

Box 3 (Tasks)

- In 1950, Congress passed the McCarran Internal Security Act. The bill required all “subversives” in the United States be subject to government supervision. President Truman vetoed the bill, but a Congressional majority overrode the veto. There are 100

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members of the Senate and 435 members of the House of Representatives. A bill first must be passed by the house of representatives by a simple majority and then the Senate by a simple majority. The bill is then sent to the President to sign or veto. If vetoed, two-thirds of the Senate must agree to overturn the bill. What is the minimum number of votes per house it would take to pass the bill? What do these numbers represent? What is the minimum number of votes it would take to overturn the veto? What do these numbers represent? Use mathematics to describe the leanings of the country regarding this bill. What does that mean? Do we see any such parallels in history? How and where?

Box 4 (Enrichment)

- Joseph McCarthy used scare tactics and a bully pulpit to advance his agenda. He used fear and intimidation to scare people to fall in line with him. McCarthy's reign of terror in the US destroyed a lot of lives. Research someone who suffered at the hands of McCarthyism (Red or Lavender Scare victims). What happened as a result of the accusations made against them? What did they lose? Were they able to ever recover? How or Why not?
- As a result of the Red Scare, a loyalty oath has been instituted in California. A professor was actually fired in 2008 for refusing to sign it (her religion preaches non-violence and she wanted to ensure that she would be able to fulfill the duties of the oath non-violently). A teaching credential is required to teach public school in California. One of the few things that can get your teaching credential revoked is membership in the communist party. All of this, because of the Red Scare. Should we require loyalty oaths? What do they prove? Read this article: <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/160596>
- Have your views changed as a result of it? The author presumes you can disagree with parts of the constitution that have been amended. What if the author is wrong? Should all teachers feel that slavery is legal and that a slave is only 3/5ths of a person? How should we handle loyalty when people are loyal to the US and state governments but stand up for inequities when those institutions are wrong?

Box 5 (Extend/Real-Life)

- In American society although individuals are afforded First Amendment Rights, speech that is inflammatory, obscene, violent, and/or provokes lawless action may not be protected. <https://lawshelf.com/shortvideoscontentview/freedom-of-speech-exceptions-categories-of-speech-not-protected/>
- How did McCarthy gain so much political power in the Senate? Why do you believe he was so effective?
- Read this speech by Margaret Chase Smith:
- <https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/SmithDeclaration.pdf>
- Why is the title of the speech, "Declaration of Conscience" effective?
- Explain why you agree or disagree with the section, "The Basic Principles of Americanism"

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- What do you think the Senator meant by her comment on pg. 622, “But I do not want to see the Republican party ride to political victory on the Four Horsemen of Calumny-Fear, Ignorance, Bigotry, and Smear.” What message does it convey?
- In today’s use of social media, negative online engagement, trolls, and malicious online smear campaigns are common. This type of behavior can ruin a reputation, derail a career, and/or tank a business. In our era politicians, actors, businesses, and sports rivals participate in this propaganda.
 1. Research five examples in the last three years when the social media platform was used by a business or individual to mischaracterize, smear, or defame someone.
 2. What appeared to be the reason(s) for the smear campaign? How did it damage the individual(s) involved? How far reaching did this smear campaign reach? What approach would you have used to address the competitor/opposition?
 3. Write a letter in response to one of the five examples you chose above. Title it “Declaration of Conscience.” Address the tactics used, how inappropriate the behavior appeared, and how much damage it caused. Challenge them to the ethical standard you believe they should demonstrate.