ABSTRACT

UN-AMERICANISM IN THE PAPERS:
ANTI-COMMUNISTS AND THEIR USE OF THE PRESS

By Peter Manley Barker

Understanding how anti-Communists in Congress manipulated public opinion through the press is critical in understanding how McCarthyism worked. This study traces the development of press interaction techniques, focusing on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and Senator Joseph McCarthy from 1938 to 1952. HUAC used the print press and radio to maximum advantage to create a discourse of fear and convince the public of the need for further investigations. Their savvy press manipulation allowed them to sidestep opposition attempts to moderate the Committee or shut it down. This study also demonstrates that Senator Joseph McCarthy drew heavily upon these precedents in his own rise to power. Given this evidence, it should not be surprising that television, the medium for which McCarthy had no established precedent, ended his career.
UN-AMERICANISM IN THE PAPERS:

ANTI-COMMUNISTS AND USE OF THE PRESS

A Thesis

Submitted to the

Faculty of Miami University

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for a degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History

By

Peter Manley Barker

Miami University

Oxford, Ohio

2009

Advisor: Allan Winkler

Reader: Robert Thurston

Reader: Amanda McVety
Table of Contents

1. Introduction
5. Establishing the Precedent
15. HUAC under Interdict
26. McCarthy and the Press
32. Conclusion
34. Bibliographical Essay and Bibliography
Introduction

McCarthyism was the most successful mass purge in American history. The persecution of radicals and communists through loyalty review boards and unconstitutional FBI investigations caused thousands of individuals to face public humiliation, character assassination, and loss of jobs. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, whose name became synonymous with the movement, relied on adept use of the press to mobilize public opinion behind him. But he was not the first anti-communist to do so. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) developed the press techniques that McCarthy made his own. By insinuating themselves into stories of importance, taking advantage of the business of the news, and cultivating personal alliances with members of the media, members of HUAC were able to use the press to sell their campaign to the public and to weather criticism and to resist the Committee’s demise.

Evidence of the Committee’s use of the press comes from mainstream daily newspapers. The most valuable sources are the largest dailies, including the Washington Post and the New York Times. Large metropolitan dailies not only have much more widespread audiences, but on a practical level, they serve as trend-setters for hundreds of smaller newspapers. Morning stories from large newspapers often appeared verbatim in small town papers, and articles from news wires across the country were also copied word for word.1 Several local newspapers do provide additional evidence for Committee actions, especially their members’ work in radio. The Committee itself produced voluminous amounts of material, including quarterly and yearly reports, reams of testimony in open and executive sessions, speeches and articles published in magazines and on radio and, later in its existence, a short film.2

HUAC established its reputation through adept use of the press. Then the Committee faced two major crises in which its use of the press manipulation saved it. The first occurred early in HUAC’s existence, under the chairmanship of Representative Martin Dies, a Democrat from Texas. Dies saved his committee by arguing that domestic investigation of subversion was a necessary component of the coming war. To do this, he used a combination of lies and

2 The Committee was actually the subject of several films throughout the 50s and 60s. These included documentaries such as Operation Abolition which HUAC produced in 1960, and fictionalized dramas like Big Jim McClain produced in 1952.
exaggerations that no major media outlet questioned. The second crisis occurred after the 1948 reelection of Harry Truman as President. The President, through a series of reforms, sought to silence the Committee. These reforms were successful until 1949, when in the face of revelations about the first Soviet nuclear test, the Committee falsely claimed that its investigations of physicists at Berkeley had revealed an atomic spy. Dr. Joseph Weinberg was later exonerated, but the hysterical press coverage, stimulated by HUAC’s extravagant claims, allowed the Committee to counter Truman’s actions and resume its savage work.

In both cases, the press was the key vehicle through which the Committee vindicated itself. Joe McCarthy copied the precedents for manipulating print and radio wholesale in 1950. McCarthy’s demise came from following the Committee’s examples too closely, and failing to adapt to the new and powerful medium of public discourse television.

Anti-Communist sentiment in the United States Government began not long after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, when Vladimir Lenin and his entourage overturned the Russian Empire and Woodrow Wilson refused to recognize the new regime. Recognition of the Soviet Union as a state did not come until 1933, when Franklin Roosevelt opened negotiations with Moscow in the hopes of using the USSR as a buffer against Japanese expansion. Anti-communism in the late 1910s and 1920s was often mixed with nativism and anti-immigrant feeling, especially during the World War I. In the Palmer Raids of 1919, the Bureau of Investigation, the predecessor to the FBI, raided the homes and offices of radicals, socialists and anarchists in response to an assassination plot against Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. Charges of illegal wiretapping, torture of suspects and break-ins were the hallmarks of the investigation, which led to many with radical views charged with sedition.

During the Great Depression, the Communist Party of the United States made major changes, disavowing armed revolution and refocusing on social change, a movement known as the Popular Front. The Party was instrumental in helping form labor unions, including the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and in opposing lynching as part of the early civil rights struggle. Though the Party’s actual membership was of a revolving door nature, with new

---

members joining and leaving again usually within a year, the Party had a direct or indirect hand in numerous social reform movements.  

The Communist Party reached its peak during World War II, when the United States allied itself with the Soviet Union. With the end of the war and the emergent reality of the Cold War, communism became increasingly viewed as hostile and alien. Several major pieces of legislation, including the Smith Act and the McCarran Act were passed between 1950 and 1952. The McCarran Act implicitly outlawed the Communist Party by stating that it was “unlawful for any person to knowingly combine, conspire, or agree with any other person” any act which could lead to “a totalitarian dictatorship in the United States.” The measures presupposed that government and the public that Communists in America were attempting to establish Soviet rule in the United States. This bill made anyone openly identified as a Communist subject to arrest. Furthermore, it required anyone in a fellow traveler organization to register with the Attorney General’s office. The Smith Act took this one step further by explicitly outlawing members of the Party. The law led to the arrest and imprisonment of several Party leaders. Meanwhile, the House Un-American Activities Committee stood at the forefront of the anti-communist crusade, and was the most public voice of anti-Communism in government. 

Congressional investigation of Communism began in response to a newspaper story. The earliest committees were formed in 1919, after the Washington Post ran a sensational account of a pro-Soviet rally at Poli’s Theater in the capital. The early 1930s saw another attempt to use the investigative power of Congress against Communism, with the Fish Committee. Hamilton Fish, the Chairman of the Committee, though possessed of anti-communist fervor, did not have a great deal of media savvy, and he was roundly criticized in the press. Though the Fish Committee failed, it inspired Representative Samuel Dickstein, a New York Democrat to attempt his own investigation. 

---

5 U.S Statutes At Large, United States House of Representatives, 81st Congress, 2nd Session, 1950. 987-988.
8 According to Allen Weinstein’s The Haunted Wood Dickstein eventually grew impatient with the government’s laxity in investigating fascists that he offered to supply intelligence to the Soviet Union. Weinstein has never
Throughout the 1930s, the Jewish Dickstein grew increasingly concerned over the number of anti-Semitic attacks in his district, and sought a Committee to investigate whether the explosion of pro-German and pro-Fascist groups in New York were receiving foreign funding. The Committee he eventually co-chaired with John McCormack, Democrat of Massachusetts was little more than a circus, with witnesses storming out or screaming “Seig Heil” at any attempt to question them.9

While the Dickstein-McCormack Committee failed to produce any significant revelations about foreign funding of fascist groups, it made several legislative recommendations that, when they became law, laid the foundation for HUAC. The first was the recommendation that political groups and individuals deemed subversive or radical be registered with the Justice Department, a task taken up by the new Federal Bureau of Investigation with gusto. Another was a new law that allowed U.S. attorneys to independently prosecute witnesses for contempt of Congress. The charge of contempt was the primary weapon later Committees wielded against uncooperative witnesses and dissenters.10

In 1938, Martin Dies used renewed fear of Communism to form a new committee to investigate un-American activities. Dies was far more skilled at media manipulation than either Dickstein or McCormack and used his Committee primarily as a weapon against the Roosevelt administration and the New Deal. Under Dies, press interaction became a prominent part of the Committee’s actions, as he argued that exposing communists and communism to the public was one of the Committee’s primary functions. The Committee survived the Depression and the Second World War, becoming a permanent standing body in 1947.

The House Un-American Activities Committee was at the forefront of the anti-communist crusade throughout much of its life. It purged Hollywood of the left beginning with a series of highly public hearings in 1947, which led to the arrest and blacklisting of several prominent writers and directors for failure to cooperate in the witch hunt. In 1948, through the testimony of former communist Whittaker Chambers, the Committee exposed Alger Hiss, a past

publicly disclosed his source material, but given Dickstein’s increasing stridency during the 30’s his claim does seem plausible.


10 Ogden, *The Dies Committee*, 36-37.
employee of the State Department, accusing him of espionage. Hiss was eventually convicted of perjury in two very public and closely covered trials.

The Committee went on to investigate minority groups, atomic scientists, members organized labor, and communism in Hawaii. In every case, it attempted to grab as much press exposure as possible. The precedents the Committee established can be clearly traced to its first Chairman Martin Dies. Though Dies’ methods were crude, and in fact put the Committee in jeopardy on one notable occasion, he laid the basic framework for how the Committee related to the press and the public. His methods would be improved upon by the likes of Richard Nixon and Karl Mundt, but the formula remained the same.

Establishing the Precedent

When Dies took over chairmanship of the new House Un-American Activities Committee, he had two goals for the new body: investigate communism, which he considered a much greater threat than fascism, and discredit the New Deal. Dies possessed a deep suspicion of organized labor, a position which became increasingly popular after 1937, when a series of nationwide strikes at major defense industries brought the specter of Communism in labor into the public mind.11 His fellow Committee members shared his views. Representative John Rankin, who remained on the Committee for the next decade, stated before the first hearing that Communists outnumbered Fascists in American 5 to 1 and were far more dangerous. Conservative members of the press echoed the sentiment.12

The American public in the late thirties agreed with Dies that Communism was a threat. In 1939 the Committee received an additional boost from the Nazi-Soviet Pact, which made for an alliance between Germany and Russia, and the Communist Party of the United States’ dramatic reversal in its opposition to fascism. The Party’s stance effectively destroyed the Popular Front and alienated Communists from the mainstream. Liberals in America were growing increasingly wary of Stalinism. With war in Europe almost a certainty, both Communism and Fascism in the United States became national security issues.

---

11 Schrecker, Many are the Crimes, 90-91.
The House designed the Dies Special Committee, like its predecessors with a temporary lifespan. Its budget was a mere $25,000 dollars, a quarter of what Dies originally asked for, and its continued existence required a yearly vote in the House. Even before announcing the first hearings, Dies raised public awareness of his Committee through the press. In his first pronouncements on radio, Dies distanced himself from previous hearings, which were widely considered ineffective and farcical. Dies promised the Un-American Activities Committee would not be a “circus.”\(^\text{13}\)

Dies’ radio speeches were part of an organized press campaign by Committee members to raise awareness. While Dies was speaking through the radio, J. Parnell Thomas, Republican of New Jersey, another member, declared that the Committee would be tireless in its hunt for communists. Thomas immediately began associating the New Deal with Communism, saying that the National Theater Project, a planned target for the Committee later than year was “a haven for reds.”\(^\text{14}\)

The Committee set its first hearings for August 1938. The stifling heat of summer meant that most Congressmen were home in their districts, and Washington was largely empty. Dies understood that the Washington news bureaus had very little to cover in late summer, and the hearings of the Un-American Committee would thus get prime attention. His gamble paid off.

The first Committee targeted George Sylvester Viereck, a friend of the deposed German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, and a pro-German sympathizer, for its first hearing. Viereck was a known propagandist for the Germans, running a pro-German news service, and was the author of several pro-German articles. For some months, Viereck had been planning a trip to Germany. Dies accused him of planning to meet with Adolf Hitler, and of being a crypto-Fascist. Arguing that Viereck was a pro-German sympathizer was hardly news.

Nevertheless, the New York Times headlined with DIES OPENS WAR AGAINST PROPAGANDISTS, and followed with a story that described Viereck’s German associations in lurid detail. When Viereck angrily denounced the Committee in session, the Times followed up,

claiming that Viereck’s behavior threatened “to trample on the dignity of Congress.”\(^{15}\) Over the first month and a half of the Committee’s existence, the *Times* alone devoted more than five hundred inches of column space to coverage of the Dies Committee.\(^{16}\)

Other papers were even more accommodating. During the next hearing on Communists in government, the *Chicago Tribune* gave large sections of its front page to publishing Committee members’ accusations word for word, often embellishing them by calling named individuals Communists, even when the Committee members did not.\(^{17}\) The sheer volume of coverage the Committee received surpassed Dies’ most optimistic predictions. The Committee received intense press coverage throughout the latter months of 1938 and early 1939.

By using print, Dies was able to exploit key flaws in American newsrooms. First and foremost was their reliance on straight reporting. In an effort to maintain journalistic professionalism, editors insisted that their newsrooms report “just the facts.” This meant that, even if reporters doubted Dies’ accusations, they reported them verbatim in newspapers. Lack of editorializing also provided the reader with little or no context or continuity between stories. Dies bombarded the press with accusations, and the constant flurry of news meant that answers to his allegations only appeared weeks later, often in editorials or columns off the front page. The Committee chairman quickly realized the potential of newsprint and used it often.\(^{18}\)

Dies was extremely prolific, releasing press statements to multiple newspapers, on an almost weekly basis. Dies often chose local newspapers such as the *Richmond Times Dispatch* in Virginia, cities where larger metropolitan papers had no local bureaus. This insured that a story that appeared in the morning edition of the *Daily Record* in Philadelphia would likely headline in the afternoon edition of the *Tribune* with little or no change. This was only helped by the fact that some of the papers Dies used, such as the *Washington Times-Herald* in Washington D.C. and the Hearst owned *New York Sun*, were already friendly to his cause, and even less likely to editorialize his comments.\(^{19}\)


\(^{19}\) The Federal Bureau of Investigation produced monthly reports detailing Die’s work in the press. These now exist as a single document summing up all press activity for the Dies Committee. E.A. Tamm “Dies Press Activity, 1938-
As with McCarthy years later, newspaper editors and reporters were exceedingly lax in vetting reports from the Committee. They simply assumed that if a Congressional committee chair was making the claim, there had to be something to it.\textsuperscript{20} This complicity, however unintentional, drew national attention to the chairman and served to legitimize his committee, effectively affirming through the press that Communism was not only a threat, but was present in the government, especially in the New Deal.

The committee chairman also used radio, going on the air early and often. He gave monthly radio addresses, as well as yearly addresses summing up the Committee’s actions. Radio addresses and news wires were the most efficient way to reach the anti-Communists’ base: conservative Democrats and Republicans in the rural South and Midwest. Small towns often did not have access to large metropolitan newspapers, and local papers made ample use of newswires to fill their pages. Radio provided Dies with a completely unfiltered format for his message. In order to avoid even the minimal editorializing of pro-Roosevelt newspapers, Dies made his most direct charges against the administration via radio.\textsuperscript{21} Portions of his radio address would appear in newspapers the following day, usually without any additional editorial comment.

Dies also established a precedent of press intimidation when he did not get coverage exactly as he wanted it. This too became a staple of McCarthyism. When stations either refused or neglected to carry his radio addresses, Dies publicly accused the stations’ managers of being Communists or fellow travelers. In one incident, in December 1938, an NBC radio station preempted Dies’ radio address with regular radio serials. The Chairman humiliated the radio station owner in his next speech. After this tirade, NBC declared itself “open to Dies.”\textsuperscript{22}

Constant press attention proved highly effective in legitimizing Dies’ Committee and the early anti-Communist crusade. Letters to the editor, in major newspaper as well as letters to the

\begin{flushright}
1940,” Kenneth O’Reilly, ed.,\textit{ FBI File on the House Un-American Activities Committee}, on microfilm, Langsam Library, University of Cincinnati, Roll 1, 1937-1940.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{20} Bayley, \textit{Joe McCarthy and the Press}, 78.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{22} Associated Press, “Radio Open to Dies, NBC Head Declares, Lohr Denies Speech was Barred here as Controversial,” \textit{New York Times}, 12 Dec, 1938, 3.
\end{flushright}
FBI and the Committee, showed growing support for the mission.\textsuperscript{23} Gallup polls taken in 1938 and 1939 showed a large majority of Americans supported HUAC’s investigations, and the resolutions to continue the Committee passed with overwhelming margins in 1938 and 1939.\textsuperscript{24}

Dies was successful not only in continuing the Committee’s existence but in striking blows against the New Deal. Though the Committee never succeeded in terminating a federal program, HUAC’s continued assaults against the Federal Theater Project and the Works Progress Administration humiliated their administrators and served as focal points for attacks on the Roosevelt administration as a whole. The Committee famously gathered a list 1,125 supposed Communists in government, with which Dies used to repeatedly lambaste the Attorney General for not acting upon. Eventually, the alliance between Germany and Russia abroad and growing anti-Communist fervor at home, the Roosevelt administration began taking steps to quietly fire named Communists from New Deal boards and commissions, which the Committee spun into a public relations victory. The uncritical media coverage of Dies thus allowed for HUAC to spin the President’s actions as it wished.

The Dies Committee’s continuous positive presence in the press and the overwhelming support for its mission drove Dies to new heights of hubris in 1941, heralding major problems. Dies personality alienated the FBI and his constituents and seriously threatened the future of his committee. HUAC was saved by Dies’ most brazen and cynical press manipulation: spinning the attack on Pearl Harbor as verification of his claims about the administration’s weakness on subversives.

Dies was fond of color-coding his major reports. For Communism, he chose to call his official congressional reports the “Red Papers.” HUAC’s official report on Fascism, the “White Papers” named numerous pro-Fascist propaganda groups in the United States. Specifically, the Committee targeted Manfred Zapp and the Trans-Ocean News as disseminators of pro-Nazi newsreels. It went on to imply that, with regards to curtailing foreign propaganda, the Dies Committee had done far more in its short lifespan than the FBI or Justice had ever done. In his


radio address regarding the “White Paper,” Dies concluded by ridiculing the FBI as “a bunch of boy scouts.”

By attacking the FBI, Dies was insulting the integrity of an agency led by a man with far more media savvy and better political connections. Since the Palmer Raids against the Communist Party in the 1920s, the FBI’s Director J. Edgar Hoover, devoted himself to protecting the image of the FBI in the media. Not only had Dies slighted the Committee, his public exposure of Zapp precluded any attempt to bring real charges against him. Hoover sent copies of Dies’ White Paper to every field office in the country, directing them to use their press networks to publicly deride the Dies Committee and its work. Hoover possessed far more established press networks than Dies and editorials and cartoons began appearing in FBI friendly publications deriding the chairman.

The FBI, in an effort to prove its utility, also launched a massive investigation into a sit-down strike at the Vultee Aircraft plant in California. This investigation resulted in the arrest of several union leaders as Communist saboteurs for attempting to prolong the strike to damage the defense industry. Press releases about the arrests appeared along with editorials praising the FBI. By late 1940, Dies was receiving editorial attacks from the Hearst publishing empire, and other anti-New Deal publications, as well as liberal publications.

Dies quickly modulated his invective, praising the FBI’s work while continuing to attack the Democratic Attorney General. A truce in December between Attorney General Jackson, and Dies Committee member Jerry Voorhis, Democrat from California, resulted in the FBI calling off its smear campaign. Nevertheless, editorial rooms that disliked the Dies Committee’s crusade now possessed a legitimate criticism for its work. The argument that the Justice

---

26 Ibid, 69.
28 “Political Cartoon: Are you Sherlock Holmes, the Lone Ranger or Paul Revere?,” *Detroit News*, 16 Dec, 1940, in *FBI File on House Un-American Activities Committee*, Langsam Library, University of Cincinnati, roll 2, 1940-42.
Department was better equipped to deal with the threat of propaganda and sabotage followed the Committee into the next year.  

A second blow to the Dies Committee came in June, when Germany overturned the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and invaded the Soviet Union. Suddenly, no one could claim that the Soviets were friendly to the Axis cause. Though many sneered at the Communist Party’s quick turn-about in its attitudes toward American intervention, the majority of Americans considered Hitler the greater threat. Conservative politicians, pundits and columnists, though expressing open distrust of the Soviets, urged supporting their cause against the Nazi menace. But Dies never altered his stance on Communism at home or abroad. In a radio address only days after the invasion, he warned that Hitler’s victory would only heighten the threat of Communism in the United States, where erstwhile Communist agents would resume their activities in an effort to spread the Revolution to other nations.

By late 1940, the Dies Committee was receiving sustained criticism from the Right. Westbrook Pegler, a nationally syndicated and rabid anti-Communist who was an anti-New Deal columnist, provides an illustrative example of the Right’s growing annoyance with Dies. Throughout 1939 and 1940, Pegler was an ardent supporter of Dies’ campaign. By October 1941, his opinion had changed; while explaining that the Dies Committee was more right than wrong about American Communists, he labeled HUAC the “Anti-Reason Committee of the House of Representatives.” By December, Pegler admitted that the Dies Committee’s crying wolf served only as a “distraction” from the real struggle against totalitarianism. The Committee’s transparent partisanship was grating even to an ardently anti-New Deal writer like Pegler.

Dies was seeking for press coverage as other anti-Communist Congressional Committees began competing for resources and press attention. In August 1941, the Dies Committee

---

announced it would investigate the possibility of Japanese agents operating in American ports and shipyards. The Committee postponed the hearings at the behest of the State Department, which did not want to upset the Japanese delegation during diplomatic negotiations. By October, relations between Japan and the United States had soured significantly. Before Dies could restart his investigation, the Senate launched its own investigation, calling many of the witnesses from Dies own docket.35 Thus, the Dies Committee spent the rest of the year pursuing formerly named Communist Harry Bridges in hearings that accomplished little to nothing concrete. By now, the Committee’s actions, while still reported in print, tended to occupy the back pages of the news, rather than the front pages as before.

These blunders served to devalue Dies’ currency in the media. The credibility of his continued assertions that Soviet Communism was a continuing threat to the United States faltered with the violent break-up of the Nazi-Soviet pact, and the invasion of the Soviet Union by Axis forces.36 His Committee’s token attention paid to Fascist groups, and lack of interest in home grown white supremacist groups, showed his Committee as a partisan tool. Dies hurt his own cause by his petulant post-campaign assertions of 5th column sabotage of his election, and his continuing feuds with the Justice Department served as fodder for those who challenged the legitimacy of his Committee. By late 1941, Dies was convinced that his Committee would not survive another vote. In late October, he sent private messages to the FBI and the Justice Department, asking for the Bureau to take the Committee’s archives for its own analysis and use. With the Committee’s end at hand, Dies argued, its accumulated work should be passed on to agencies capable of dealing with the Communist threat.37 As late as early December, the FBI was in agreement with Dies’ predictions about the future of the Committee. In a confidential memo, Louis Nichols, the agent in charge of monitoring the group, reported to his superiors that the Dies Committee was likely “going out of business.” Furthermore, he dismissed Dies’ requests, stating that the Committee’s records held “nothing of value.”38 The Dies Committee, in the space of a year, had gone from being in the forefront of the Right’s attacks against

---

radicalism, to a liability. Though it still enjoyed popular support, it seemed likely that the Un-American Activities Committee had likely reached the end of its lifespan.

The fate of the Dies Committee, like the fate of the United States, took a dramatic turn after December 7, 1941. Only two days after the attack, while smoke still hung over Pearl Harbor, Dies made his most cynical and audacious press statement ever. He claimed that, had his hearings gone forward, the information gained about Japanese spies would certainly have prevented the attack from happening. Dies promised he would reveal his evidence on the extent of Japanese espionage over the next months. As in 1938, Dies claims received universal, and unedited, space in every major newspaper. Anti-New Deal publications again saw Dies’ criticism of the administration as worthy of support. Dies also became one of the loudest voices in the American Congress arguing for the internment of Japanese citizens, a position he championed well into the next year.

In February 1942, Dies released his long awaited “Yellow Papers,” his report on Japanese propaganda and subversives in the United States. The release coincided with the opening of debate on the future of the Committee in the House. The 285-page document was rife with unsupported conclusions, generalizations and false information. Much of the military data supplied was already common knowledge, and those it listed as current Japanese agent provocateurs in the United States had all largely fled the country, or were already under arrest. Nonetheless, the “Yellow Papers” received unedited attention on the front pages of most metropolitan newspapers, with blocks of text quoted verbatim.

With an overwhelmingly positive response to the “Yellow Papers,” Congress, by a margin of 331-46, once again voted to extend the Un-American Activities Committee’s lifespan. Newspaper editorial across the country declared that Communism and Fascism were threats to

---

the security of the nation, and the Dies Committee represented the best way the government could expose them.44

The Dies Committee continued to receive overwhelming votes of support throughout the war years.45 As before, its focus rarely wavered from noting the threat of Communism, and attacking the radical policies of the New Deal. In March 1944, Dies announced that he would not seek reelection due to poor health. When he returned to Congress in 1953, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was a permanent standing Committee in the House.

Dies received nearly universal and uncritical coverage in the media. By setting the agenda around the chairman, the press never questioned his premises. In 1941, the Committee survived its yearly vote by an overwhelming margin. Its budget ballooned to $125,000 dollars, five times its original budget in 1938. Dies even succeeded in spinning an attack by the Empire of Japan on the United States Navy into a justification to investigate and expose Communists in the government.

HUAC became a permanent standing committee in 1945, with Edward J. Hart, Democrat of New Jersey, as its first permanent chairman. This meant that the Committee did not need to rely on yearly house votes for its continued existence, or on the charisma of any one chairman. While its budget could be subject to change, a special vote of the House was required to end the Committee. With the war coming to a close and conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States beginning, the issue of Communism at home once again took center stage. The threat of the Soviet Union abroad helped to secure the House Un-American Activities Committee. While Representatives might oppose the Committee on principle, they were unwilling to risk the political capital necessary to vote it down and appear soft on communism. By 1948, the Committee’s members were skilled in the use of the rhetoric of fear, and used the panic of the emerging atomic age to good effect.

HUAC Under Interdict

Throughout World War II, the Committee continued to operate. Its main targets were possible saboteurs and spies within wartime industries as well as enemy propagandists. Seemingly in the interests of national unity, it seemed to tone down the rhetoric against the President. In 1945, with the war’s end no longer in doubt, the Committee resumed full attack on the New Deal by taking on the Office of Price Administration (OPA). With the War in Europe already over, the Committee excoriated the head of the OPA for keeping Communist sympathizers and known leftists on its radio staff.46

Only two years after the war’s end, with the threat of renewed hostilities between the United States and the Soviet Union, the House voted to make HUAC a permanent institution. During the war years, membership in the Communist Party skyrocketed. With the end of the war, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the Soviet Union represented the United States’ greatest rivals, and fears of home grown Communist sympathizers prompted the passage of Public Law 601 making the nine-member committee a permanent fixture in the Congress. This significantly increased its budget and allowed HUAC to retain a well-paid staff of investigators and researchers. It also lessened the threat of the Committee’s termination by House vote. Bolstered, the Committee undertook several ambitious projects that maximized its attention in the press.

In 1947, the Committee challenged Hollywood. The movie industry, which had only recently been unionized, was an inviting target. Several outspoken and prominent leftwing actors, writers and directors made movies sympathetic to the Soviet Union during the war as part of propaganda efforts for the allies. Only a few years later, these movies seemed to be endorsements of the United States’ new adversary. Targeting the recently organized labor guilds within the movie industry, HUAC subpoenaed several witnesses with leftwing sympathies. The hearing rooms were packed with cameras and hearings were stopped several times to allow for photographers and radio operators to better position themselves.

Several of the directors and screenwriters called refused to answer questions about their loyalties, citing the first amendment to the Constitution with its guarantee of free speech. Again and again, members of HUAC asked the famous question, “Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?” With the aid of a sympathetic press, the Committee members painted these uncooperative witnesses as devious liars who were using false indignation to cover for their subversive deeds. Over the course of the high-profile hearings, ten unfriendly witnesses were cited for contempt of Congress, giving the Committee almost daily front page coverage.

The Committee also received a boost from J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI. In a highly calculated move for both the Committee and the Bureau, Hoover was given unfettered access to the Committee. His testimony amounted merely to his reading a prepared speech into the record, which appeared verbatim in newspapers across the country. Hoover declared that Communism represented the single greatest threat to the American way of life. He explained that Communists came in two types. Either they were unwitting dupes gullibly serving a cause that would ultimately destroy them, or sinister agents of the Kremlin bent on overthrowing the government in favor of totalitarian rule. Hoover’s stature served to further elevate the Committee, while the Committee served to give Hoover yet another public outlet to increase his own stature as chief G-Man. Furthermore, Hoover’s description of the average Communist became a template for the Committee, appearing repeatedly in publications throughout the 50s.

While 1947 was a high point for the Committee, 1948 was a banner year. The Committee’s best press came from the Alger Hiss hearings. It generated more press coverage than any other hearing the Committee ever undertook. Nearly all of this coverage was in newspapers, the primary way in which Americans experienced the drama. The hearings began with Whittaker Chambers, a former editor of a Communist newspaper. Chambers named several former Communist associates whom he claimed were involved in espionage. Among those named was Alger Hiss, a former State Department employee. The hearings became a media sensation, after Chambers and Hiss went public with their accusations and counter-accusations.

As the hearings dominated the front pages across the country, Nixon and fellow Republican Karl Mundt wasted no opportunity to link Hiss to the Truman administration over the course of questioning and in press releases.\(^5^1\)

The Hiss hearings allowed Committee members to take full advantage of the personal relationships they developed with select sympathetic members of the press. Republican Representative Richard Nixon would later become legendary for his antagonistic relationship with reporters, both as Congressman and President.\(^5^2\) During the Hiss hearings, however, Nixon personally reached out to Bert Andrews, editor and former Washington Bureau Chief for the Hearst owned *New York Herald Tribune*. He insured that Andrews was present during much of the questioning of Chambers and Hiss, including private meetings and executive sessions. In exchange for this choice access, Andrews and other members of the press gave glowing coverage to Nixon, painting him as a tireless investigator.\(^5^3\) With the help of friendly news rooms, Hiss was convicted in the court of public opinion, and charged with perjury by a Grand Jury.\(^5^4\)

President Harry Truman managed to win re-election in 1948 by skillfully outmaneuvering both his opponents. He managed to out red-bait the red-baiters against Henry Wallace, former Vice President and Secretary of Commerce, who left his position as editor of the *New Republic* to run as a Progressive Party candidate. Truman claimed Wallace was a friend, even a sympathizer, of the Communist Party.\(^5^5\) He succeeded in winning support over his Republican rival Thomas Dewey of New York, and from break-away renegades in his own party, by carefully crafting an image of working class ethics, honesty and liberal compassion that won over large sections of the working class.\(^5^6\) Truman not only gained re-election but accumulated a number of New Deal Democrat seats in Congress. Poised with a mandate and with a slight majority of support in the House, Truman seemed, at least temporarily vindicated over his political rivals.

---

\(^{5^1}\) Ibid, 99; Hearings Regarding Communist Infiltration of the United States Government, U.S House of Representatives, Special Sub-Committee on Un-American Activities, 80\(^{th}\) Congress, 2\(^{nd}\) Session, 30 Aug, 1948, 1347-1348.


\(^{5^4}\) O’Reilly, *Hoover and the Un-Americans*, 110.

\(^{5^5}\) Fried, *Nightmare in Red*, 84.

After the election, Truman was the first to celebrate what he believed was the beginning of the end for HUAC, which he saw as a major political thorn. In a press statement soon after the election, he declared HUAC a “dead committee” and called its investigations political red herrings.\(^{57}\) He was soon openly threatening to abolish the Committee outright.\(^{58}\) The liberal wing of the Democratic Party stood behind Truman, hoping to purge the rebel Dixiecrats from the Party. The Committee had few open supporters among the Republicans. Mundt had moved on to the Senate, and only Nixon was willing to openly declare his desire to serve again as a Committee member before the end of the 80\(^{th}\) Congress’s term.\(^{59}\)

Truman was certainly no stranger himself to the anti-Communist inquisition. In 1947 he issued a sweeping executive order creating loyalty review boards to test government employees for subversive activity. This action gave Presidential approval to the anti-Communist crusade, and vindicated many of the most outspoken anti-Communist members of the House.\(^{60}\) Truman’s desire to remove the Committee was purely political, as it represented a significant and consistent opponent of his proposed Fair Deal legislation, a continuance of Roosevelt’s New Deal.

Despite his victory, the President was unable to garner the support in Congress necessary to risk a vote abolishing the Committee. A public relations campaign waged in the press, both by the Committee and right wing groups outside of Congress which saw the Committee as an ally, challenged him. Numerous editorials appeared in major newspapers around the country, many of them mobilized by the American Legion and other vocally anti-Communist political groups.\(^{61}\) Staff editorials also supported the Committee. While right wing newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune* and *New York Daily News* were unequivocal in their support, even traditionally liberal New Deal friendly publications like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* ran supporting editorials. These tended to argue that while the Committee’s vices were inexcusable and HUAC

---


was it desperate need of reform, it still served a valuable purpose. The *Baltimore Sun* went so far as to warn against Democrat tampering with the Committee, claiming that Democratic reforms would make the Committee too “sleepy” to investigate further Communist infiltration of the executive branch.

With the help of the press, the Committee survived another year with a budget of $200,000. In the face of a concerted press campaign, the Truman Democrats felt that they no longer had the political clout to actually terminate the Committee. Rather than kill it outright, the Democratic Congress attempted to silence it, both by removing its most vocal members and by restricting its press access. Truman’s allies in the Congress used their majority to both reshape the Committee’s make-up and its operating procedure in an effort to tone down its rhetoric. They thus hoped to appear tough on Communism by keeping the Committee alive, while preventing it from accessing the press and harming the Fair Deal initiatives Truman was attempting to push through Congress.

The first reforms to the Committee involved removing the most vocal and damaging members, those who were the most vociferous in the press. Since the Committee’s inception, John Rankin stood out as HUAC’s most consistent headache for the administration, as well as a liability for the Committee itself. His open racism and anti-Semitism made him infamous, especially his consistent defense of the Ku Klux Klan as a “thoroughly American group.” The Democrats instituted a rule for the Committee specifically designed to remove Rankin, stating that no one could serve as a member of HUAC and another Committee.

A second reform stated that only licensed attorneys could serve on the Committee. This sought to remove another vocal and press savvy member F. Edward Hebert, a Republican from Louisiana. In their place, the Committee received Burr Harrison of Virginia and John McSweeny of Ohio, two members with proven New Deal credentials.

---

64 O’Reilly, *Hoover and the Un-Americans*, 50-51, 76.
John Wood from Georgia, a long time Committee member replaced the former Chairman J. Parnell Thomas, recently indicted on corruption charges. Of the original Republicans, only Nixon, whose press savvy in the Hiss case preserved him, remained. He was joined by Harry Velde, Republican of Illinois, a Conservative recommended to the Committee as a former FBI agent. Democrats considered him a good addition as he was a relatively inexperienced politician, but his investigative credentials made him an obvious choice.

Chairman Wood, under pressure from Congressional Democratic leaders, undertook a series of procedural reforms to quiet the Committee. Foremost, the Chairman banned all radio microphones and television cameras from all HUAC sessions. Prior to the change, a sea of cameras and radio microphones dominated open hearings. Wood even turned down a chance for the Committee to star in a proposed anti-Communist movie, an opportunity that most certainly would not have been passed up prior to the 1948 election.

The investigative procedures of the Committee also changed drastically. The Committee’s published reports in 1949 were straightforward fact reporting, lists of names and organizations linked to the Communist Party or Communist front groups along with names of those recommended for contempt charges. These were a far cry from the lurid descriptions and hysterical attacks on the State and Justice Departments of previous reports in 1947 and 1948. Previous HUAC reports sought specifically to maximize press attention with salacious details. The 1949 reports did not garner the same front page press attention that characterized earlier HUAC publications.

A marked change also came over HUAC’s hearings. In 1947, the bulk of Committee testimony involved intense grilling sessions with unfriendly witnesses, and long soliloquies by members. The Committee’s records demonstrate that much of HUAC’s work in early 1949 focused on procedure and evidence gathering. At no time in the Committee’s operating history were so many documents entered into its record, before and during hearings. Witness identification and a detailed dossier accompanied each witness, with carbon copies of Communist membership cards when applicable. The Committee’s staff confronted used this evidence to confront potentially
interviews largely fell to the Committee’s paid investigators, preventing members from making lengthy statements on the record.\textsuperscript{70} In order to avoid embarrassing witnesses, the Chairman increasingly used executive sessions, in which no press were allowed for sensitive testimony, in one case over the protest of Nixon.\textsuperscript{71} These reforms were largely successful in keeping the Committee’s actions off the front pages. Press coverage of HUAC largely consisted of simple reporting on its actions.

The Truman coalition seemed to have won a victory over the Committee. The most extensive press attention the Committee received in the winter and spring of 1949 was reporting on the various personnel changes within it. Most important, the Committee’s members failed to launch any organized anti-Fair Deal investigations. Four out of its nine hearings consisted solely of interviewing friendly anti-Soviet, anti-Communist witnesses, and entering evidence into the record. These included an investigation of Soviet spying in embassies abroad, Communist infiltration of minority groups, and a continuation of investigation into possible spies at the Los Alamos nuclear testing labs.

Committee members angered at the changes in HUAC’s procedures expressed their opinions anonymously. Conservative members, dissatisfied with their lack of access, used their connections in the press to sound off about the changes. “I am more than dissatisfied,” stated an unidentified Democrat, “I am disgusted. It is hardly worth our time to be serving on a group that is doing so little.”\textsuperscript{72} The FBI also took notice, noting the dissatisfaction of Conservative members of the Committee in its reports.\textsuperscript{73}

Despite the sweeping changes to the Committee, its members were not kept completely out of the press. Richard Nixon continued to adeptly use the press to attempt to preserve the Committee’s budget. On September 6\textsuperscript{th}, 1949 Nixon went to friendly editors at the \textit{Chicago Tribune} to publish a story claiming that Truman was attempting to hamstring espionage

\textsuperscript{71} Hearings Before the Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, 81\textsuperscript{st} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Session, 31 March, 1949, 101.
\textsuperscript{73} “Memo from Nichols to Tolson,” 30 Mar, 1949, \textit{FBI File on House Un-American Activities Committee}, roll 3.
investigations by “shaking up” the staff, cutting investigators.\textsuperscript{74} This story appeared on the eve of HUAC’s yearly progress reports in order to maximize its effects. Nevertheless, this story was one of the only direct attacks against the Truman administration up to that point.

Republican and conservative members of HUAC did not go on the offensive against the New Deal coalition until after September 24, 1949, when the American public first learned from their President that the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb.\textsuperscript{75} Discussion of the explosion and the means by which the Soviets managed to acquire the bomb dominated the print press for the coming month. The critical question throughout the papers was how the Soviets had achieved a nuclear detonation “in only four years.”\textsuperscript{76} Letters to the editor and man-on-the-street interviews indicate that similar questions were sweeping through the public. The forgone conclusion seemed to be that the Soviets stole the technology through espionage. As one street interview concluded, “it makes sense, they’ve been snooping on us for years.”\textsuperscript{77}

As Dies did almost ten years before, members of the Committee in 1949 sensed an immediate opportunity to insinuate themselves back into the spotlight. Stories of Soviet espionage, and the possibility of a terrifying new kind of war dominated the headlines. Despite the fact that newspapers stories urged Americans to remain calm, arguing that the “bomber gap” would keep the country safe, they did so in the context of large font headlines proclaiming the possibility of actual nuclear war.\textsuperscript{78} Anti-Communist crusader groups such as the American Legion published editorials calling for more power given to HUAC in order to root out the Communist traitors responsible.\textsuperscript{79} Conservatives on the Committee immediately took steps to insinuate themselves into the story and throw off the confines of Congressional procedural reform. The opportunity presented itself in the form of a previous investigation into Dr. Joseph Weinberg, a Berkley atomic physicist.

\textsuperscript{74} Willard Edward, “Democrat Drive to cripple Spy Inquiry Gaining,” Chicago Daily Tribune, 6 Sept, 1949, 19.  
\textsuperscript{79} Thompson, The Frustration of Politics, 72.
Weinberg was the primary target of an extended HUAC investigation into the atomic laboratories at Los Alamos in 1948 and again in 1949. He was a nuclear physicist and personal friend of J. Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb. He was also a known Communist sympathizer, and as was later revealed, a former Party member. Weinberg’s political sympathies, however, were long known both to the government and Oppenheimer himself, who took immediate steps to distance himself from Weinberg after accepting a position on the Manhattan Project. Oppenheimer himself identified Weinberg as a Communist to the FBI during his security clearance interviews. The government denied Weinberg security clearance, and placed him under observation long before the first HUAC hearing.80

The Committee’s investigation of the Los Alamos and Berkley labs produced very little concrete information. No charges were filed during the initial investigation, nor were there any startling revelations. Throughout the investigation, the Committee hinted at the existence of an individual known as Scientist X, a Communist agent within the atomic physics lab actively selling secrets to the Soviets. HUAC, however, never had enough information to officially reveal the existence of Scientist X.81

Now Committee members, in an attempt to gain as much press attention as possible, rushed to implicate Weinberg as Scientist X. The Committee did not posses any new information. The only new evidence presented in the press releases was a statement that Weinberg was once a member of the Young Communist League, and kept a continuing acquaintance with Steve Nelson, another known Communist sympathizer. The Committee never actually claimed that Weinberg was solely responsible for passing atomic secrets to the Soviets, but the press, eager for answers, highlighted the charge.82 At the end of the third rushed hearing on Weinberg, a grand jury charged the scientist with three counts of perjury for denying he was a member of the Communist Party in previous sessions. Weinberg was never charged with espionage.

80 John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, Early Cold War Spies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 146-152.
81 Buckley Jr., The Committee and Its Critics, 286.
Ultimately the Weinberg trial ended with all charges dropped, though Weinberg paid heavy extra-legal consequences for his loyalties.\textsuperscript{83} The failure to get a conviction had little effect on a rejuvenated HUAC, which now riding the wave of hysteria following continuing revelations of actual atomic spying by Soviet agent Klaus Fuchs, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, all charged with atomic espionage. Over the spring and summer of 1949, the Committee was largely silent on Truman’s handling of espionage and subversion. Then the Committee joined a chorus of attacks on Truman for his inability to keep the secret of the bomb in U.S. hands. Whereas Committee members often chose to make their critiques anonymously earlier in the year, they now openly attached their name and positions in the Committee to their statements.\textsuperscript{84}

The Committee’s members made maximum use of sympathetic newspapers such as the \textit{Chicago Tribune}, which were already hostile to Truman’s policies and which were already regularly publishing editorials excoriating Truman for his security failings.\textsuperscript{85} Even newspapers traditionally friendly to the administration had harsh criticism for the President in the wake of revelations of atomic espionage. Moderate newspapers also joined in the chorus, arguing for strengthening of the Committee’s budget and investigative team to prevent future leaks from occurring.\textsuperscript{86} Letters to the editor reinforced the near universal outrage at Truman and the State Department for allowing such a major security breach. Committee members were quick to revive the specter of Alger Hiss in their attacks on the President.\textsuperscript{87} By February 1950, stories of Communist agents running amok in the government blanketed the news. Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Truman received the lion’s share of the blame, especially after the arrest of Fuchs.\textsuperscript{88}

HUAC resumed many of its old tactics, including abusive grilling of witnesses in front of radio microphones and newspaper reporters. In August for example, the committee called Lee Pressman, a former legal council for the C.I.O. and member of the Progressive Party, to testify. Nixon, in an attempt to maximize press coverage, approached Bert Andrews at the \textit{New York}

\textsuperscript{83}Haynes and Klehr, \textit{Cold War Spies}, 152-153
\textsuperscript{88}Bayley, \textit{Joe McCarthy and the Press}, 3.
*Herald Tribune* as well as several other friendly newspapers. Using these connections he was able to get scathing and sensational stories published about Pressman, claiming that he was a Communist sympathizer before he even began to testify. During the hearings, when Pressman told the Committee that he found naming names offensive, Nixon badgered him, despite recommendations from Wood that the witness had nothing more to give. Under Nixon’s pressure, Pressman named several names, all of which then appeared in the press.\(^\text{89}\)

Continued public support for the Committee was evident throughout 1950, as Red Scare hysteria reached its peak. Not only did HUAC enjoy preferential press treatment, but newspaper reporters themselves now took an active part in steering stories to the Committee. In June of 1950, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* ran a 10,000 signature petition drive to initiate a HUAC hearing about union activity in Cincinnati, specifically in the General Motors jet engine plant.\(^\text{90}\) Chairman Wood responded by launching a three-month investigation into the plant’s union, the United Electrical Workers. Local papers reciprocated by providing the Committee with nearly continuous coverage in all Southern Ohio newspapers, including speeches from the members, and long transcripts of witness testimony. Local politicians also made speeches and passed resolutions supporting the Committee’s endeavors.

This represented a new level in the relationship between the press and HUAC. Previously, newspapers aided the anti-Communist cause merely by failing to fact-check Committee claims, and by providing unfettered access. The assumption that the statements of Congressional Committee members were always worth printing dominated newsroom thinking, giving the Committee an edge over opponents. From late 1948 to 1950 members of the Committee formed personal connections with editors and reporters that paid off in the face of political pressure. The Committee was big enough news that the press found it paid to actively court its support and even feed stories to sell more papers. In the face of fears of a new and terrible war with the Soviet Union, the press recognized the Committee as a valuable source for the stories the public most wanted to read.

Thanks to the Committee’s shrewd use of the press, it managed to throw off all attempts by the Truman coalition to control it. HUAC’s timely press releases took full advantage of fears about atomic espionage, and the press that not only failed to provide a fair context for its statements, but in fact printed the most outlandish claims verbatim in order to maximize business. The Committee continued to utilize the press to successfully harness public fear into the 1950s, cheerleading legislation that gave the government unprecedented powers to curtail the rights of perceived radicals.

The passage of the McCarran Internal Security Act in 1950 spelled the end of Truman’s left-wing coalition. Unwilling to appear weak in the face of a perceived national emergency, left wing activists and centrists in the Congress abandoned the President, voting for the bill and overriding his veto. HUAC became the model for the numerous loyalty review boards and investigative committees that sprang up around the country as the McCarran Act was put into effect. None of this would have been possible without the aura of fear and urgency created by near constant press coverage of the Communist threat.

The failure of Truman’s coalition to hold the Committee in check or silence the anti-Communists in the media led to a renewed intensity in Senator Joseph McCarthy’s crusade. In the face of political pressure, an emergent war in Korea and the shadow of a new arms race, the Truman administration had no choice but to expand the loyalty review boards it instituted in 1946. The close relationship between the press and the anti-Communist crusaders in Congress meant that anti-Communism presented an easy way for any ruthless and ambitious member of Congress to make headlines. In 1952, McCarthy took advantage of the press hysteria to become America’s most successful demagogue.

**McCarthy and the Press**

Senator Joseph R. McCarthy was a man of habits. He was a prolific gambler, a practical jokester and a drinker. These habits followed him into the United States Senate and affected his politics. Once McCarthy found a method that worked, one that put him in the spotlight and got people listening, he stuck with it. His relationship with the press was developed through a mixture of personal charisma, and the plagiarism of the statements of other anti-Communists. In fact, all of McCarthy’s most successful tactics can be traced to previous anti-Communist
Representatives in HUAC. His attacks on the State Department and Executive Branch, his manipulation of the media through well-timed press releases and speeches, his cultivating personal friendships with editors, even his speeches all contained passages liberally copied from his predecessors.91

McCarthy began his career as a small town lawyer in Wisconsin, and then as a circuit judge, before enlisting in the Marine Corps. McCarthy used his military service to maximum affect, crafting fantastic stories about serving on heavy bombers during the War. In 1946, while still in the Marine Corps, The self styled “Tail-Gunner Joe” was elected to the Senate. McCarthy remained fairly inconspicuous during his first term, until making his famous Lincoln Day Address in Wheeling West Virginia. Using his position as chairman of the Permanent Sub-Committee of Investigations he instituted an infamous series of public investigations that earned him the distinction of being synonymous with government abuse and intimidation.

McCarthy’s habits eventually ruined him. In the face of dramatic changes in media and politics, he was unable to adapt. His precedents for media manipulation were built on an understanding of print press and radio, which left him ill-prepared for television. He based his tactics for garnering headlines on an anti-Communist crusade which developed over two decades of Democratic control of the Presidency. Thus, McCarthy, a creature of habit, continued his tirades against the State Department and even the Army in ways that made him a political liability to his own party.

When McCarthy took center stage in the unfolding Cold War drama in February 1950, Communism already dominated the front pages of national newspapers. The Hearst Press empire, a staunch ally of McCarthy in his early years, ran a regular column by right wing writer Victor Riesel dedicated to exposing “crooks and Communists” in labor unions.92 The fall of Chang-Kai Shek’s government in China, the Soviet blockade of Berlin the previous year, and an emergent crisis in Korea kept Communism in the headlines almost continuously. McCarthy was well aware of the power of press manipulation. He had a well-established precedent to work

---

92 Tuck, McCarthyism and New York’s Hearst Press, 45.
with and set about explicitly to manipulate public opinion by using the press. Thus when McCarthy stood on the stage in Wheeling, West Virginia and announced that he possessed a list of active Communists within the United States government, he could be assured that his claims would receive nation-wide attention.

As Nixon did before him, McCarthy established personal and friendly relationships with editors in papers which showed a propensity to favor the anti-Communist cause. His closest supporters were in the Wisconsin State Journal, from his home state. McCarthy also made efforts to reach out to reporters from such diverse newspapers as the Boston Post, Boston Herald, Chicago Tribune and New Orleans Time-Picayune. He was especially friendly with members of the McCormick Press empire which ran the Chicago Tribune. Even as far back as 1946, he was on a first-name basis with several editors in McCormick papers. These newspapers often got priority in press releases from McCarthy, ensuring that his exposure to the public was largely uncritical.

McCarthy was not without his detractors in the press. The New York Post, New York Times, Washington Post and Capital Times of Madison Wisconsin often ran editorials attacking McCarthy’s boorish tactics. It was, in fact, a Washington Post cartoonist, Herbert Block, who first coined the term McCarthyism, in response to what he believed was McCarthy’s undeserved influence in foreign and domestic affairs. But even these papers tended not to question McCarthy’s claims, just his methods, in their coverage. Often papers ran stories with titles like, “McCarthy Knows Names of 57 Reds,” and “McCarthy has New Facts.”

Like Dies before him, McCarthy was prolific on the radio as well. He took full advantage of newswires. Radio newswires ran between radio programs, usually at the top and bottom of the hour. They were brief, often with nothing more than a headline and two or three sentence description, as well as choice sound bites from the subjects of the stories. McCarthy was fond of newswires as they provided him with unfettered access to his rural constituents that

---

93 According to Roy Cohn, McCarthy’s counsel and personal friend, McCarthy always attempted to gear his press releases and speeches for maximum press coverage. Bayley, Joe McCarthy and the Press, 7-8.
did not have access to newspapers. He had media savvy enough to always be ready with short, punchy quotes for reporters to run on the wires with his stories. They featured choice bits of testimony from his humiliating of hostile witnesses, with little or no context.

Like fellow anti-Communist crusaders McCarthy could not tolerate criticism. Just as Dies railed against radio operators who refused to carry his addresses, and just as Rankin snidely derided his critics in House speeches, McCarthy learned that targeting reporters individually often scared the press even from the meager criticism that might be offered. During his re-election campaign in 1952, many editors simply did not give press time to his political opponents, assuming he was the heir apparent. This lent an air of invincibility to McCarthy such that many of his Democratic rivals considered it political suicide to openly oppose him.  

McCarthy succeeded in nearly paralyzing the State Department under the Truman administration. Under pressure, John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State under Dwight Eisenhower, summarily fired numerous individuals McCarthy named without public hearing. Though there was now a Republican administration in the White House, McCarthy proved unable to temper his rhetoric. Within two years, President Eisenhower could boast the firing of 1,147 federal employees, and Richard Nixon, a fellow anti-Communist, was now Vice President, McCarthy’s attacks on the federal government continued unabated. Despite his tough stance on Communism, Eisenhower did not repeal any of the successful remnants of the New Deal, such as Social Security. For McCarthy, who like his predecessors associated the New Deal with socialism, such inaction was unacceptable. For most of the Republican Party, however, the New Deal was no longer an issue. This adherence to obsolete traditions, and McCarthy’s continuing abuse of reporters who were hesitant to give him unrestricted access, began to alienate him from the conservative media that provided him access to his base.

Like Dies, Rankin and J. Parnell Thomas before him, McCarthy made the fatal mistake of overestimating his power. Gallup polls suggested that more that 50% of the American public was behind the Senator and his committee. McCarthy’s hubris led him to his most grandiose undertaking, a public hearing, regarding Communist infiltration of the United States Army. This

---

hearing, and the unprecedented access the American public had to it through the new medium of television, ultimately destroyed McCarthy’s career.

Television proved to be McCarthy’s undoing. The medium brought a number of pitfalls that politicians had yet to learn how to sidestep. First and foremost, live television coverage allowed McCarthy’s witnesses and counsel equal time to contend with the Senator’s own grandstanding. Unlike radio newswires and newspaper reports, which tended to filter out much of the response to McCarthy in favor of his choicer quotes, television provided its audience with context. People saw McCarthy’s attempts to bully witnesses, including highly decorated military officers. His adversaries fared far better than he did on live broadcasts. Both Secretary of the Army Frank Pace, and Attorney for the Army Joseph Welch sparred verbally with McCarthy, often forcing him into awkward backpedaling.99

Without television, it is likely the most embarrassing moments of the McCarthy hearings would not have reached a mass audience. The gaffes McCarthy made never reached the print of major newspapers. Newsprint provided little context, other than a basic recap of the issues.100 In early June, Welch proved not only that McCarthy’s team doctored photos but challenged McCarthy to provide hard evidence for his claims, which he did not possess. This culminated in a clumsy attack by McCarthy on a member of Welch’s staff. After getting Welch to admit that he would do everything he could to expose Communists, McCarthy informed Welch that a young aide, Frank Fisher once worked for the National Lawyers Guild, which the Senator claimed was the “Legal arm of the Communist Party.” In response to this, Welch launched into a tirade, defending Fisher, humiliating the Senator, and ending with the now famous line, “Have you no decency sir, at long last?”101 None of this appeared in the print press. The New York Times provided an extensive list of quotes from the hearings, which did not include many of Welch’s counterpoints.102 The anti-Communist friendly Chicago Tribune printed only the rebuttal to the Army’s lawyers by McCarthy and his counsel Roy Cohn.103 Radio was little

99 Much of the Army-McCarthy Hearings have been compiled into a documentary which demonstrates McCarthy’s give and take with witnesses. Point of Order, directed by Emile de Antonio, Point Films, 1964.
101 Ibid.
better at giving audiences real insight into the nature of the hearings. Daily radio in New York only provided morning recaps of the hearings themselves. Built in newswire style, they rarely contained more than a few choice bits of actual testimony. In some cases, the press seemed to suggest that McCarthy was getting the better of his opponents.

Television as a medium provided unparalleled and unrestricted access to the hearings. McCarthy was aware of the damaging power of television, and of TV journalists. He promised on June 1 his next target, after he was finished with the Army would be television journalism. McCarthy was further disgraced when radio and television journalist Edward R. Murrow dedicated a number of programs to his antics on his See it Now news magazine show. Despite apprehension from colleagues, Murrow used the medium to maximum effect, showing film clips of a rude McCarthy at his most petty. In a later episode, Murrow offered McCarthy a chance to respond to his charges, which McCarthy accepted the offer and treated it much like a standard radio address. He appeared seated at his desk reading a prepared speech, in which, among other things he accused Murrow of being a Communist fellow traveler in his youth. Murrow responded with more examples of McCarthy’s brutishness, dismissing his charges, and cleverly turning his own quotes against him. Unlike McCarthy, Murrow understood the power of the camera, and the footage he provided of McCarthy spoke louder than a prepared speech.

The Army-McCarthy hearings were disastrous for the Senator. But, McCarthy was not finished, nor was his crusade. He immediately attempted to rally support in the press. The print press, with some exceptions, caught up with the evidence presented on television and realized that the Senator was a bombastic fool. The Hearst Press empire instituted a McCarthy “brown out” after the hearings, which kept the Senator’s statements off of its pages entirely. More liberal press outlets, using many of Murrow’s examples, excoriated McCarthy as an example of everything wrong with conservatives in the Congress.

---

108 Tuck, McCarthyism and New York’s Hearst Press, i-iii.
The Republican Party joined Democratic criticism of McCarthy. The Army-McCarthy hearings served to fracture the party around the Senator, and now his vulnerability made it easy for moderate Republicans to distance themselves from him. In late 1954, McCarthy received official censure of the Senate for two counts of misconduct. Though he would continue in Congress for another two and a half years before his death, most of his power base evaporated. His fall also marked the sharp decline of the anti-Communist crusade that now bore his name. Though the movement McCarthy joined outlasted the senator, the stigma he attached to it eventually brought it to an end.

The dominant narrative in the history of journalism prefers to remember McCarthyism in terms of Edward R. Murrow’s courageous stance. The exposure of McCarthy as a bullying fraud was certainly noble, as it served to end his hysterical and shameful inquisition. This narrative, however, fails to take into account the complicity of the press in the decades preceding the Senator’s rise to power. The reality is that McCarthy’s career did not mark the beginning of a Red Scare, but rather the beginning of its end.

Conclusion

Members of the press were at once complicit in and victims of McCarthyism. The FBI targeted and humiliated editors and reporters in front of Congressional Committees as early as the 1930s. At the same time, editors joined the rank and file of the anti-Communist crusade by providing information on their employees and coworkers to committees looking to expel undesirables. The effects of McCarthyism on the American press and the American media remains a subject of intense study.

Despite the persecution, members of the press played a clear and defining role in promoting and preserving McCarthyism. Newspapers were the means through which anti-Communists reached and convinced their constituency. It was uncritical reporting that kept the Dies Committee in business in the wake of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. It served as a medium through which the Committee could rebound against Democratic pressure, and contributed to an


111 Ibid, 137-139.
air of general hysteria over the atomic bomb that created the atmosphere necessary for McCarthy to enter the fray.

McCarthyism depended upon a press that was incurious and eager to find the most exciting story to print. The anti-Communists understood as well as the press did that the threat of war, of dark and lurking saboteurs, and of degenerate spies in the midst of the American people would sell advertisements and newspapers. This resulted in a symbiotic, though not untroubled, relationship between newsrooms and Congressional investigators, each benefiting from the discourse of fear. Could a more skeptical and proactive press have stopped McCarthyism? The answer it seems is yes. It is doubtful that McCarthyism could have survived without the engagement of the press.

The most recent treatments of McCarthyism have broadened the picture to include the Federal Bureau of Investigation, dedicated anti-labor and anti-radical forces in society, immigration and race. The why of McCarthyism has received nearly as much historical study as the question of who was involved. While these studies are invaluable, they largely ignore the mechanics of McCarthyism. Serious treatments of McCarthyism and the press only follow McCarthy himself, neglecting the long precedent of media manipulation that preceded him. This approach gives McCarthy far too much credit. Not only was he boorish, petty, and vicious, he was also thoroughly unoriginal.

Examining McCarthyism as a social phenomenon, in isolation also lends it an air of inevitability that seems out of place with historical fact. It ignores the constantly changing and fickle eye of American culture. Anti-Communists worked hard to maintain the spotlight, and convince the public that the United States needed them. If the Dies Committee expired, as its Chairman and the FBI predicted, HUAC might have simply been a footnote in one of the brief Red Scares that seemed to flare up in the United States regularly after the Russian Revolution of 1917. If Committee members had not taken advantage of the press’s tendency to print the most hysterical and attention grabbing headlines, then it is possible that the Committee would have remained a largely impotent investigative Committee, and not the subject of media spotlight and movie drama.
McCarthyism worked through the press in every sense. The media provided the salacious coverage that kept the gaze of the public fixed on the threat of internal Communism, gave the government power unprecedented in peacetime to combat that threat. Members of Congress intentionally maximized the drama of their hearings to capitalize on this public gaze. The badgering of witnesses, the libelous public addresses, and the outrageous accusations of McCarthyism were all done with an eye towards the public spotlight the press provided, and none understood this better than McCarthy himself. Congress and the press thus formed a symbiotic, if often dysfunctional, relationship that led to one of the most protracted political purges in the history of the United States.

Beyond the study of McCarthyism and HUAC, the question of government manipulation of the business of the press begs a larger examination of the media’s relationship with power. Popular media history is full of stories of the press acting to expose government at its worst, with examples such as the Teapot Dome Scandal, the My Lai Massacre, Watergate and the tireless work of progressive muckrakers to expose the abuses of unrestrained enterprise. But are these real indicators of the media’s role within the history of the United States, or merely exceptions to the rule? It begs serious questions about whether the media has fulfilled its stated role of the watchdog of power.

**Bibliography**

The historical accounts about McCarthyism in general and the House Un-American Activities Committee specifically are voluminous and many. Almost from its inception, the Committee received attention not just from the press, but from academia as well. August Raymond Ogden’s *The Dies Committee* chronicling the Dies Committee represents the first real scholarly work on HUAC. Other contemporary accounts of the Committee’s work include Walter Goodman’s thorough *The Committee* and William F. Buckley’s defense of HUAC *The Committee and Its Critics*. Most of these books served to recount HUAC’s major actions and grapple with the constitutionality of its mission, rather than place it in broader historical context.

The phenomenon of McCarthyism did not receive serious treatment until later in the 20th century. The predominant view of McCarthyism in the 60s and 70s was usually that it was a temporary evil, caused by Cold War hysteria, or a purely partisan attempt to stifle liberalism and
crush the New Deal by the conservative right.  It was not until the rise of the New left in the 1980s and 1990s that historians examined the Committee as part of a broader social context. The New Left expanded the study of McCarthyism out of the 1940s and 1950s, showing how federal investigators and a loose network of right wing groups participated in society wide purging of undesirables. Ellen Schrecker’s *Many are the Crimes*, Richard Frieds’s *Nightmare in Red*, Joel Kovel’s *Red Hunting in the Promised Land*, and Kenneth O’Reilly’s *Hoover and the Un-Americans* took the study of McCarthyism beyond government action, and moved the period of study as far back as the 1910s.

Along with these works has come a major effort to re-evaluate American Communism and the Communist Party itself. New Left scholars have complicated the prevailing 20th century view of the Communist Party as a monolithic entity solely under the control of the Soviet Politburo. Michael E. Brown’s *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism*, and Mark E. Solomon’s *The Cry was Unity* among others, demonstrate that many of the Party’s social reform activities were not driven solely by opportunism, but represented serious efforts by dedicated individuals to reform American life. In this light, McCarthyism appears not as a politically motivated purge, or an ideological crusade, but rather as an anti-reform movement designed to crush gains made by organized labor and minorities during the Depression.

In response to the New Left’s treatment of Communism, a number of books detailing the Party’s connections with Soviet spying have surfaced. Often these serve as apologetics for the anti-Communist movement. John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr’s *Early Cold War Spies*, Allan Weinstein’s books *The Haunted Wood*, and *Perjury* and Herbert Romerstein and Eric Breindel’s *The Venona Secrets* seek to clear the names and reputations of friendly witnesses before the Committee such as Whittaker Chambers and Elizabeth Bently by using declassified intelligence documents to implicate the Communist Party in espionage schemes. These works tend to argue that while the Committee was certainly heavy-handed and ostentatious, the anti-Communist crusade itself was justified given the very real threat that the Soviet Union presented to the United States.

---

The relationship between anti-Communists and the press has also received scholarly attention, almost all of it focused on Joseph McCarthy himself and his relationship with newspapers and editors. Edward Alwood’s *Dark Days in the Newsroom*, Edwin Bayley’s *Joe McCarthy and the Press* and Jim Tuck’s *McCarthyism in the Hearst Press* detail McCarthy’s systematic manipulation and intimidation of major news outlets, during his brief rise to fame and power. While arguing against the notion that McCarthy was “made by the press,”¹¹⁶ they demonstrate that McCarthy was well aware of how to use the business of the news and the repeated failures of reporters to back check the content of his outrageous claims. They also detail the ways in which McCarthy targeted and intimidated his enemies and attempted to dismantle newsroom unions.¹¹⁷

The purpose of this study is not to pass judgment on McCarthyism or the Committee itself, nor to implicate or exonerate its victims. Instead it seeks to expand the studies of how anti-Communists used print media to manipulate public emotion and legitimize the crusade using the investigative power of Congress to expose what they saw as subversive elements in American society. The works of Bayley, Alwood and Tuck, while illuminating, are incomplete, in that they treat McCarthy as an original phenomenon, who seemed to develop his skills with the press de novo, or out of some twisted political genius. If the work of the New Left and its adversaries proves anything, it is the impossibility of understanding McCarthyism if historical inquiry is limited only to the 1940s and 50s. The precedents for the anti-Communist crusade in relating to and exploiting the press were established long before, and any political savvy McCarthyism possessed was heavily borrowed and adapted.

**Newspapers and Publications**

*Baltimore Sun*

*Cincinnati Enquirer*

*Chicago Tribune*

*Dayton Journal Herald*

Detroit News

Harvard Crimson

New York Post

New York Times

Michigan Daily Press

Peoria Star

St. Paul Pioneer Press

Washington Post

**Government Documents**


Hearings Regarding Communist Infiltration of Minority Groups parts 1 and 2, Thursday July 14, 1949, United States House of Representatives, House Committee on Un-American Activities, 81st Congress, 2nd Session.

Books


**Articles**


**Film**

*Point of Order*. DVD. Directed by Emile de Antonio (Point Films, 1964).