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anticommunism

Anticommunism refers to the effort in American history to combat the influence of communist political thought. Although American foreign policy was actively anticommunist throughout most of the post-World War II era, the government also waged an effective campaign against communism on the domestic scene.

The national debate over the persecution of those holding communist beliefs has forced Americans to address the complexities of valuing freedom of speech and freedom of belief even if that ideology is offensive. Although anticommunist fervor has risen and fallen throughout modern American history, the battle against American communism reveals a great deal about the role of political dissent in a democracy that prizes intellectual freedom and individualism.

In the 19th century, elite groups in America were predominantly white, Christian, and propertied, and their beliefs came to constitute the "American way." A fundamental component of this way of life was little government intervention in the lives of its citizens. Accordingly, any philosophy that promoted more government intervention appeared un-American. In the late 19th century, however, immigration, industrialization, and urbanization caused massive upheavals in many Americans' lives, prompting some to explore new political philosophies that offered more substantial benefits for a greater proportion of society.

From Europe, where similar changes were transforming society, came such a philosophy, espoused by two German intellectuals named Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In 1848, Marx and Engels published a pamphlet entitled *Communist Manifesto* in which they presented the idea that common people could displace the elite classes of society in government and business and effect massive societal changes based on a redistribution of property among the citizens so that all could enjoy the greater benefits of society.

Philosophers and social activists quickly introduced their own variations on Marx and Engels' work, producing a broad array of political thought known collectively as socialism. Socialism took many forms throughout the world, but in the United States, the most prevalent forms emerged in the labor movement. A large segment of the working class joined the effort to form labor unions in the late 19th century, believing that such collective organizations were the only way to protect the interests of workers in American businesses.

Other more radical thinkers embraced communism (wherein private property is abolished and all property is held in common by the people acting through a centralized government) and anarchism (which advocates a dissolution of government altogether). Few in power recognized the differences in these disparate ideologies, believing that to one degree or another, all advocated a radical change in the

government's relationship to both the economy and society in general.

As the labor movement gained strength in the late 19th century, government officials, business executives, and members of America's wealthy classes began to view workers with increasing fear, convinced that unions threatened to undermine the entire American way of life. Such outbreaks of violence as the Haymarket Square riot of 1886 only served to heighten these fears, resulting in a widespread effort to stamp out unionism, which many Americans mistakenly confused with communism.

Such labor radicalism and the reaction it initiated left many Americans with a strong dislike for radical ideologies and linked them to foreign political objectives and strategies. This antiradicalism germinated for several decades before reasserting itself in a full-fledged red scare shortly after World War I.

In the years immediately following the turn of the 20th century, the Progressive movement led to a more active and involved government at all levels. With that change came an expectation that the government should and would act to prevent such radicals as communists and socialists from fomenting discontent.

When the Russian Revolution successfully installed the first communist government in the world in 1917, most Americans reacted with hostility, alarmed by the violence and massive dislocation associated with the revolution. Although some American radicals saw the Russian Revolution as the first step for world liberation from the capitalist economic system that kept the working classes poor, most Americans looked on the developments in Russia with a deep sense of foreboding, fearful that such tumult would eventually creep into the United States.

At the same time, President Woodrow Wilson, the federal and local governments, and citizen groups generated a feeling of intense patriotism to support the American war effort in World War I, leaving a highly charged atmosphere after the war ended in November 1918. Drawing from their wartime patriotism and the recent success of communists in Russia, many Americans identified any sign of industrial disruption or labor agitation as a sign that communists were in America and trying to foment the same type of revolution as had occurred in Russia.

In response, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer created the General Intelligence Division in the U.S. Justice Department and appointed the young, virulently anticommunist J. Edgar Hoover to head it. The division was used to spy on suspected communists and other radicals and institutionalized anticommunism in the federal government.

For several months in late 1919 and early 1920, the Justice Department pursued a practice now known as Palmer raids. Government agents would raid a radical organization's office, arrest those present, and deport any resident aliens. The Communist Party organizations that had developed in the United States became principal targets for Palmer's government agents and such vigilante groups as the American Protective League, which Palmer encouraged to harass suspected communists.

Although the red scare had subsided by the early 1920s, anticommunists remained in the background throughout most of the 1920s and 1930s. As the world moved toward another world war in the late 1930s, however, communism once again seemed to crystallize as a significant threat to the United States.

In 1938, the U.S. House of Representatives created the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to investigate possible communist influences in government and the labor movement. With the formation of this committee, the federal government indicated that it was taking renewed interest in communism in America.

In 1940, Congress passed the Smith Act, which criminalized activities that "encouraged the overthrow or destruction of . . . government by force or violence." The act did not require action on the part of the accused, just advocacy, making communists particularly vulnerable since they advocated a fundamentally different government. Although the Smith Act was meant as a security measure as World War II erupted in Europe, it was primarily used after the war when communism became perceived as a serious threat to America.

Immediately after World War II ended in 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union began a new and different kind of war that became known as the Cold War. Although the two countries never officially declared war against one another or faced each other on the battlefield, they challenged each other for spheres of influence around the world in such places like Korea, Cuba, and Vietnam.

Americans believed their mission in the Cold War was to prevent the worldwide spread of communism, particularly in their own country. Thus began a widespread and concerted effort that occurred at the local, state, and federal level to root out communists in American society.

In 1947, three developments significantly bolstered anticommunists in their efforts. First, President Harry Truman's executive order issued on March 22, 1947 established the loyalty-security program, creating loyalty boards in government agencies charged with finding out who was disloyal to the American government and dismissing them from government employment. In practice, the program went after anyone who had been involved in an organization with any hint of communism or even a number of liberal groups. Those accused of being disloyal had a hearing before a loyalty review board but did not have the right to know the identity of their accuser, often an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which was a right guaranteed under the Sixth Amendment to the Constitution. Truman had enacted the program to combat accusations from conservatives that he was weak on communism.

Second, the Taft-Hartley Act, passed over Truman's veto, required union leaders to sign affidavits proclaiming that they were not communists to receive the protection and assistance provided by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). This legislation was designed by critics of the labor movement to limit the achievements the movement had made during the New Deal.

Finally, a number of screenwriters and directors were called before HUAC in 1947 in a congressional effort to eradicate communism in the powerful entertainment industry, which potentially could use its influence to spread communist propaganda. Many of the entertainment executives named colleagues who had been active at one time or another in the Communist Party. Ten of them, later known as the Hollywood 10, refused to provide names of suspected communists, citing the First Amendment as a protection for anyone who held communist beliefs. The U.S. House of Representatives cited them for contempt, and they eventually served prison terms, but the incident brought a tremendous amount of national attention to the anticommunist effort and prompted many Americans to ponder the meaning of the First Amendment. The Hollywood 10 and many others whose names had been presented to the committee were blacklisted in the entertainment industry, and for some, the episode proved the end of their careers.

In 1948, another set of hearings before HUAC launched a new stage in the anticommunists' crusade. In August, Whittaker Chambers, an admitted ex-Communist Party member and spy for the Soviets, testified dramatically before HUAC and identified a number of individuals as former or current members of the Communist Party. Among those he named was State Department official Alger Hiss, who was also close friends with several key members of the foreign policy team in the administrations of both Truman and his predecessor President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Hiss' credentials and credibility were unimpeachable, and he volunteered to go before HUAC to deny all that Chambers had claimed. Charges and countercharges ensued with Representative Richard Nixon leading the aggressive attack against Hiss. Eventually, Hiss was convicted of perjury on January 21, 1950. Although it remains unclear whether Hiss had engaged in espionage or was a former communist, the Hiss-Chambers controversy had clear repercussions. The hearings and perjury trial legitimized HUAC's investigations and exposed the apparent presence of communists in government agencies with sensitive policy-making information.

Through the Hiss affair, Nixon established himself as a leading anticommunist and a national figure. Other politicians quickly followed suit, eager to bring their name before a national audience. In 1950, Congress passed the McCarran Act, once again over Truman's veto. This measure required communists or other groups deemed subversive to register with the U.S. attorney general. Furthermore, it prevented members of these identified organizations from holding government or defense employment and denied them passports. Additionally, it prohibited any alien's entry to the United States if he or she had ever belonged to the Communist Party.

On a local level, states and communities pursued suspected communists. For instance, groups in Massachusetts long suspicious of intellectual and liberal university professors led the charge against them. In Georgia, anticommunism was used to discredit civil rights groups, since many communists in the 1930s worked for improvement in the lives of African Americans.

The combination of HUAC, anticommunist and antilabor legislation, Executive Order 9835, the ubiquitous foreign policy tensions with the Soviet Union, and local efforts designed to expose and

eliminate a communist menace in Americans' midst created an almost unstoppable momentum against communism—a situation only heightened by the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950.

Bolstered by the Hiss conviction of perjury, partisan politicians, mostly congressional Republicans, began to accuse the federal government of harboring communists. Chief among these politicians was Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy. On February 9, 1950, McCarthy gave a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia in which he claimed to have a list of 205 names of known members of the Communist Party who worked in the U.S. State Department. In the ensuing weeks, he changed the number of known communists but never showed the list.

McCarthy freely lied and falsely accused people for bald political gain in well-publicized hearings before Senate committees in which he badgered witnesses and manufactured evidence in an attempt to label government workers as communists. Although he had many critics, especially among liberal elements in Congress and throughout the United States, McCarthy received great attention and much support for his virulent attacks from a specially convened Senate investigation committee.

McCarthy's extremism and irresponsibility ultimately led to his downfall, a vote of censure by the Senate, and his death by alcoholism in 1957, but his reign of terror in the early 1950s destroyed hundreds of people's lives. The word McCarthyism is often used to describe virtually all of American anticommunism in the 1950s, although McCarthy was only the most visible component of the overall anticommunist movement at that time.

Throughout the red scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s, civil libertarians maintained that anticommunist activities smacked of unconstitutional violations of Americans' rights of assembly and speech. The U.S. Supreme Court acquiesced to the pressures and currents of the time. Most notably, it upheld the Smith Act in *Dennis v. United States* (1951) over strong dissents from Justices Hugo Black and William O. Douglas.

The Court did eventually reverse itself in the 1960s. With its decisions in *Albertson v. Subversive Activities Control Board* (1965) and *United States v. Robel* (1967), the Court ruled that compulsory registration of Communist Party members and the ban on communists working in defense plants as mandated by the McCarran Act violated individuals' constitutional rights, but in the 1950s, the Court's support for congressional legislation and presidential influence reinforced Americans' anticommunist tendencies.

After the 1950s, anticommunism waned in the United States. To a large degree, McCarthyism discredited the movement to such an extent that anticommunists were forced to adopt different tactics to suppress communism. By the early 1960s, political dissent of all kinds was on the rise in American society to a greater extent than ever before.

As groups of students and political and social activists began to question every facet of the American way of life, communism began to enjoy a limited degree of acceptance, although the mainstream of

American society has never shown much tolerance for it. However, the vast majority of Americans adopted the view that intellectual freedom, freedom of association, freedom of speech, and freedom of belief must be respected, regardless of content. The collapse of communism in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s effectively ended American anticommunism, as even devoted communists have come to question the tenets of the ideology.

Anticommunism in American history reveals the effects of antiradicalism in American politics and culture. When confronted with ideas antithetical to the American dream, many Americans rejected them and moved to exclude radicals from equal participation in society and from equal protection under the law.

When internal conflict corresponded with communist success in other parts of the world, as during the Russian Revolution and the early years of the Cold War, anticommunism enjoyed a great deal of influence in the United States. Citizen groups, local government, and especially the federal government all worked to deny communists freedoms other Americans took for granted. In the name of national security, all branches of the federal government deliberately violated the civil liberties of individuals. Only with the excesses of McCarthyism did Americans come to recognize how anticommunism threatened Americans' basic constitutional rights.

**MLA:**

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