On November 14, 1908, Joseph McCarthy was born into a Roman Catholic family as the fifth of nine children in Appleton, Wisconsin. Although McCarthy dropped out of grade school at the age fourteen, he returned to diligently finish his studies in 1928, permitting him to attend Marquette University. Once accepted, he began his journey to become what many historians consider to be one of the least qualified, most corrupt politicians of his time. After receiving his law diploma at Marquette University, McCarthy dabbled in unsuccessful law practices, and indulged in gambling along the way for extra financing. Despite being a Democrat early in his political years, he quickly switched into the Republican Party after being overlooked as a candidate in the Democratic Party for district attorney. His dirty campaign to win the position as circuit court judge proved to be an ominous foreshadowing to his later era of “McCarthyism.”

To stimulate his political career, McCarthy quit his job as circuit court judge and joined the Marines during World War II. After his short military career McCarthy then ran as the Republican candidate for the Wisconsin Senate seat, where he used propaganda and erroneous accusations against his opponent, Robert La Follette, to promote his own campaign. Damaging La Follete’s reputation by claiming he hadn’t enlisted in the military during the war, McCarthy won the election and became Senator.

As re-election began to loom closer, McCarthy, whose first term was unimpressive, searched for ways to ensure his political success, resorting even to corruption. Edmund Walsh, a close fellow Roman Catholic and anti-communist suggested a crusade against so-called communist subversives. McCarthy enthusiastically agreed and took advantage of the nation’s wave of fanatic terror against communism, and emerged on February 9, 1950, claiming he had a list of 205 people in the State Department who were known members of the American Communist Party. The American public went crazy with the thought of seditious communists living within the United States, and roared for the investigation of the underground agitators. These people on the list were in fact not all communists; some had proven merely to be alcoholics or sexual deviants. Regardless, McCarthy relentlessly pushed through and became the chairman of the Government Committee on Operations of the Senate, widening his scope to “investigate” dissenters. He continued to investigate for over two years, relentlessly questioning numerous government departments and the panic arising from the witch-hunts and fear of communism became know as McCarthyism.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s America was overwhelmed with concerns about the threat of communism growing in Eastern Europe and China. Capitalizing on those concerns, a young Senator named Joseph McCarthy made a public accusation that more than two hundred “card-carrying” communists had infiltrated the United States government. Though eventually his accusations were proven to be untrue, and he was censured by the Senate for unbecoming conduct, his zealous campaigning ushered in one of the most repressive times in 20th-century American politics.

While the House Un-American Activities Committee had been formed in 1938 as an anti-Communist organ, McCarthy’s accusations heightened the political tensions of the times. Known as McCarthyism, the paranoid hunt for infiltrators was notoriously difficult on writers and entertainers, many of whom were labeled communist sympathizers and were unable to continue working. Some had their passports taken away, while others were jailed for refusing to give the names of other communists. The trials, which were well publicized, could often destroy a career with a single unsubstantiated accusation. Among those well-known artists accused of communist sympathies or called before the committee were Dashiell Hammett, Waldo Salt, Lillian Hellman, Lena Horne, Paul Robeson, Elia Kazan, Arthur Miller, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Charlie Chaplin and Group Theatre.
members Clifford Odets, Elia Kazan, and Stella Adler. In all, three hundred and twenty artists were blacklisted, and for many of them this meant the end of exceptional and promising careers.

During this time there were few in the press willing to stand up against McCarthy and the anti-Communist machine. Among those few were comedian Mort Sahl, and journalist Edward R. Murrow, whose strong criticisms of McCarthy are often cited as playing an important role in his eventual removal from power. By 1954, the fervor had died down and many actors and writers were able to return to work. Though relatively short, these proceedings remain one of the most shameful moments in modern U.S. history.

Reading Questions

Answer the following questions in complete sentences. Use an extra sheet of paper if you need more space.

1. Describe Senator McCarthy’s upbringing.

2. What did McCarthy do in life before he became a politician?

3. What did McCarthy claim he had in 1950?

4. During the 1940s and 1950s, what was America threatened by?

5. What committee was formed in 1938 and for what purpose was it formed?

6. What is “McCarthyism”?

7. On whom was McCarthyism most difficult?

8. How long did the McCarthyism period last?