

To what extent are McCarthy's accusations of Communist infiltration in the US government during the Second Red Scare supported by evidence?

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Section 1 - Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This essay will examine the extent to which McCarthy's accusations of Communist infiltration within the US government are supported by evidence. The first source to examine is a political cartoon created by Herblock in 1954 called 'I Have Here In My Hand'.¹ This source is relevant to this investigation because it conveys popular sentiments towards McCarthy's accusations at the time. The second source is the book 'McCarthy and his Enemies' written by William F. Buckley Jr. and L. Brent Bozell in 1954.² This is a relevant source due to its reputation as the most well-known revisionist interpretation of McCarthyism.

Source A

This source is a cartoon that originated from the Washington Post, a widely circulated magazine, and its purpose is to use humor to appeal to people with awareness of the issue. On the one hand, the popularity of the newspaper indicates that this is a valid depiction of widespread attitudes towards McCarthy, and that the portrayal of McCarthy was based on true events. However, there is bias in the cartoon due to the fact that it was published in a magazine with a liberal slant, and that the purpose of political cartoons is to use exaggerated humor to cater to existing opinions, thus making the source limited as a source of information on McCarthy himself.

The content of the source is a caricature of McCarthy holding faked evidence that is burning in his hands. Although this source has value because the portrayal of McCarthy faking evidence was fair, this source has an accusatory tone and an embellished unflattering portrayal of McCarthy that doesn't provide any new information concerning him. This is why this source may be useful for ascertaining popular opinions towards McCarthy at that time, but is severely limited as a source of factual information.

Source B

This book was written in 1954 with its main purpose being to defend McCarthy. The respectful and explanatory tone of the introduction³ indicates that this book was not designed to cater to a

¹ ""I have here in my hand--" - Library of Congress." Accessed April 29, 2017.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/00652203/>.

² "McCarthy and his Enemies - JRBooksOnline.com." Accessed April 29, 2017.

http://www.jrbooksonline.com/PDF_Books/McCarthy_and_His_Enemies-Wm_F_Buckley_Jr-L_Brent_Bozell-1954-421pgs-POL.pdf.

³ "McCarthy and his Enemies - JRBooksOnline.com." Accessed April 29, 2017.

http://www.jrbooksonline.com/PDF_Books/McCarthy_and_His_Enemies-Wm_F_Buckley_Jr-L_Brent_Bozell-1954-421pgs-POL.pdf.

specific audience, which reduces the bias within the content's purpose. The authors also studied historical documents rather than journalistic evidence, which gives this text a valuable and unique perspective. However, the fact that one of the authors was a lawyer who had never written a historical text before limits its credibility.

This book tries to use evidence and logic to argue that McCarthy's ideas and premises were valid. Some of the content has value since the authors are accurate in their explanations of the genuine security risks surrounding Communism at the time.⁴ However, the integrity of the arguments is limited by evident conservative bias, the authors downplaying McCarthy's greater errors⁵ and the fact that the authors consulted with McCarthy himself when working on this book without contacting anybody against him.⁶ This source's biases limit its credibility as a factual source, but it still has value because it serves as an accurate reflection of the revisionist arguments concerning McCarthyism.

⁴ "McCarthy and His Enemies | The Liberty Conservative." Accessed April 29, 2017. <http://www.thelibertyconservative.com/mccarthy-and-his-enemies/>.

⁵ "McCarthy and His Enemies | The Liberty Conservative." Accessed April 29, 2017. <http://www.thelibertyconservative.com/mccarthy-and-his-enemies/>.

⁶ "McCarthy and His Enemies - The New York Times." Accessed April 29, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/07/16/specials/buckley-enemies.html>.

Section 2 - Investigation

During the early 1950s in America, Joseph McCarthy became a prominent figure in the proliferation of The Red Scare: a time of paranoia surrounding Communist infiltration in America. It is widely accepted by most historians that McCarthy was a populist whose accusations had little basis in reality, but some revisionist historians maintain that McCarthy was correct about the extent of Communist infiltration in the United States government. In this essay, the extent to which the Venona Papers and McCarthy's original accusations support his arguments will be analyzed, and ultimately, it will be made evident that although the orthodox view of this matter is more valid since McCarthy's accusations are not strongly supported by evidence, there is merit to the fear of Communist infiltration in the US government at the time.

One of the most damning pieces of evidence that revisionist historians use to vindicate McCarthy is the Venona Papers. These Russian cablegrams decrypted in the 1940s implicated 349 people related to Soviet intelligence agencies in espionage within the US government, which many argue serve as validation to McCarthy's theories of mass Communist infiltration in the government.⁷ These papers were incriminating because they were released in the 1990s, and by then the mainstream view of history was that McCarthy caused undue and dangerous hysteria surrounding Communism, so the revelation of these documents after the Freedom of Information Act caused a rift in popular historical consensus thus leading to several reevaluations of McCarthyism. However, when evaluating the papers, it is worth noting that although they clearly indicated a Communist conspiracy on the scale McCarthy described, the sources are purely data-based and the government operations surrounding them were kept secret for a long time, indicating not only that this data can be prone to misconstruance but also that the circumstances surrounding the decoding of the communications are dubious, thereby undermining the case that the Venona Papers fully support McCarthy's accusations.

Another reason that the Venona Papers aren't entirely supportive of the revisionist viewpoint is that they barely support McCarthy's specific accusations. In John Earl Haynes' 'Venona: The Decoding of Soviet Espionage in America', it is clarified that out of 159 specific suspects referenced by McCarthy, only 9 were shown through the Venona Papers to be involved in Soviet spying,⁸ meaning that although McCarthy may have been right about a Soviet conspiracy, he was not correct about specific individuals. This is important to consider because the inaccuracy in his cases may indicate that his claims of a Communist conspiracy were more motivated by populism

⁷ "First Chapter: 'Venona' - The New York Times." Accessed April 29, 2017.

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/h/haynes-venona.html>.

⁸ "Senator Joseph McCarthy's Lists and Venona - John Earl Haynes." Accessed April 29, 2017.

<http://www.johnearlhaynes.org/page62.html>.

than evidence. During the Red Scare, the government's negative attitude towards Communism, and their obfuscation of evidence in order to keep public peace, stifled concrete evidence and made it easier for demagogues like McCarthy to blend evidence with exaggeration to proliferate their agendas.

Having said that, there is a reason that the Venona Papers are considered so important in vindicating McCarthy, since they don't just validate the great extent of Communist infiltration in the US government at the time, but they also implicate noteworthy figures such as Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs whose trials for Communist spying captured much public attention. The degree of Soviet influence in government sectors such as secret intelligence, the State Department and the atomic bomb development project was also astonishing, and added validity to McCarthy's claims of infiltration in these specific sectors. Furthermore, only 3 percent of Russian cablegrams received for the Venona Project were actually decoded,⁹ meaning that the extent of Soviet infiltration was probably much greater than anyone currently knows of.

An obvious way in which McCarthy's accusations can be discredited is in pointing out the flaws of his more specific accusations and cases. For instance, McCarthy's 'list' of Communists that had infiltrated the State Department started the furor around McCarthyism, but by 1954, it was common knowledge that the list was fabricated.¹⁰ This was ascertained due to the number of names he supposedly had changing from 205 at the Wheeling Speech to 57 when corresponding with Truman two days later.¹¹ Consequently, Truman himself was skeptical of McCarthy's claims, as shown by an unsent telegram to McCarthy calling his evidence '*not true*'.¹² but that telegram was one of many that Truman would write as cathartic messages to various people that were never sent, meaning that it could have been influenced more by emotion than rational analysis of McCarthy's claims.

Another reason for the list being discredited lies in a letter written to McCarthy from the Secretary of Defense describing how difficult it was to obtain the list from him (so that the Defense Department could begin investigations), and how McCarthy only wanted to relinquish it

⁹ "First Chapter: 'Venona' - The New York Times." Accessed April 29, 2017.

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/h/haynes-venona.html>.

¹⁰ "'I have here in my hand--'" - Library of Congress." Accessed April 29, 2017.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/00652203/>.

¹¹ "'Enemies from Within": Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's ... - History Matters." Accessed April 29, 2017. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6456>.

¹² "Telegram from Senator Joseph McCarthy to President Harry S. Truman." Accessed April 29, 2017. <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/mccarthy-telegram>.

under assurance that *'the Department of Defense agree to keep the names secret.'*¹³ This letter pointed to the fact that McCarthy did not have a legitimate list of names, but it was later confirmed in 'The Politics of Fear' by Robert Griffith that McCarthy got his names from a 1946 letter written by the Secretary of State¹⁴ that listed the status of employees whose *'suitabilities were in doubt'* by subtracting from 285 names 80 employees that were already gone,¹⁵ which solidifies that McCarthy's most notorious claim of Communist infiltration was fabricated.

Defenders of McCarthy's practices such as William Buckley, author of *McCarthy And His Enemies*,¹⁶ have pointed out that McCarthy's actions were beneficial because they resulted in increased security within the US government, which was necessary given the degree of infiltration at the time.¹⁷ Even though fear surrounding Communism amongst the general public grew, it is widely acknowledged that the investigations conducted were less efficient at rooting out Communists than bullying suspects.¹⁸ This claim is also dubious when considering Truman's strident criticisms of McCarthy mentioned earlier, the fact that anti-Communist hysteria was reflected in government policies long before McCarthyism,¹⁹ and the lack of findings from the Tydings Committee²⁰ to support McCarthy's accusations, which shows that the evidence McCarthy offered wasn't taken seriously.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that some of the reasons McCarthy gave for his lack of

¹³ "Letter, Asst. Secretary of Defense Fred Seaton to Senator McCarthy" Accessed April 29, 2017.

https://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/research/online_documents/mccarthyism/1954_06_03_Seaaton.pdf.

¹⁴ "The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate - Google Books." Accessed April 29, 2017.

https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Politics_of_Fear.html?id=ViXaw6NSkrYC.

¹⁵ "The Other Shoe Remains Aloft - jstor." Accessed April 29, 2017.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30031184>.

¹⁶ "McCarthy and his Enemies - JRBooksOnline.com." Accessed April 29, 2017.

http://www.jrbooksonline.com/PDF_Books/McCarthy_and_His_Enemies-Wm_F_Buckley_Jr-L_Brent_Bozell-1954-421pgs-POL.pdf.

¹⁷ "McCarthy and His Enemies - The New York Times." Accessed April 29, 2017.

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/07/16/specials/buckley-enemies.html>.

¹⁸ "Edward R. Murrow: A Report on Senator Joseph ... - UC Berkeley Library." Accessed April 29, 2017. <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/murrowmccarthy.html>.

¹⁹ "McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare - Oxford Research" Accessed April 29, 2017.

<http://americanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-6>.

²⁰ "The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate - Google Books." Accessed April 29, 2017.

https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Politics_of_Fear.html?id=ViXaw6NSkrYC.

evidence were plausible. After the speech concerning the list, McCarthy claimed in his telegram to Truman that he could not show him evidence due to a State Department blackout,²¹ which we now know was possible due to the extent of infiltration in US intelligence at that point. McCarthy also argued that those responsible for an initial expulsion of only 80 out of 300 suspected Communists from the State Department were working under Alger Hiss, and that this case should be reviewed after Hiss' conviction for perjury and spying,²² which is a reasonable judgement to make. An overriding theme within McCarthy's accusations is that even though his specific claims don't stand up to scrutiny, his overall claims and arguments make logical sense. This along with the universal smearing of his reputation may explain the revisionism surrounding him, and this pattern is in line with a quote about him from George Reedy, the White House Press Secretary: *'His IQ was goddamn high. He could think through to the fundamental principles. And boy, he really had the press figured out.'*²³

In conclusion, McCarthy's accusations against individuals within the government were ultimately lacking in substantial evidence. Having said that, it wouldn't be prudent to dismiss his claims relating to a Communist conspiracy in the government, since the Venona Papers offer stark proof of large degrees of infiltration, and the secrecy surrounding this topic indicates yet more incriminating information is hidden. We may never know if McCarthy proliferated his agenda out of a desire for popularity or genuine concern, but it can be agreed that rather than a purely orthodox or a purely revisionist viewpoint of the situation, a post-revisionist view of this matter can be adopted: that *'point by point, Joe McCarthy got it all wrong and yet was still closer to the truth than those who ridiculed him.'*²⁴

²¹ ""Enemies from Within": Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's ... - History Matters." Accessed April 29, 2017. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6456>.

²² ""Enemies from Within": Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's ... - History Matters." Accessed April 29, 2017. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6456>.

²³ "Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining the Life and Legacy ... - Google Books." Accessed April 29, 2017. https://books.google.com/books/about/Joseph_McCarthy.html?id=DIibZoDyADEC.

²⁴ "Witching Hour; Rethinking McCarthyism, if Not McCarthy - The New" Accessed April 29, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/18/weekinreview/witching-hour-rethinking-mccarthyism-if-not-mccarthy.html>.

Section 3 - Reflection

Since my investigation involved the examination of evidence concerning McCarthyism, one challenge that faced me which is common for many historians was judging the reliability of the sources I came across. There is a pronounced stigma towards attempts to vindicate McCarthy, so it was more difficult to find reliable sources that supported that view. I primarily used book reviews and articles on the historiography of McCarthyism to find comprehensive sources that I could extensively discuss. One disadvantage of this method was that I didn't have as familiar a grasp of the texts as I wanted due to time constraints, and I may have still used biased information from my sources, which is why I took care to find multiple perspectives on each historian's source and focus on empirical evidence when possible. Ultimately, although unreliable sources can be used to gain context of certain popular or fringe views, it impacts the reliability of concrete information surrounding that event, so a historian must balance opinionated secondary sources with factual primary sources to support their investigation.

Another issue that historians face which resonated with me was deciding which sources to include to support the thesis. When researching historiography and interpretations of events, there are many perspectives and supporting pieces of evidence that one can find, but it's difficult to be selective about deciding how to use the best information you have to your advantage. I got around this challenge by considering the level of bias in each source, deciding to abandon two paragraphs exclusively on historiography to focus more on analyzing McCarthy's evidence, and considering how I could increase the diversity in the sources I used. I also learned that using multiple perspectives to supplement arguments is more effective than treating historiography as a separate entity to analyze, and that this approach made the scope of my essay more focused.

One method that historians often use when investigating certain cases is analysis of the implications of primary sources, which I did when examining the letter from the Secretary of Defense. Although I enjoyed using this analysis and felt it added nuance to my investigation, I acknowledge that interpretations of primary sources can differ between historians, that bias may be involved and that there are possible contexts to sources that historians may be unaware of. This is why the dialogue between historians concerning interpretations of events is sometimes more fascinating than the events themselves.

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