Narrative: Joseph McCarthy and Irresponsibility

I can identify Joseph McCarthy’s actions as examples of irresponsibility in his leadership.

Essential Vocabulary

<table>
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<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<td>irresponsibility</td>
<td>Acting on poor judgment or failing the trust others place in you.</td>
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<td>fascists</td>
<td>A follower of a fascist regime, which is a political system based on a very powerful leader, state control, and being extremely proud of country and race, and in which political opposition is not allowed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>communism</td>
<td>A political theory derived from Karl Marx, advocating class war and leading to a society in which all property is publicly owned and each person works and is paid according to their abilities and needs.</td>
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<td>subversive</td>
<td>A person who attempts to weaken or destroy a political system or government.</td>
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Narrative

Political leaders in a republic have many responsibilities when they are elected or appointed to office. They have an obligation to preserve the Constitution and the rule of law. They must act prudently to exercise their powers for the common good. They also have a duty to respect the rights and liberties of the people in promoting a just government and society. Moreover, they must commit to respecting and upholding the dignity and integrity of their office and position as a public servant.

Irresponsibility compromises leadership and endangers the republic. Imprudence, demagoguery, and corruption are often related to leaders acting irresponsibly. The rule of law thus breaks down and injustice, self-interest, and uncertainty can result. The rights of the people are usually endangered, and citizens start to doubt they live in a free society. The people begin to question whether they can trust their leaders, which has a corrosive effect on self-government.
During the early 1950s, Joseph McCarthy, a Senator from Wisconsin, became well-known for rousing Americans to fear that subversives were spying for the Soviet Union and damaging the American fight against Communism around the globe. McCarthy’s name has become synonymous with “McCarthyism,” which was characterized as a “witch-hunt” or “red scare” against Communists in America. Thousands of government employees, union members, Hollywood actors, military members, educators, and members of the Communist Party lost their jobs, were blacklisted, called to testify in congressional hearings, and sometimes convicted and jailed. McCarthyism generated great fear in the United States and sometimes led to the violation of civil liberties such as freedom of speech and thought.

The attempt to find subversives in government had a long history and was carried out by both political parties. A red scare had taken place under the Wilson administration after World War I because of fear generated by the communist Russian Revolution. More recently, Congress organized the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1938 which held hearings about communist subversion, passed the Hatch Act (1939) that banned Communists from working in government jobs, and passed the Smith Act (1940) which banned political groups advocating the violent overthrow of the United States. In 1947, President Harry Truman signed an Executive Order creating a loyalty review board to investigate suspected subversives in the federal government. Truman vetoed the Internal Security Act, or McCarran Act (1950), which forced Communist Party members to register with the government, but large majorities in Congress overrode the veto. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and his agents investigated communist subversives in the United States. But, if McCarthy did not create the climate of fear, he contributed to it and benefited politically.

When McCarthy and other Americans looked at the events during the start of the Cold War, they feared that communist subversives threatened American national security from within. Their fears were legitimate and justified by several acts of real subversion. The cases of Klaus Fuchs, the Rosenbergs, and Alger Hiss demonstrated that Americans in high positions of government were spying for the Soviet Union. The national government investigated the treasonous activities according to the rule of law and preserved the constitutional principles of due process and trial by jury. Several espionage rings for the Soviets were uncovered, and Manhattan Project scientist Klaus Fuchs was arrested for selling atomic secrets to the Soviets. In addition, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted and executed for participating in a Soviet
spy ring. Most famously, spy Alger Hiss was convicted of perjury based upon evidence hidden in a pumpkin by his accuser Whitaker Chambers.

McCarthy was a relatively unknown senator until he delivered a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, on February 9, 1950, warning of communist subversion and treason in the State Department. He said he had a list of alleged Communists who worked in the State Department. When the press gave him tremendous attention for his accusations, McCarthy continued the attack. He sincerely believed that Communists and spies were infiltrating the federal government — and he was correct that spies endangered national security — but he was irresponsible with the charges he leveled. He held a public trust as a senator to act for the good of the country, but broke it for his own political gain. The number of spies on his supposed list kept changing, and he began to lie and exaggerate for the media attention and increased political power.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee created a subcommittee to investigate McCarthy’s allegations. McCarthy browbeat and bullied witnesses who appeared before the Tydings Committee. Anyone who pleaded the Fifth Amendment (the right to remain silent) and refused to answer questions was accused of being guilty of communist beliefs, party membership, or subversion. The outbreak of the Korean War, in which communist North Korea invaded South Korea in June 1950, added to the tense political climate. Finally, the committee report concluded that McCarthy’s accusations were “a fraud and a hoax,” but he continued his crusade. His irresponsibility seemed to know few boundaries of preserving civil liberties and treating others with respect.

McCarthy’s attack on communist spies took a reckless turn when he accused the upright World War II Army Chief of Staff and later Secretary of State George C. Marshall of “invariably serving the world policy of the Kremlin.” A cross-section of liberal and conservative Americans were outraged by McCarthy’s charges against Marshall, and many in the media began calling the senator a demagogue. When anyone attacked him, however, McCarthy called them a communist. McCarthy was trying to use the popular anti-communist issue for his own political fame and power. It increasingly seemed as if he were pursuing his own self-interest rather than protecting the public or even telling the truth. He was also drinking heavily and showed increasing signs of impaired judgment. McCarthy’s irresponsible charges undermined the legitimate anti-communist cause in the United States that advocated strength against the Soviet Union and uncovering spies in the government.
FBI Director Hoover and President Dwight Eisenhower both distanced themselves from McCarthy and worked against him behind the scenes. “I won’t go down into the gutter with that guy,” Eisenhower said. The president also asserted “it is imperative that we protect the basic rights of loyal American citizens” while honestly combating real subversion. Still, McCarthy sought the spotlight wherever he could find it, making wild accusations in committee hearings and trying to block the nomination of an anti-communist appointee at the State Department. McCarthy’s final downfall occurred in 1954 when he investigated lax security in the Army for contributing to communist subversion. He made horrific allegations, at one point accusing an Army general who had fought heroically at Normandy on D-Day of covering up communist spies. When one of his aides was drafted into the Army, McCarthy and his staff tried to get special privileges and assignments for him. In June, while being questioned in hearings to determine his role in his staff member’s special privileges, McCarthy accused the lawyer of sheltering a young lawyer in his law firm. McCarthy called the young man a communist. The lawyer angrily shot back: “Little did I dream you could be so reckless and so cruel as to do an injury to that lad …. Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator. You have done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?”

A few months later, the Senate voted to censure Joseph McCarthy by a vote of 67 to 22. Within a few years, the senator died of complications resulting from severe alcoholism. While the Cold War and fear of communism continued for decades, McCarthy seemed a symbol of the hysteria during the early 1950s and used the issue for his own interest. McCarthy irresponsibly subverted constitutional principles of due process and created an unhealthy civic culture of fear and distrust.
Analysis Questions

- Why was the Cold War after World War II such a frightening place? Why did Americans believe that the Soviet Union and communism was “on the march” around the world?
- Were there communist subversives committing treason in the American government? Could the danger of spies selling secrets to the Soviet Union be controlled while also supporting constitutional rights and the rule of law in the United States? Explain your answer.
- Was the “red scare” of the 1940s and 1950s a product only of Joseph McCarthy? Which other individuals or groups contributed to government investigation of communist subversion during those decades? What constitutional rights seemed endangered by those laws and investigations?
- How morally responsible is Joseph McCarthy for the red scare or “McCarthyism” during the Cold War? Is a person responsible only for his or her own actions, or should they bear a general responsibility for larger related events over which they don’t have direct control?
- How was Joseph McCarthy reckless in his accusations of a communist conspiracy to undermine American institutions and policy in the Cold War? Do you think he acted irresponsibly? Defend your answer with evidence.
- Why do you think other government officials and the American people turned against Senator McCarthy? Did they show courage in battling him or rejecting his accusations? What constitutional principles and civic virtues did they stand for in denouncing McCarthy?