McCarthyism: An overview

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, Ella Kazan, Arthur Miller, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Charlie Chaplin. 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.
How McCarthyism Worked

by Ala Hoyt

Introduction to How McCarthyism Worked

Mass hysteria has reared its ugly head for as long as humans have existed. Adolf Hitler worked enough people into a frenzy to justify the murder of millions of Jews. Jesus Christ, known by all as peaceful, if controversial, was brutally nailed to a cross because a few high-ranking officials felt threatened by him. Although one would hope that people would learn a lesson or two from the mistakes of the past, it seems that history, as the old cliché goes, is forever doomed to repeat itself.

Enter Senator Joseph McCarthy. While he may not have caused genocide or murdered a prophet, he was able to whip up hysteria in America in the early 1950s. McCarthy’s issue of choice? Communism. The American Heritage Dictionary defines McCarthyism as “the political practice of publicizing accusations of disloyalty or subversion with insufficient regard to evidence.”

Communism, in simple terms, is an economic system designed to equally benefit everyone in the society. The idea is that everyone contributes to the society and gets an equal share of property and goods. Communist systems are generally controlled by dictators and totalitarian governments - think China, Cuba and North Korea.

By the ’50s, communism wasn’t exactly a new worry for the United States. In the aftermath of World War II, the country had experienced the First Red Scare (“yes” is slug for communism). Russia had a new communist government as a result of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, and dictator Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (Lenin) had brutally slaughtered about 9 million of his people for resisting his ideals [source: The History Guide]. All of this upheaval upset Americans, so lawmakers decided to prevent the spread of communism to the United States by enforcing the Sedition Act and the Espionage Act. The First Red Scare was characterized by the fear with which the U.S. government identified and attacked suspected communists.

By the time McCarthy won a Senate seat in 1948, World War II was over and the Cold War was beginning. Communist governments had gained hold in Eastern Europe and China, and Americans were increasingly concerned about it— and about rumors of high-ranking U.S. government officials who were secret communists. McCarthy took advantage of the mounting fear, but because it isn’t actually illegal to be a communist, he started charging people with the act of subversion—the “systematic attempt to overthrow or undermine a government or political system by persons working from within” [source: Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of Law]. Then he got to work prosecuting them for selling or giving American security secrets to communist governments.

In this article, you’ll learn about the basics of communism, McCarthy’s interview tactics, and recent evidence about the communist presence in the United States at the time of McCarthyism. You’ll also learn about the impact of McCarthy’s accusations on the lives of the accused, the country as a whole and his own family name.

The Rise of Joseph McCarthy

Born in Wisconsin in 1908, Joseph Raymond McCarthy attended Marquette University and became an attorney in 1935, smack in the middle of the Great Depression. He became the youngest circuit court judge in Wisconsin history when he defeated an incumbent in 1938. During World War II, he joined the Marines, where he was promoted to captain. After two years, though, he left because of a broken bone in his foot that was suffered during a leaking raid. In 1944 he ran for U.S. Senate, parlaying his military service into the patriotic persona of “Tail Gunner Joe.” He didn’t win that time, but did take the ticket in 1946 when he became Wisconsin’s junior senator.

McCarthy burst onto the national scene several years later. In 1950, during a highly controversial speech at a Lincoln’s Birthday luncheon, he waved around a list of 205 names of supposed active communists holding jobs in the State Department.

McCarthy was a relative unknown, but once he lit the fire under America’s fear of communism, there seemed to be no stopping it. There had already been some cases of communist spies selling and giving secrets to the Soviet Union about the American government and nuclear program. McCarthy claimed the liberal officials knew of other threats to national security but were taking a soft approach toward identifying them.

Two things happened almost immediately after McCarthy’s speech:

- Americans became frantic to identify and remove communists from positions of power. Many believe this hysteria to have been generated not completely by McCarthy, but rather by the events that preceded his speech. Communists, led by Mao Zedong, had gained control of China two months earlier. The Soviet Union had exploded an atomic bomb in 1949. And leaders of the Communist Party of the United States had recently been convicted of conspiring to violently overthrow the U.S. government.
- McCarthy’s speech was the icing on the cake.
- Politicians of all parties began to attack McCarthy’s claims.
McCarthy then embarked on what is often described as a "witch hunt" to root out and prosecute communists and sympathizers using controversial techniques and often making accusations with scant evidence.

McCarthy's Tactics

McCarthy identified suspected communists through a variety of channels. Some were members of organizations with reported communist sympathies. Some were associates of known communists, and homosexuality was also an apparent cause of suspicion. However, they were identified, McCarthy looked ahead at his targets with great intensity.

Once McCarthy's claims gained national attention, he became chairman of the Senate Committee on Government Operations. This increased level of power afforded him the opportunity to investigate the people he suspected of being communists or sympathizers. Hundreds of witnesses were brought before the Senate committee, in both public and private hearings. Transcripts of the Senate hearings, which became available in 2003, confirm what the American public eventually realized about McCarthy's interview tactics. He used severe intimidation, and often the threat of prison, when trying to get information -- and he often had little or no solid evidence on which to base his claims. The names of many witnesses and suspects were released publicly, resulting in defamation of character and guilt by association. Careers and reputations were irreversibly damaged. And when all was said and done, there were no convictions for subversion.

Liberals and conservatives alike agreed that McCarthy's actions were reckless and that his methods were out of line. In fact, his actions directly resulted in a 1957 Supreme Court ruling that secures the constitutional rights of witnesses during a congressional investigation. In other words, even though congressional investigations can take place in an actual court, witnesses cannot be subjected to less-than-ethical interrogation methods.

One of the most enduring legacies of McCarthyism was its effect on Hollywood. Next, we'll learn about McCarthy's targeting of the film industry.

"MCARTHURISM"

The term was coined in a Washington Post cartoon by Herbert Block that ran on March 29, 1950. It showed Republicans forcing an elephant, their party symbol, to stand on a precarious pile of tar buckets. The highest bucket was tagged "McCarthyism," and the caption quoted the elephant saying, "You mean I'm supposed to stand on that?"

Attacking Hollywood

Many of the people whom McCarthy suspected of having communist ties were Hollywood figures, including major actors, screenwriters, directors and producers. Here are a few common terms associated with McCarthy's attack on Hollywood:

- Entertainment industry blacklist: This is the list of members of the entertainment industry who had suspected or real ties to communism. Those on the blacklist were refused employment based on their political ties. A full list of the artists blacklisted is available at BookRags.com.
- The Hollywood Ten: The first 10 members of the Hollywood film industry questioned by McCarthy decided not to cooperate with the investigation, choosing instead to claim their First Amendment right to free speech. Unfortunately for them, they were not successful. Eight were sentenced to a year in prison for contempt of Congress. The other two received six-month sentences. A full list of the Hollywood Ten and their credentials is available at the Library of the University of California, Berkeley.
- The Waldorf Statement: This was issued by Hollywood executives announcing the firing of the Hollywood Ten.
- Fifth Amendment Communists: After the Hollywood Ten debacle, future suspects often claimed the Fifth Amendment, which protects against self-incrimination. Many of their bosses considered that as good as a guilty plea, and most were fired.
- The $64 Question: "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party of the United States?"
Communism in the United States

The irony of the whole McCarthy scandal is that, despite his high-handedness, lack of evidence and general recklessness, there definitely was a communist presence in the United States at the time, as illustrated by the Rosenbergs and others. In fact, a number of the people McCarthy interrogated were later identified as communists and even Soviet agents. The evidence he had so desperately sought became available in 1956 with the release of the Venona intercepts. These secret Soviet intelligence messages had been decoded in the 1940s but didn’t become public knowledge until 1995. According to journalist Charles Peters, the Venona intercepts identified multiple communists, including:

- Two atomic spies
- A captain in the U.S. Navy
- One person who had enough clout to hold a private meeting with Roosevelt and Churchill
- One who held a top office in today’s equivalent of the Central Intelligence Agency (source: Peters)

19 senior-level government officials suspected by McCarthy were also later shown to have Communist Party ties. The Venona intercepts, coupled with Kremlin archive data, proved that “rather than being blameless martyrs, all were indeed communists, Soviet agents or assets of the KGB, just as McCarthy had suggested” (source: Evans).

McCarthy also questioned Michael and Ann Sidorovitch, couriers for convicted communists Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The Venona intercepts show that both were full-time agents for the KGB.

Friends and Enemies

McCarthy’s supporters included:

- Much of the American public. According to Conservapedia, McCarthy’s popularity peaked in early 1954, when a Gallup Poll reported that 50 percent of the respondents had a generally favorable opinion of him. He also took fourth place on a list of most admired men.
- The American Legion
- Minute Women of the U.S.A.
- American Public Relations Forum
- Christian organizations

Detractors included such heavy hitters as:

- President Harry Truman, who reportedly ignored warnings by the FBI that Harry Dexter White had communist ties. Truman promoted him to a top-level position at the International Monetary Fund. White was later revealed to be a Soviet agent.
- Lyndon B. Johnson
- Politicians of all parties
- Edward R. Murrow, host of “See It Now.” His March 9, 1954, episode portrayed McCarthy in an extremely unflattering light -- some consider it to be the beginning of the end of McCarthy.
- The Communist Party (surprise)

But it wasn’t long before McCarthy’s detractors started to outweigh his supporters, and the stage was set for his eventual downfall.

The Fall of McCarthy

Television, the medium that makes or breaks so many, was ultimately McCarthy’s downfall. McCarthy had been viciously interrogating suspects in public and private hearings for some time, but the American people witnessed his brutal methods firsthand when the Army–McCarthy hearings were broadcast on live TV in 1954 (the doing of President Eisenhower, who wanted the public to see McCarthy’s mistakes). The hearings began generically enough, with McCarthy making accusations against Army officers for not answering questions about their political beliefs. Lt. Col. Chester T. Brown, for one, outright refused to answer McCarthy’s questions. In response, McCarthy said, “Any man in the uniform of his country who refused to give information to a committee of the Senate which represents the American people, that man is not fit to wear the uniform of his country” (source: CNN). McCarthy then went one step further when he interviewed Brigadier General Ralph Zwicker, a decorated veteran and hero in Normandy, calling him “a disgrace to the uniform he wore” (source: Kiehr).

McCarthy had finally gone too far. Joseph Welch, the attorney for the U.S. Army, responded famously by saying, “I think I never really gauged your cruelty or your recklessness. Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?” (source: Kiehr) The public quickly stilled its opinion of
the man who had insulted members of the Armed Forces. President Eisenhower and the rest of the Senate agreed with Welch. In 1954, the Senate censured McCarthy on 46 charges for abuse of legislative powers. He was eventually censured on only two of the charges because the Senate didn't want to project the image of being "soft" on communism. Instead, the censure resolution stated that he had abused his power as a senator. He remained in office but was left with virtually no power or clout.

McCarthy died on May 2, 1957, of acute hepatitis, which resulted from alcohol abuse. He was 48 years old.

McCarthy's Legacy

The 1995 release of the Venona intercepts caused some to view McCarthy's legacy differently. Maybe he had, in fact, been a crusader against communism in a country that wasn't taking a tough enough approach. But most remember him as violating the civil liberties of too many innocent people — and even some guilty people. He is still generally considered a reckless bully who used whatever means necessary to obtain the information he wanted. His actions certainly cost some of the accused their careers and livelihoods.

If nothing else, historians hope that others will learn from McCarthy's mistakes. When the Senate hearings transcripts were released in 1995, Senator Susan Collins said, "We hope that the excesses of McCarthyism will serve as a cautionary tale for future generations" [source: Frommer]. Only time will tell if that will be the case.

For more information about McCarthyism, take a look at the links on the next page.
Why I Wrote The Crucible:

An artist’s answer to politics.

by Arthur Miller

As I watched “The Crucible” taking shape as a movie over much of the past year, the sheer depth of time that it represents for me kept returning to mind. As those powerful actors blossomed on the screen, and the children and the horses, the crowds and the wagons, I thought again about how I came to cook all this up nearly fifty years ago, in an America almost nobody I know seems to remember clearly. In a way, there is a biting irony in this film’s having been made by a Hollywood studio, something unimaginable in the fifties. But there they are – Daniel Day-Lewis (John Proctor) scything his sea-bordered field, Joan Allen (Elizabeth) lying pregnant in the frigid jail, Winona Ryder (Abigail) stealing her minister-uncle’s money, majestic Paul Scofield (Judge Danforth) and his righteous empathy with the Devil-possessed children, and all of them looking as inevitable as rain.

I remember those years – they formed “The Crucible’s” skeleton – but I have lost the dead weight of the fear I had then. Fear doesn’t travel well; just as it can warp judgment, its absence can diminish memory’s truth. What terrifies one generation is likely to bring only a puzzled smile to the next. I remember how in 1964, only twenty years after the war, Harold Clurman, the director of “Incident at Vichy,” showed the cast a film of a Hitler speech, hoping to give them a sense of the Nazi period in which my play took place. They watched as Hitler, facing a vast stadium full of adoring people, went up on his toes in ecstasy, hands clasped under his chin, a sublimely self-gratified grin on his face, his body swiveling rather cutely, and they giggled at his overacting.

Likewise, films of Senator Joseph McCarthy are rather unsettling – if you remember the fear he once spread. Buzzing his truculent sidewalk brawler’s snarl through the hairs in his nose, squinting through his cat’s eyes and sneering like a villain, he comes across now as nearly comical, a self-aware performer keeping a straight face as he does his juicy threat-shtick.

McCarthy’s power to stir fears of creeping Communism was not entirely based on illusion, of course; the paranoid, real or pretended, always secretes its pearl around a grain of fact. From being our wartime ally, the Soviet Union rapidly became an expanding empire. In 1949, Mao Zedong took power in China. Western Europe also seemed ready to become Red – especially Italy, where the Communist Party was the largest outside Russia and was growing. Capitalism, in the opinion of many, myself included, had nothing more to say, its final poisoned bloom having been Italian and German Fascism. McCarthy – brash and ill-mannered but to many authentic and true –
boiled it all down to what anyone could understand: we had “lost China” and would soon lose Europe as well, because the State Department – staffed, of course, under Democratic Presidents – was full of treasonous pro-Soviet intellectuals. It was as simple as that.

If our losing China seemed the equivalent of a flea’s losing an elephant, it was still a phrase – and a conviction – that one did not dare to question; to do so was to risk drawing suspicion on oneself. Indeed, the State Department proceeded to hound and fire the officers who knew China, its language, and its opaque culture – a move that suggested the practitioners of sympathetic magic who wring the neck of a doll in order to make a distant enemy’s head drop off. There was magic all around; in politics of alien conspiracy soon dominated political discourse and bid fair to wipe out any other issue. How could one deal with such enormities in a play?

“The Crucible” was an act of desperation. Much of my desperation branched out, I suppose, from a typical Depression-era trauma – the blow struck on the mind by the rise of European Fascism and the brutal anti-Semitism it had brought to power. But by 1950, when I began to think of writing about the hunt for Reds in America, I was motivated in some great part by the paralysis that had set in among many liberals who, despite their discomfort with the inquisitors’ violations of civil rights, were fearful, and with good reason, of being identified as covert Communists if they should protest too strongly.

In any play, however trivial, there has to be a still point of moral reference against which to gauge the action. In our lives, in the late nineteen-forties and early nineteen-fifties, no such point existed anymore. The left could not look straight at the Soviet Union’s abrogations of human rights. The anti-Communist liberals could not acknowledge the violations of those rights by congressional committees. The far right, meanwhile, was licking up all the cream. The days of “J’accuse” were gone, for anyone needs to feel right to declare someone else wrong. Gradually, all the old political and moral reality had melted like a Dali watch. Nobody but a fanatic, it seemed, could really say all that he believed.

President Truman was among the first to have to deal with the dilemma, and his way of resolving it – of having to trim his sails before the howling gale on the right – turned out to be momentous. At first, he was outraged at the allegation of widespread Communist infiltration of the government and called the charge of “coddling Communists” a red herring dragged in by the Republicans to bring down the Democrats. But such was the gathering power of raw belief in the great Soviet plot that Truman soon felt it necessary to institute loyalty boards of his own.

The Red hunt, led by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and by McCarthy, was becoming the dominating fixation of the American psyche. It reached Hollywood when the studios, after first resisting, agreed to submit artists’ names to the House Committee for “clearing” before employing them. This unleashed a veritable holy terror among actors, directors, and others, from Party members to those who had had the merest brush with a front organization.

The Soviet plot was the hub of a great wheel of causation; the plot justified the crushing of all nuance, all the shadings that a realistic judgment of reality requires.
Even worse was the feeling that our sensitivity to this onslaught on our liberties was passing from us—indeed, from me. In "Timebends," my autobiography, I recalled the time I'd written a screenplay ("The Hook") about union corruption on the Brooklyn waterfront. Harry Cohn, the head of Columbia Pictures, did something that would become unthinkable: he showed my script to the F.B.I. Cohn then asked me to take the gangsters in my script, who were threatening and murdering their opponents, and simply change them to Communists. When I declined to commit this idiocy (Joe Ryan, the head of the longshoremen's union, was soon to go to Sing Sing for racketeering), I got a wire from Cohn saying, "The minute we try to make the script pro-American you pull out." By then—it was 1951—I had come to accept this terribly serious insanity as routine, but there was an element of the marvelous in it which I longed to put on the stage.

In those years, our thought processes were becoming so magical, so paranoid, that to imagine writing a play about this environment was like trying to pick one's teeth with a ball of wool: I lacked the tools to illuminate miasma. Yet I kept being drawn back to it.

I had read about the witchcraft trials in college, but it was not until I read a book published in 1867—a two-volume, thousand-page study by Charles W. Upham, who was then the mayor of Salem—that I knew I had to write about the period. Upham had not only written a broad and thorough investigation of what was even then an almost lost chapter of Salem's past but opened up to me the details of personal relationships among many participants in the tragedy.

I visited Salem for the first time on a dismal spring day in 1952; it was a sidetracked town then, with abandoned factories and vacant stores. In the gloomy courthouse there I read the transcript of the witchcraft trials of 1692, as taken down in a primitive shorthand by ministers who were spelling each other. But there was one entry in Upham in which the thousands of pieces I had come across were jogged into place. It was from a report written by the Reverend Samuel Parris, who was one of the chief instigators of the witch-hunt. "During the examination of Elizabeth Proctor, Abigail Williams and Ann Putnam"—the two were "afflicted" teen-age accusers, and Abigail was Parris's niece—"both made offer to strike at said Procter; but when Abigail's hand came near, it opened, whereas it was made up, into a fist before, and came down exceeding lightly as it drew near to said Procter, and at length, with open and extended fingers, touched Procter's hood very lightly. Immediately Abigail cried out her fingers, her fingers, her fingers burned...."

In this remarkably observed gesture of a troubled young girl, I believed, a play became possible. Elizabeth Proctor had been the orphaned Abigail's mistress, and they had lived together in the same small house until Elizabeth fired the girl. By this time, I was sure, John Proctor had bedded Abigail, who had to be dismissed most likely to appease Elizabeth. There was bad blood between the two women now. That Abigail started, in effect, to condemn Elizabeth to death with her touch, then stopped her hand, then went through with it, was quite suddenly the human center of all this turmoil.

All this I understood. I had not approached the witchcraft out of nowhere or from purely social and political considerations. My own marriage of twelve years was teetering and I knew more than I wished to know about where the blame lay. That
John Proctor the sinner might overturn his paralyzing personal guilt and become the most forthright voice against the madness around him was a reassurance to me, and, I suppose, an inspiration: it demonstrated that a clear moral outcry could still spring even from an ambiguously unblemished soul. Moving crabwise across the profusion of evidence, I sensed that I had at last found something of myself in it, and a play began to accumulate around this man.

But as the dramatic form became visible, one problem remained unyielding: so many practices of the Salem trials were similar to those employed by the congressional committees that I could easily be accused of skewing history for a mere partisan purpose. Inevitably, it was no sooner known that my new play was about Salem than I had to confront the charge that such an analogy was specious — that there never were any witches but there certainly are Communists. In the seventeenth century, however, the existence of witches was never questioned by the loftiest minds in Europe and America; and even lawyers of the highest eminence, like Sir Edward Coke, a veritable hero of liberty for defending the common law against the king’s arbitrary power, believed that witches had to be prosecuted mercilessly. Of course, there were no Communists in 1692, but it was literally worth your life to deny witches or their powers, given the exhortation in the Bible, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” There had to be witches in the world or the Bible lied. Indeed, the very structure of evil depended on Lucifer’s plotting against God. (And the irony is that kllitches of Luciferians exist all over the country today; there may even be more of them now than there are Communists.)

As with most humans, panic sleeps in one unlighted corner of my soul. When I walked at night along the empty, wet streets of Salem in the week that I spent there, I could easily work myself into imagining my terror before a gaggle of young girls flying down the road screaming that somebody’s “familiar spirit” was chasing them. This anxiety-laden leap backward over nearly three centuries may have been helped along by a particular Upham footnote. At a certain point, the high court of the province made the fatal decision to admit, for the first time, the use of “spectral evidence” as proof of guilt. Spectral evidence, so aptly named, meant that if I swore that you had sent out your “familiar spirit” to choke, tickle, poison me or my cattle, or to control my thoughts and actions, I could get you hanged unless you confessed to having had contact with the Devil. After all, only the Devil could lend such powers of invisible transport to confederates, in his everlasting plot to bring down Christianity.

Naturally, the best proof of the sincerity of your confession was your naming others whom you had seen in the Devil’s company — an invitation to private vengeance, but made official by the seal of the theocratic state. It was as though the court had grown tired of thinking and had invited in the instincts: spectral evidence — that poisoned cloud of paranoid fantasy — made a kind of lunatic sense to them, as it did in plot-ridden 1952, when so often the question was not the acts of an accused but the thoughts and intentions in his alienated mind.

The breathtaking circularity of the process had a kind of poetic tightness. Not everybody was accused, after all, so there must be some reason why you were. By denying that there is any reason whatsoever for you to be accused, you are implying, by virtue of a surprisingly small logical leap, that mere chance picked you out, which in
turn implies that the Devil might not really be at work in the village, or, God forbid, even exist. Therefore, the investigation itself is either mistaken or a fraud. You would have to be a crypto-Luciferian to say that – not a great idea if you wanted to go back to your farm.

The more I read into the Salem panic, the more it touched off corresponding images of common experiences in the fifties: the old friend of a blacklisted person crossing the street to avoid being seen talking to him; the overnight conversions of former leftists into born-again patriots; and so on. Apparently, certain processes are universal. When Gentiles in Hitler’s Germany, for example, saw their Jewish neighbors being trucked off, or farmers in Soviet Ukraine saw the Kulaks vanishing before their eyes, the common reaction, even among those unsympathetic to Nazism or Communism, was quite naturally to turn away in fear of being identified with the condemned. As I learned from non-Jewish refugees, however, there was often a despairing pity mixed with “Well, they must have done something.” Few of us can easily surrender our belief that society must somehow make sense. The thought that the state has lost its mind and is punishing so many innocent people is intolerable. And so the evidence has to be internally denied.

I was also drawn into writing “The Crucible” by the chance it gave me to use a new language – that of seventeenth-century New England. The plain, craggy English was liberating in a strangely sensuous way, with its swings from an almost legalistic precision to a wonderful metaphoric richness. “The Lord doth terrible things amongst us, by lengthening the chain of the roaring lion in an extraordinary manner, so that the Devil is come down in great wrath,” Deodat Lawson, one of the great witch-hunting preachers, said in a sermon. Lawson rallied his congregation for what was to be nothing less than a religious war against the Evil One – “Arm, arm, arm!” – and his concealed anti-Christian accomplices.

But it was not yet my language, and among other strategies to make it mine I enlisted the help of a former University of Michigan classmate, the Greek-American scholar and poet Kimon Friar (He later translated Kazantzakis.) The problem was not to imitate the archaic speech but to try to create a new echo of it which would flow freely off American actors’ tongues. As in the film nearly fifty years later, the actors in the first production grabbed the language and ran with it as happily as if it were their customary speech.

“The Crucible” took me about a year to write. With its five sets and a cast of twenty-one, it never occurred to me that it would take a brave man to produce it on Broadway, especially given the prevailing climate, but Kermit Bloomgarden never faltered. Well before the play opened, a strange tension had begun to build. Only two years earlier, the “Death of a Salesman” touring company had played to a thin crowd in Peoria, Illinois, having been boycotted nearly to death by the American Legion and the Jaycees. Before that, the Catholic War Veterans had prevailed upon the Army not to allow its theatrical groups to perform, first, “All My Sons,” and then any play of mine, in occupied Europe. The Dramatists Guild refused to protest attacks on a new play by Sean O’Casey, a self-declared Communist, which forced its producer to cancel his option. I knew of two suicides by actors depressed by upcoming investigation, and every day seemed to bring news of people exiling themselves to Europe: Charlie
Chaplin, the director Joseph Losey, Jules Dassin, the harmonica virtuoso Larry Adler, Donald Ogden Stewart, one of the most sought-after screenwriters in Hollywood, and Sam Wanamaker, who would lead the successful campaign to rebuild the Old Globe Theater on the Thames.

On opening night, January 22, 1953, I knew that the atmosphere would be pretty hostile. The coördness of the crowd was not a surprise; Broadway audiences were not famous for loving history lessons, which is what they made of the play. It seems to me entirely appropriate that one the day the play opened, a newspaper headline read "ALL 13 REDS GUILTY" – a story about American Communists who faced prison for "conspiring to teach and advocate the duty and necessity of forcible overthrow of government." Meanwhile, the remoteness of the production was guaranteed by the director, Jed Harris, who insisted that this was a classic requiring the actors to face front, never each other. The critics were not swept away. "Arthur Miller is a problem playwright in both senses of the word," wrote Walter Kerr of the Herald Tribune, who called the play "a step backward into mechanical parable." The Times was not much kinder, saying, "There is too much excitement and not enough emotion in The Crucible." But the play's future would turn out quite differently.

About a year later, a new production, one with younger, less accomplished actors, working in the Martinique Hotel ballroom, played with the fervor that the script and the times required, and "The Crucible" became a hit. The play stumbled into history, and today, I am told, it is one of the most heavily demanded trade-fiction paperbacks in this country; the Bantam and Penguin editions have sold more than six million copies. I don't think there has been a week in the past forty-odd years when it hasn't been on a stage somewhere in the world. Nor is the new screen version the first. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his Marxist phase, wrote a French film adaptation that blamed the tragedy on the rich landowners conspiring to persecute the poor. (In truth, most of those who were hanged in Salem were people of substance, and two or three were very large landowners.)

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that, especially in Latin America, "The Crucible" starts getting produced wherever a political coup appears imminent, or a totalitarian regime has just been overthrown. From Argentina to Chile to Greece, Czechoslovakia, China, and a dozen other places, the play seems to present the same primeval structure of human sacrifice to the furies of fanaticism and paranoia that goes on repeating itself forever as though imbedded in the brain of social man.

I am not sure what "The Crucible" is telling people now, but I know that its paranoid center is still pumping out the same darkly attractive warning that it did in the fifties. For some, the play seems to be about the dilemma of relying on the testimony of small children accusing adults of sexual abuse, something I'd not have dreamed of forty years ago. For others, it may simply be a fascination with the outbreak of paranoia that suffuses the play – the blind panic that, in our age, often seems to sit at the dim edges of consciousness. Certainly its political implications are the central issue for many people; the Salem interrogations turn out to be eerily exact models of those yet to come in Stalin's Russia, Pinochet's Chile, Mao's China, and other regimes. (Nien Cheng, the author of "Life and Death in Shanghai," has told me that she could hardly believe that a non-Chinese – someone who had not experienced the Cultural Revolution – had written...
the play.) But below its concerns with justice the play evokes a lethal brew of illicit sexuality, fear of the supernatural, and political manipulation, a combination not unfamiliar these days. The film, by reaching a broad American audience as no play ever can, may well unearth still other connections to those buried public terrors that Salem first announced on this continent.

One thing more — something wonderful in the old sense of that world. I recall the weeks I spent reading testimony by the tome, commentaries, broadsides, confessions, and accusations. And always the crucial damning event was the signing of one's name in "the Devil's book." This Faustian agreement to hand over one's soul to the dreaded Lord of Darkness was the ultimate insult to God. But what were these new inductees supposed to have done once they'd signed on? Nobody seems even to have thought to ask. But, of course, actions are as irrelevant during cultural and religious wars as they are in nightmares. The thing at issue is buried intentions — the secret allegiances of the alienated heart, always the main threat to the theocratic mind, as well as its immemorial quarry.