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McCarthy Hearings

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What have become known as the "McCarthy hearings" refer to 36 days of televised investigative hearings led by Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1954. After first calling hearings to investigate possible espionage at the Army Signal Corps Engineering Laboratories in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, the junior senator turned his communist-chasing committee's attention to an altogether different matter, the question of whether the Army had promoted a dentist who had refused to answer questions for the Loyalty and Security Board. The hearings reached their climax when McCarthy suggested that the Army's lawyer, Joseph Welch, had employed a man who at one time had belonged to a communist front group. Welch's rebuke to the senator—"Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?"—has been called one of the most devastating lines in American history. McCarthy was censured for his conduct by the Senate a few months later, and in 1957, he died. Though he has become something of a pariah in the annals of history, the enduring value of studying and understanding the hearings that bore his name is undeniable.

Prior to the hearings on television in 1954, McCarthy's search for communists in the Central Intelligence Agency, the motion picture industry, the State Department, and elsewhere made him a widely despised man. His reach was unmatched among those with institutional power, and his influence was only bolstered after 1952 with the arrival of Republican majorities in the House and Senate, and with the election of an Eisenhower administration reluctant to denounce him for fear of appearing soft on communism. Moreover, he had commanded the attention of television. McCarthy was eventually undermined significantly by the incisive and skillful criticism of a journalist, Edward R. Murrow. Murrow's devastating TV editorial about McCarthy, carried out on a series of episodes of his show, *See It Now,* cemented him as the premier journalist of the time, and it also raised concerns about the ideological powers of journalists and of television generally.

Television, via Murrow, had seemingly stepped in to stop what a partisan Republican majority around Senator McCarthy could not seem to. In the process, Edward R. Murrow became a symbol of television and its influence. As a result of the hearings, journalists and intellectuals alike talked at length about television's power as a communication medium, just as they had at the dawn of radio. Indeed, the McCarthy hearings are underappreciated for their coincidence with the early stages of the development of TV as a technological medium for politics. In this context—after years of blacklisting in Hollywood, and the

demonizing of some of its most famous writers—TV was a cultural obsession. As pessimists dismissed it as culturally disruptive, overly commercialized, and a promoter of laziness and sloth, optimists argued that TV would deliver America from war into a technologically enhanced democratic utopia. The hearings were a test of TV's democratic promise, but they were a commercial failure and the networks dropped all-day coverage after just 2 weeks. While it is fair to say that they suffered by comparison to entertainment programming, this was only a beginning. The hearings were a test of television for the future, and as such, had important consequences for how we think about the power of television, about the ideology and the media, and about press responsibility today.

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See also Murrow, Edward R.; *Television in Politics*

Further Readings

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