Context Sheet #2:
Notes on McCarthyism

The term McCarthyism has its origins in the period in the USA known as the Second Red Scare, lasting roughly 1950-1956 and characterised by heightened political repression against communists. Originally coined to criticise the pursuits of Senator Joseph McCarthy, “McCarthyism” soon took on a broader meaning.

During the McCarthy era, thousands of Americans were accused of being communists or communist sympathisers and became the subject of aggressive investigations and questioning before government or private-industry panels, committees and agencies. The primary targets of such suspicions were government employees, those in the entertainment industry, educators and union activists.

The most famous examples of McCarthyism include the speeches, investigations, and hearings of Senator McCarthy himself; the Hollywood blacklist, associated with hearings conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC); and the anti-communist activities of the FBI under Director J. Edgar Hoover.

Many factors contributed to McCarthyism including Communism’s emergence as a recognised political force. Thanks in part to its success in organising unions and early opposition to fascism; the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) increased membership in the 1930s, reaching a peak of about 75,000 members in 1940–41.

Joseph McCarthy’s involvement began with a speech he made on February 9, 1950, to the Republican Women’s Club of Wheeling, West Virginia. He produced a piece of paper which he claimed contained a list of 205 known Communists working for the State Department. This speech resulted in a flood of press attention and established the path that made him one of the most recognised politicians in the United States.

In 1947 President Harry Truman initiated a program of loyalty reviews for federal employees. It called for dismissal if there were “reasonable grounds ... for belief that the person involved is disloyal to the Government of the United States.” As a result, informing on others was actively encouraged.

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was one of the nation’s most fervent anti-communists, and one of the most powerful. Hoover designed President Truman’s loyalty-security program, and its investigations of employees were carried out by FBI agents. Due to Hoover’s insistence upon keeping the identity of his informers secret, most subjects of reviews were not allowed to know the identities of those who accused them. In many cases they were not even told what they were accused of.
Formed in 1938, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) - was the most prominent and active government committee involved in anti-Communist investigations. HUAC achieved its greatest fame and notoriety with its investigation into the Hollywood film industry. In October 1947, the Committee began to subpoena screenwriters, directors, and other movie industry professionals to testify about their known or suspected membership in the Communist Party, association with its members, or support of its beliefs.

It was at these testimonies that the question was asked: “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party of the United States?” Among the first film industry witnesses subpoenaed by the Committee were ten who decided not to cooperate. These men, who became known as the “Hollywood Ten”, cited the First Amendment’s guarantee of free speech and free assembly, which they believed legally protected them from being required to answer the Committee’s questions. This tactic failed, and the Ten were sentenced to prison for contempt of Congress.

In the future, witnesses (in the entertainment industries and otherwise) who were determined not to cooperate with the Committee would claim their Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination. While this usually protected them from contempt of Congress citation, it was considered grounds for dismissal by many government and private industry employers.

The legal requirements for Fifth Amendment protection were such that a person could not testify about his own association with the Communist Party and then refuse to name names of colleagues with Communist affiliations. Thus many faced a choice between “crawl[ing] through the mud to be an informer,” as actor Larry Parks put it, or becoming known as a “Fifth Amendment Communist”.

On November 25, 1947 the President of the Motion Picture Association of America, issued a press release on behalf of the heads of the major studios. This statement announced the firing of the Hollywood Ten and stated: “We will not knowingly employ a Communist or a member of any party or group which advocates the overthrow of the government of the United States[...]” This marked the beginning of the Hollywood blacklist. In spite of the fact that hundreds would be denied employment, the studios, producers and other employers did not publicly admit that a blacklist existed.

It is difficult to estimate the number of victims of McCarthyism. The number imprisoned is in the hundreds, and some ten or twelve thousand lost
their jobs. In many cases simply being subpoenaed by HUAC or one of the other committees was sufficient cause to be fired. Many of those who were imprisoned, lost their jobs or questioned by committees did in fact have a past or present connection of some kind with the Communist Party. But for the vast majority, both the potential for them to do harm to the nation and the nature of their communist affiliation were tenuous.

Suspected homosexuality was also a common cause for being targeted by McCarthyism. The hunt for “sexual perverts”, who were presumed to be subversive by nature, resulted in thousands being harassed and denied employment. Many have termed this aspect of McCarthyism “The Lavender Scare”

Homosexuality became framed as a dangerous, contagious social disease that posed a potential threat to state security. As the family was believed to be the cornerstone of American strength and integrity, the stigmatisation of homosexuals meant that they were both unable to function within a family unit.

In the film industry, more than 300 actors, authors and directors were denied work in the U.S. through the unofficial Hollywood blacklist. Blacklists were at work throughout the entertainment industry, in universities and schools at all levels, in the legal profession, and in many other fields. Some of the more notable people who were blacklisted or suffered some other persecution during McCarthyism are listed here:

- Bertolt Brecht, poet, playwright, screenwriter
- Charlie Chaplin, actor and director
- Albert Einstein, Nobel Prize-winning physicist, philosopher, mathematician, activist]
- Allen Ginsberg, Beat poet
- Danny Kaye, comedian, singer
- Gypsy Rose Lee, actress and stripper
- Burgess Meredith, actor
- Arthur Miller, playwright and essayist
- J. Robert Oppenheimer, physicist, scientific director of the Manhattan Project
- Dorothy Parker, writer, humorist
- Paul Robeson, actor, athlete, singer, writer, political activist
- Sam Wanamaker, actor, director, responsible for recreating Shakespeare’s Globe in London
- Orson Welles, actor, author, film director