Adam Gincel

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Reading Response

I first learned about McCarthyism in my junior year of high school, around four years ago now, in AP U.S. History. I never really understood the full gravity of its consequences in that class. To have paranoid government employees lashing out at anyone they deemed even slightly threatening, with or without proof, and destroy their lives is a terrifying power. Reading through Hoover’s letter it sounds so convincing – these people legitimately sound like a threat. To have the first sentence after the letter’s place in the book be “this was dismissed because it was fantasy.” Was a jarring moment for me – it made me understand how easy it was to manipulate words to convey the feelings you want to convey, and how simple it was to throw your enemies under the bus with or without proof.

Paranoia may have been justified in this era, to some extent. The Verona decryptions proved that there was espionage going on in the United States. The Soviets wanted information from the US, and the US wasn’t keen on letting them have it. Unfortunately, in their vicious attacks on anyone who could be deemed a threat, a lot of innocent people lost a lot. It seems very likely that this was all but intentional – McCarthyism was just as much a suppression tactic as it was a legitimate method to weed out Communists. In the day, communists could be a scapegoat for any number of problems – it isn’t too far off from the xenophobia we still see today. It may have been different because of the Cold War, but the principles are similar. History likes to repeat itself, and it’s a shame we let innocent people continually get caught in the crossfire of paranoia and fear.