First Place, Wisconsin Civics Games Contest Editorial Contest (High School)
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Joseph McCarthy Civics Column by Sandy Flores Ruiz

A recent column in The Capital Times reported that according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, only about 22% of American students are proficient in civics. One good way for students in our state to study civics is through an infamous episode from the 1950s when a journalist stood up to a powerful U.S. Senator from Wisconsin.

Joseph McCarthy, Edward R. Murrow, and the Red Scare is a first-amendment case study from history. All Wisconsin students should learn the lessons behind this case.

Joe McCarthy was one of the most controversial politicians in American history. He served as a Wisconsin Senator from when he was first elected in 1947, until his death in 1957. He is known for declaring that communist spies and sympathizers had penetrated the U.S. federal government. During the early 1950s, few people dared to speak out against McCarthy as his accusations and tactics were so intimidating. For those who did criticize McCarthy, the consequences were often dire. He would dramatically denounce them and accuse the person of being a communist, often without proof. Jobs were lost and reputations were ruined.

One of the first people to openly challenge McCarthy was renowned journalist, Edward R. Murrow. It took great courage, but Murrow’s exposés about McCarthyism played an important role in the senator’s downfall. On March 9, 1954, millions of Americans watched as Murrow used his national news program to attack McCarthy and his methods. This dramatic chapter in American history was captured in a 2005 film directed by George Clooney: *Good Night, and Good Luck*.

McCarthyism serves as a lesson and a crucial reminder for students today. One reason to study civics is to learn the value of freedom of the press and freedom of speech as laid out in the First Amendment. During the 1950s, Americans hesitated to exercise their rights or question the actions of so-called anti-communists like McCarthy. He gained the support of many by tapping into American concerns about communist infiltration. Lessons from the McCarthy era highlight that the silence of many can lead to abuses of power. The First Amendment protects us all by giving us the right to speak up.

As the film *Good Night, and Good Luck* says, the early 1950s was when “a nation was terrorized by its own government.” But McCarthy today is remembered for his role in fomenting divisions in the United States at a time when the Cold War was just ramping up. McCarthy’s investigations exposed communists and caused fear that divided a country. But eventually, when public opinion finally turned against him, Joseph McCarthy and his use of unproven allegations were rejected.

It was the First Amendment that made it possible for Murrow to challenge McCarthy. In the end, it was freedom of speech and freedom of the press, enshrined in our Constitution, that helped protect Americans from McCarthy’s demagoguery.