The Great Fear

BY J. RONALD OAKLEY

Background

Americans first started becoming anxious about communism in the middle of the last century, when the ideas of social philosophers like Karl Marx began to make their way across the Atlantic. By the 1920s, the Bolshevik revolution in Russia had sent shock waves through the United States. Many Americans believed that the labor unrest which was occurring in the United States at that time could lead to a violent Communist seizure of the government. Many individuals who were suspected of having Communist sympathies were harassed, jailed, and in some cases, deported.

In the 1950s the United States and the Soviet Union were deeply involved in the “Cold War” amid an atmosphere of extreme distrust and suspicion. Many Americans feared that the country had been infiltrated by Communist spies who were plotting the overthrow of the government. Senator Joseph McCarthy exploited the fears of those who believed that the Communist threat was a serious one and that the country had to take protective measures. Throughout the decade, individuals belonging to organizations that espoused progressive social agendas or were sympathetic toward civil rights were persecuted and blacklisted. The McCarthy hearings fueled public paranoia, and extraordinary measures were taken to eradicate all domestic stirrings of the “Red Menace.”

They Came from Outer Space

Scholars have often argued that after the McCarthy purges the quality of American cinema declined dramatically. Screenwriters and producers certainly seemed more likely to avoid themes which could be interpreted as controversial or politically sensitive. There was also a growing market in movies that played on the public’s fear of a Communist takeover of the United States. Movies depicting invasions from outer space were particularly popular. One of the best of these was Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956). This classic science fiction film’s success can be partially attributed to its thinly veiled comparison of Communists with sinister alien beings.

McCarthy—The Reckoning

When Joe McCarthy accused the U.S. Army of “coddling Communists,” many people felt he had gone too far. The celebrated Army-McCarthy Senate hearings in 1954 were broadcast on national television. McCarthy’s demagoguery was exposed to the nation and cost him the support of millions of Americans. He was condemned by the Senate for “contemptuous” conduct and lost nearly all of his influence. He died in 1957, a broken man.

Salem