# The Fear of Subversion:

# Effects of Anti-Communist Hysteria on Women in the Government During the Second Red Scare

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# I. INTRODUCTION

In 1951, two journalists published *Washington Confidential*, a dramatized narrative of the lives of government employees. The journalists described Washington as a "femmocracy" of unhappy, self-sustaining women who slept their way to high level positions to prove that "the emancipation of women is boloney."[1] The book topped the *New York Times* bestseller list, reflecting the popularity of such misogynistic rhetoric.[2] *Washington Confidential's* narrative was not unique– in fact, misogynistic narratives dominated popular culture during the Second Red Scare, a period defined by intense fear-mongering about communist infiltration and purges of suspected communists from various aspects of society.[3]

The Second Red Scare stemmed from rising tensions between the capitalist U.S. and the communist Soviet Union. Although the two nations were allies in the fight against the Axis Powers during World War II (WWII), the U.S. and the Soviet Union were secretly suspicious of each other. After the war, relations soured explicitly. In 1946, Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, mentioned that an "iron curtain" was falling over Eastern Europe, framing the Western countries as separate from communist Eastern Europe. In 1947, Truman delivered a speech to Congress that came to be known as the Truman Doctrine. In this speech, Truman committed the U.S. to containment– a policy that sought to halt the Soviet Union's expansionism. This doctrine solidified the hostility between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.[4] On February 9, 1950, Joseph McCarthy, a Senator from Wisconsin, exacerbated these tensions by

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[1] Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, *Washington Confidential* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1951), accessed June 27, 2025, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/63469/63469-h/63469-h.htm.
[2]Landon R. Y Storrs, "Attacking the Washington 'Femmocracy': Antifeminism in the Cold War Campaign against 'Communists in Government,'" Feminist Studies 33, no. 1 (2007): 118, JSTOR.
[3] Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 243.
[4] Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 157.

claiming that there were 205 communists in the State Department.[5] Although McCarthy did not provide evidence for his claims, many Americans were convinced by his rhetoric. As the publisher of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* later explained, many Americans believed that "when there was so much smoke, there must have been some fire."[6] McCarthy's rhetoric spread the notion that the government was permeated with communists, intensifying the preexisting fear of communist infiltration.

In 1953, McCarthy was named chairman of the Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations.[7] In his role as chairman, McCarthy presided over loyalty investigations– hearings conducted to root out communist subversion in the government. Although governmental employees of all genders were affected by this purge, this narrative will examine the effects of the purge on women in the government. Specifically, the analysis will prove that women were disproportionately targeted in loyalty investigations due to misogynistic narratives, highlighting how political fear-mongering was used as a justification for maintaining social hierarchies.

## II. WOMEN IN THE GOVERNMENT

As emphasized by *Washington Confidential*, a widespread narrative was that women in the government did not deserve their careers. This narrative existed even before the Second Red Scare began. In 1942, Mary Dublin Keyserling, an employee of the Department of Commerce, was referred to as a "parasite" on the government's payroll by Representative John Taber. Taber cited her marriage to Leon Keyserling, an economic advisor to Truman, as an indication that she did not need her job. Similarly, while accusing Eveline Burns, a member of the National Resources Planning Board, of having Communist policies in 1943, Senator Robert Taft

[5] New York Times, "McCarthy Insists Truman Oust Reds," *New York Times*, February 12, 1950, accessed May 20, 2025, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1950/02/12/87017517.html?pageNumber=5.
[6] Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 243.
[7] Storrs, "Attacking the Washington," 135.

emphasized the high government salaries of Burns and her husband to imply that Burns did not deserve her position.[8]

Such misogynistic assertions against women in the workforce intensified after the end of WWII. As men returned home, the demand for working women reduced, and society encouraged women to return to traditional gender roles. A 1946 article in the *Journal of Home Economics* reflected this sentiment, stating that homemaking had to be "sold or re-sold to a large group of women" to persuade them to return to the home sphere.[9] In addition to the reduced demand for working women, society also emphasized a return to the home sphere as a defense to communist influence. To counter communist influence, citizens had to possess American ideals like civic duty, democracy, and individualism.[10] These American ideals had to be imbibed in the next generation so that the next generation could avoid falling victim to the communist agenda.[11] A stable family, characterized, at the time, as a family where the mother worked inside the home and the father worked outside the home, would allow American children to internalize these ideas because both parents in this stable family would be devoted to spreading American values.[12] As a result, women were encouraged to return to being homemakers to ensure their children did not grow up susceptible to communist influence. This sentiment was shared by physician Leo Kanner of Johns Hopkins Hospital, who stated, in 1949, that "the fact that young women are no longer reared for the main purpose of becoming wives and mothers" was causing

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[8] Landon R.Y Storrs, *The Second Red Scare and the Unmaking of the New Deal Left*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-century America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), eBook Academic Collection (EBSCOhost).
[9] J.H.S Bossard, "Family Problems of the Immediate Future," The Journal of Home Economics 37, no. 7 (1945): 297, accessed February 14, 2025, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b2866985&seq=497&q1=%22family+problems%22.
[10] "Women and Family in the Suburban Age," in *Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*, ed. Mary Kupiec Cayton and Peter W. Williams (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001), Gale in Context: U.S. History.
[11] "Women and Family."
[12] "Women and Family."

problems between mothers and children.[13] For these problems to be resolved, women had to return to being wives and mothers, and teach their children American values.

In the wake of this pressure to restore traditional gender roles, women in the government were attacked during loyalty investigations through this patriarchal lens– since women in the government were viewed as women who should return to the home sphere, their loyalty investigations were plagued with the sentiment that they were undeserving of their jobs and salaries. When women were called before the Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, they were often attacked for their salaries. When Dorothy Kenyon, a lawyer, judge, and US Delegate to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, appeared before the subcommittee, McCarthy opened his attacks by incredulously pointing out her annual salary of $12,000.[14] Kenyon's salary was irrelevant to the investigation; however, McCarthy used her high salary to besmirch her character. By implying that Kenyon's salary was outrageous for a woman, McCarthy painted her as undeserving in the eyes of the subcommittee in an attempt to increase the likelihood of Kenyon being convicted of communism.

The sexist undertones that influenced Kenyon's hearing were also reflected in Esther Brunauer's investigation. In 1952, Brunauer, who worked in international affairs for the State Department, was dismissed as a security risk. Although previously absolved of all communist accusations by the State Department in 1950, her loyalty was called into question again when her husband resigned from the Navy. Brunauer's husband, who had formerly belonged to the communist Young Workers' League, was called to testify in her hearing. Although the hearing was meant to be focused on Brunauer's loyalty, the board used the hearing as an opportunity to investigate Brunauer's husband. When her husband was deemed disloyal, Brunauer was also

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[13] "Women and Family."
[14] Storrs, "Attacking the Washington," 135.

regarded as a security risk. The rationale for this decision was the societal belief women could not have different opinions to their husbands– if the husband inherently controlled the household, then how could women have beliefs independent of their husband's? This sexism was reflected when Brunauer was dismissed while economist Mordecai Ezekiel was not. As an employee of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, Ezekiel faced loyalty boards in 1954 and 1955 due to his wife's position as the head of the Washington League of Women Shoppers (LWS), an organization designated as communist by the HUAC, and his sister-in-law's marriage to a prominent communist. Ezekiel was able to convince the board that his wife's views did not influence his own, something that Brunauer was unable to do as a woman.[15] Although a spouse's communist associations affected the careers of all government officials, regardless of gender, women were more likely to be dismissed because of the societal belief that women shared their husbands' views.

Feminism and involvement in women's organizations were also used as strategies to prove communism. Kenyon and Dublin Keyserling were former members of the LWS, an organization composed of middle and upper class women that was labelled communist by the HUAC in 1944. This organization advocated against discrimination based on race and sex, and attracted prominent liberal women, most of whom were implicated in McCarthy's anticommunist purge.[16] Since one of the primary platforms of the Communist Party of the U.S. (CPUSA) was gender equality, feminism was strongly correlated with communism.[17] As a result, organizations that fought for women's rights were targeted, and so were women who belonged to these organizations. In her loyalty investigation, Dublin Keyserling was explicitly attacked for keeping

[15] Storrs, *The Second.*
[16] Storrs, "Red Scare," 519
[17] Beth Slutsky, *Gendering Radicalism: Women and Communism in Twentieth-Century California* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 90, ProQuest Ebook Central.

her maiden name for a short time after marriage, a practice that was usually associated with feminism.[18] McCarthy's evocation of this feminist practice in a loyalty investigation highlighted how feminist associations were used as a mechanism to prove communism.

In addition to affecting the investigations itself, gendered narratives also caused a larger number of accusations to be brought against women in the government. In Dublin Kerserling's case, many informants were hostile male coworkers who did not believe that Dublin Keyserling, as a woman, deserved her position.[19] Two of the formal allegations against Dublin Keyserling were filed by coworkers, and interviews conducted by the FBI highlighted that many of her subordinates disliked having a female boss. Dublin Keyserling's lawyer, Abe Fortas, supported the notion that Dublin Keyserling's co-workers were hostile. Fortas told the loyalty board that "it is exceedingly difficult for a young woman to run an organization [...] without incurring a certain amount of hostility."[20] The idea that women were disproportionately implicated in loyalty investigations is supported by evidence– while women only composed 3 percent of high-level federal employees, they composed 18 percent of high-level investigations, illustrating how women were overrepresented in loyalty investigations. Further, the agencies most targeted by the subcommittee, like the Commerce and State Department, were ones that had the most women in high-level positions.[21] These agencies were likely viewed as more liberal than others due to the prevalence of women in leadership roles– since feminism was associated with communism, an agency with more high-level female employees would also be associated with communism, and therefore disproportionately targeted.

[18] Storrs, "Red Scare," 517.
[19] Storrs, "Red Scare," 518.
[20] Storrs, "Attacking the Washington," 126.
[21] Storrs, "Attacking the Washington," 124.

Some women attempted to use these sexist social narratives to their advantage during investigations. When Dublin Keyserling was accused of communism, her lawyer, Abe Fortas, revoked the claim that she had a "dominant personality" because he recognized that female assertiveness could be associated with communism. While Keyserling's attackers portrayed her as "domineering" and "ambitious," her defenders described her personality as "refined" and "charming," evoking traditional feminine values. When asked about Keyserling's presence at a radical conference in Mexico, her friend Nathanial Weyl asserted that she was more interested in shopping than the conference itself, implying that Keyserling was not very involved in the radical movement. This example illustrates how sexist social narratives were used as a defense mechanism against threats of communist subversion.[22] However, by using these social narratives as defense mechanisms, defenders of the accused women reinforced the societal expectation that women should be "charming" and uninvolved in politics.

While sexist narratives could be used as a defense mechanism, these defenses often backfired. Although traditional feminine traits like "charm" were used to prove anti-communism, they could also be used to prove communism. The societal narrative that women were weak and "malleable," for example, could make women more susceptible to communist influence.[23] Hyperfemininity was also reminiscent of communism, as expressed by the portrayal of Soviet spies as beautiful and seductive. These narratives were illustrated not only in womens' loyalty investigations, but also in mens'. During loyalty investigations, men were often attacked for not adequately exhibiting traditional masculine behaviors.[24] For example, when Leon Keyserling said he was uncertain whether his wife had sponsored a particular dinner event in 1941, the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee (SISS) exhibited surprise at his lack of control over his

[22] Storrs, "Attacking the Washington," 141.
[23] Storrs, "Attacking the Washington," 141.
[24] Storrs, "Attacking the Washington," 142.

wife. Similarly, the media assailed Leon Keyserling for his lack of war service and his criticism of football.[25] By criticising Leon Keyserling for not conforming to traditional masculinity, the SISS and the media asserted that a lack of masculinity increased the likelihood of a person being communist.

## III. CONCLUSION

The overrepresentation of women in loyalty investigations during the Second Red Scare illustrates the overlooked impacts of misogynistic social narratives on the careers of women in the government during the Second Red Scare. Further, the disproportionate targeting of women due to their gender serves an example of the weaponization of a crisis to preserve existing social hierarchies– by attempting to remove women from their roles by proving them to be disloyal, McCarthy used fear-mongering to preserve the prevalence of men in powerful roles. The gendered narratives that gained prominence due to the anti-communist hysteria are reflective of broader Cold War dynamics. Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. sought to morally separate itself from the Soviet Union. The U.S. prided itself on being a democracy, called out human rights violations in the USSR, and overall asserted its moral superiority. Traditional gender roles were another way for the U.S. to separate itself from the Soviet Union– while the USSR was filled with female laborers, the U.S. had stable, traditional families where women were homemakers, which Americans viewed as superior. Ultimately, social narratives during the Second Red Scare reflected how the U.S's desire to separate itself from the USSR came at the expense of female government workers' careers.

[25] Storrs, "Attacking the Washington," 141.

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