Senator Joseph McCarthy
Online Exhibit & Primary Sources

Introduction: After several years in the Senate, Joseph McCarthy made headlines when he announced in a 1950 speech in Wheeling, West Virginia that he knew that 205 communists were currently working in the State Department. Since American men and women were getting ready to die in combat against a communist enemy in Korea, this speech garnered great publicity. Capitalizing on people's fears, McCarthy launched a public campaign aimed at eliminating the supposed communist infiltration of the U.S. government that provided a strong platform for his re-election. Easily re-elected in 1952 and chosen chair of the Senate Permanent Investigations Subcommittee, McCarthy tried to expose communists and their sympathizers throughout American political and cultural life.

His Subcommittee interrogated more than 500 people privately and publicly; being called to testify before it ruined political, literary, and business careers. Citing national security, McCarthy often refused to reveal sources of information. Fearful of being named communist sympathizers themselves, many leaders of labor unions and professional organizations joined in the "Red Scare." Other intellectuals and activists refused to answer his questions or appear before his committee despite the threat to their personal well-being. Several famous Hollywood producers and scriptwriters were among the best-known citizens black-listed by their employers for refusing to co-operate with his committee. McCarthy's 1953 accusation that the military was harboring communists ultimately led to his downfall. TV commentator Edward R. Murrow successfully exposed his tactics and publicly denounced his actions as a threat to America's core democratic values. In December 1954, the Senate rebuked him for "conduct unbecoming a senator."

Part A: Joseph McCarthy: A Modern Tragedy

This online exhibit, a cooperative product of the Outagamie County Historical Society and the UW Oshkosh Archives and Area Research Center, contains dozens of photographs, posters, quotations from primary sources, and commentary by historians. It is the best online introduction to the controversial Wisconsin senator's life and career.

Link: http://www.myhistorymuseum.org/mccarthy/

HOMEWORK- Using the link from Part A answer the following questions:
(Hint: Be sure to select 'next' at the bottom of the screen to proceed through the pages)

1. McCarthy as student (1 pg): Looking at his background and previous jobs, what can you infer about McCarthy's personal characteristics?

2. McCarthy as judge (1 pg): Briefly describe McCarthy's career as a judge. Was there anything that set him apart from others? If so, what was it?

3. McCarthy as Marine (2 pgs): In your opinion, was McCarthy's military career an asset he could have politically run on? Why or why not? Use examples to support your opinion.

4. McCarthy as Senator: (10 pgs): Briefly describe McCarthy's senatorial career. In your opinion, was he a good politician? Why or why not? Use examples to support your opinion.

5. Legacy (5 pgs): What was McCarthy's lasting legacy on Wisconsin and American politics? Why do you think this? Use examples to support your opinion.

Part B: McCarthy seeks support against "communist mouthpieces"

Wanted! Your support for Sen. McCarthy's battle against these communist mouthpieces

Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1946, Joseph McCarthy created a sensation in 1950 when he announced that communist members of the State Department were influencing American foreign policy. Over the next four years, McCarthy became an anti-Communist crusader as chairman of the Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. By 1954 though, other Senators and government officials had grown dissatisfied with his
reckless accusations, eventually censuring him for behavior unbecoming of a Senator. This broadside, produced before McCarthy's censure, attempts a last-ditch effort to gain support for his position, citing articles and quotes from communist and socialist publications that oppose him.

Link: http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/tp/id/58128

Part C: An anti-McCarthy political flyer from the 1952 campaign
What has McCarthy done for Wisconsin?

Up for re-election in 1952, Senator Joseph McCarthy faced challenger Leonard Schmitt in the Republican primary. Schmitt's campaign produced this brochure that used quotes from prominent newspapers and politicians to try to show how little McCarthy had done for the state.

Link: http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/tp/id/62216

Part D: The Progressive Magazine takes on Senator McCarthy in 1954
McCarthy: a documented record

In 1954, The Progressive Magazine published an updated version of The McCarthy Record for its 45th Anniversary edition. The original report was produced in 1952 from the Senator's public documents by the Wisconsin Citizens' Committee on McCarthy's Record, a non-partisan group drawn together by their "deep concern for the consequences of McCarthy's conduct," for use during Sen. Joseph McCarthy's re-election campaign. Although the group disbanded after the election, the records were given to the editor of The Progressive who condensed and expanded upon the original for the 1954 edition of the magazine. In a series of articles, The Progressive sought to show the danger that Wisconsin's junior Senator posed to the nation. This resource is made available through the generosity of The Progressive magazine.

Link: http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/ref/collection/tp/id/63472

HOMEWORK- Using Parts B-D, answer the following questions:

1. What action does the pamphlet "Wanted!..." call for? What is its main point?

2. In your own words, summarize what you see as the main points of the newspapers and individuals quoted in the campaign material.

4. In the pamphlet "What Has McCarthy Done for Wisconsin?", the final page ("Tail Gunner Joe") asserts that McCarthy "was relieved from active duty at his [own] request" 6 months before end of Pacific war, prior to the costly battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. What does this statement attempt to imply about McCarthy?

5. The same pamphlet includes the phrase, "Why Wisconsin's Junior Senator has NO influence in Washington" printed below references to major newspapers and magazines. Does that prove the claim to your satisfaction? What does the author hope you will infer?

6. Compare one of the sections in "McCarthy: a documented record" with the "Wanted! Your support..." pamphlet. Assess the merits of each source.

7. The "Wanted! Your support..." pamphlet uses the testimony of experts in an unusual way. Why do you think the person who created the material chose this tactic?