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### The United States of Hysteria: “Witch-Hunts” and Their Impact On American Society

Through its nearly two-hundred fifty year history as an independent nation and even prior as a British colony, America has a record of reacting preemptively in response to paranoia generated by periods of conflict or distress. The Salem Witch Trials, the internment of Japanese-Americans citizens during WWII, and the arrests and interrogations of suspected Communists during the McCarthyism period are examples of Americans turning on one another in fits of mass hysteria and generating false identities of the oppressed. Those specific events and others around the same period have led to the development of harmful misconceptions and stereotypes that are still being dismantled by the victims and their kin many years after the fact. Historical experts have dubbed them “witch-hunts”, in order to convey the severity of the actions that had taken place. History shows us that “witch-hunts” were used as a form of systemic oppression by the U.S. government and other local authorities to gain control over stressful periods of paranoia in American history. Author Israel Morrow, appropriately adds in his memoir that “Fear and superstition were not the tools of witches but rather the tools of those who persecuted them.” (*Gods of the Flesh: A Skeptic’s Journey Through Sex, Politics and Religion*). Through an analysis of periods of mass paranoia and persecution of marginalized groups in the history of the United States, it is possible to prevent future developments of “witch-hunts” and hysteria in American society.

The town of Salem, Massachusetts was founded in 1626 by Roger Conant and a group of fishermen that had sailed from the Cape Ann colony under the charter of the Dorchester

Company. In its formative years, many of the leadership roles of Salem and the colony of Massachusetts were held by prominent members of the First Church in the New England colonies, like the settlement's founder Roger Conant and John Endicott, the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Historians have recorded that since its inception, Salem was a community built upon the beliefs and teachings of the Puritans, a group of religious reformers that had separated from the Church of England and made the trans-Atlantic journey from the United Kingdom to escape religious intolerance and persecution. Their community surrounded themselves in the belief that "... humans are innately sinful, tainted by the sins of Adam and Eve..." as well as the understanding that "... good can be accomplished only through hard work and self discipline" (Thornton Township High Schools District). In an article written by PBS, the public broadcasting company adds that "...it was not only individual salvation that mattered; the spiritual health and welfare of the community as a whole was paramount as well, for it was the community that honored and kept covenant" ("People & Ideas: The Puritans", Gods in America). Though it should be regarded that the Puritans believed that the souls of men and women were equal in the eyes of Heaven, Puritan women were nevertheless subjected to being viewed as secondary and subordinate to men in the home and in society ("People & Ideas: The Puritans", Gods in America). In an article written for the blog, *History of American Women*, the author writes that according to the Puritans, "Women were considered to be the "weaker vessels," not as strong physically or mentally as men, and less emotionally stable." ("Plymouth Colony Women's Rights"). Although there was a middling number of women that chose to step outside of their traditional roles and challenge male authority. Among those women was an outspoken, Puritan preacher named Anne Hutchinson who had been banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for leading meetings outside of the Church and criticizing several Church leaders. She had been

declared a “woman not fit for our society” (“The Banishment of Anne Hutchinson, Khomina). It very well may have been the case during the Salem Witch Trials, for what would be considered one of the most infamous moments in early Colonial American history.

In the early months of 1692, a group of young girls from prominent Salem families, such as the Williams and Parris’, began to exhibit unexplainable symptoms such as violent convulsions and delusions. William Griggs, the town’s physician who had attended to the young girls, would come to the grim conclusion that witchcraft and dark forces were the likely culprits behind the children’s afflictions. Under intense scrutiny and pressure by the leaders of the church and town to reveal those who had bewitched them, the girls would go on to point the finger to Sarah Goode, Sarah Osborne, and Tituba, an enslaved woman from Barbados. Contemporary historians have expressed that it is likely that the three women were victims of opportunity and incriminated because they were seen as outsiders in the town. On top of the Goode family’s financial destitution and reliance upon the townsfolk for relief, Sarah Goode had been described as being “socially unpleasant” (“Sarah Goode”, Jobe) and a pariah around Salem. Prior to the accusations, the next victim Sarah Osborne had been entangled in a legal battle over her young sons’ land inheritance with her brother-in-law, Captain John Putnam, who was related to one of the accusers Anne Putnam. Osborne’s initiative to take ownership of her sons’ inheritance likely generated feelings of disdain amongst some of the prominent Salem families and influenced the opinions of her accusers (“Sarah Osborne”, Carroll). The third accused, Tituba, was an enslaved woman brought from Barbados to serve the Reverend Samuel Parris and his family and had exposed the girls to stories of “African or Caribbean voodoo and magic spells” (“Tituba”, Barillari,). Tituba had also taught the girls about the practice of fortune telling, which was forbidden amongst the Puritans, and was recorded as being a trigger for the fits that girls had

experienced. The overall accumulation of those individual circumstances that had separated the three women from the crowd were what had made them such easy choices for girls. Historian George Francis Dow adds that “We all know how easily children absorb the feelings of their elders and usually to an exaggerated extent. To them, the people hated by their fathers are capable of the most terrible crimes...” (“History of Topsfield, Massachusetts”, Dow). In the months following the initial allegations, neighbor turned on neighbor, and the witch-hunt trials of Salem would result in more than two hundred people being implicated and nineteen executed for the crime of witchcraft. The paranoia began to lose its steam when the accusations started to extend outside the boundaries of Salem. Perhaps by coincidence, around the time the wife of the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Sir William Phips, was accused, did the high powers of the colony’s government intercede. By the late spring of 1693, Phips had established a new court which disregarded evidence of spectral phenomenon and pardoned all of the individuals that had been jailed or convicted of witchcraft. In the aftermath, many who had been charged and the families of the victims who were executed sought out financial compensation from the courts for their grief and loss of property and social standing that had been seized as the results of the accusations. It came to be that some of “... the accusers and judges showed hardly any remorse for executing twenty people and causing others to languish in jails. Instead they placed the blame on the "trickery of Satan," thus freeing themselves from any sense of guilt.” (“Aftermath Of The Salem Trials”, Encyclopedia.com). Salem community leaders who had feared the wrath of God had publicly sought forgiveness through practices like fasting and prayer as well as releasing a petition signed by some of the trial jurors that had admitted “that they had convicted and condemned people to death on the basis of insufficient evidence” (“A Delusion of Satan: the Full Story of the Salem Witch Trials”, Hill). Publications like “More Wonders of the Invisible World”

by Robert Calef had “attacked the accusers and judges of viciously turning on their neighbors and friends” (Encyclopedia.com). The Enlightenment period which had graced the continent at the turn of the 19th century and brought the concept of rational fact-based thought, was likely the reason behind the fewer to no incidents involving witchcraft in the years to come. Ultimately, there were never any real witches in Salem, Massachusetts nor anywhere across the land that would one day be known as the United States of America. What had happened was the culmination of several personal vendettas between neighbors had ultimately turned deadly and was disguised as the Puritans mission to rid Salem of the Devil and dark forces. The Salem Witch Trials was among the first recorded accounts of American leaders taking advantage of fear-based hysteria to gain situational awareness and control over marginalized groups.

When a person regards the history of the United States of America, one can't help but acknowledge the darker chapters involving discrimination and prejudice towards immigrants and their subsequent descendants. The subject of immigration in the United States has drawn deep lines in the sand between Americans for years, going as far back as the Founding Fathers. George Washington, who had been proponent for laws such as the Naturalization Act of 1790, wrote in a letter to Dutch patriot Francis Adrian Van Der Kemp, “I had always hoped that this land might become a safe & agreeable Asylum to the virtuous & persecuted part of mankind, to whatever nation they might belong,” (“From George Washington to Francis Adrian Van der Kemp, 28 May 1788”, National Archives). Despite the hopes for a prosperous future for immigrants and their kin in America from those like Washington, the country would turn a cold shoulder upon those groups and they would endure several decades of discrimination and bigotry. The nineteenth century in America was a particularly difficult time for certain marginalized groups like the Irish and the Chinese. The Great Hunger and political clashes with

Great Britain in the 1840s led to several million Irish-Catholics to make the grueling transatlantic journey to the United States of America. They were immediately met with aggression by Americans who had feared the Irish would steal jobs and resources, as well as a brewing anti-catholic sentiment that had predated the British colonies (Klein, 2017). Around the same period, several 100,000 Chinese immigrants arrived in the American west to work in California mines during the Gold Rush and the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. Similar to Irish immigrants on the East Coast, Chinese immigrants would face prejudice and discriminatory practices especially after Congress had passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. An article written for the U.S. Department of State mentions that the Act had "... suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers (skilled or unskilled) for a period of 10 years ... and also required every Chinese person traveling in or out of the country to carry a certificate identifying his or her status..." ("Chinese Immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts, Office of The Historian for the U.S. Department of State). This legislation was some of the first of its kind that placed restrictions on immigration in the United States and wouldn't be revisited again until World War II in 1943.

This established anti-immigration sentiment and decades of hostility towards citizens of Asian ancestry likely contributed to the mass-paranoia and "witch-hunts" of Japanese Americans in America during WWII. In early March of 1942, nearly three months after Japan's attack upon the American naval station, Pearl Harbor, General John L. DeWitt "divides parts of the West Coast into Military Area 1 and Military Area 2, from which people of Japanese ancestry would be excluded" (Japanese-American Internment Camp Newspapers, 1942 to 1946 Collection, Library of Congress). This order followed President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, and a declaration which allowed for the authorization of the "forced removal of all persons deemed a

threat to national security from the West Coast to “relocation centers” further inland...”

(“Executive Order 9066: Resulting in Japanese-American Incarceration (1942)”, National Archives). During this period of unrest, an accelerated number of reports of arrests, hate crimes and racial violences against Asian-Americans were reported across the nation, primarily in the West Coast region. The War Relocation Authority (WRA), the federal agency that was established to manage the internment of Japanese Americans, had claimed their mission was to “take all people of Japanese descent into custody, surround them with troops, prevent them from buying land, and return them to their former homes at the close of the war.” (“Japanese American internment”, Britannica). Many individuals and families were given just around a week to prepare to be uprooted from their lives and removed by the U.S. Army from their homes and businesses. Accounts recorded by the Library of Congress say that “The evacuees were required to liquidate their assets in a few days, and so homeowners were required to sell their houses, and business owners their farms, stores, and restaurants, hurriedly and at steep discounts, often for pennies on the dollar”, which added financial hardship to the feelings of uncertainty and fear (“Behind the Wire”, Library of Congress Staff). The detention camps had been located in isolated areas around western America surrounded by barbed wire, guarded by armed military personnel and living conditions were described as being limited in regards to quality of living conditions. Though Adam Augustyn with Britannica recounts that “People at the camps tried to establish some sense of community. Residents were allowed to live in family groups, and the internees set up schools, churches, farms, and newspapers. Children played sports and engaged in various activities. Nevertheless, the internment took its toll on Japanese Americans, who spent as long as three years living in an atmosphere of tension, suspicion, and despair.” (2019). Despite the several civil liberties and constitutional rights violations that those Americans faced, the

Supreme Court found in the case of *Korematsu v. United States* that the evacuation and internment of those with Japanese ancestry was considered constitutional (“Japanese American Internment - Life in the Camps”, Augustyn). The American government conducted several investigations regarding the loyalty of those who were incarcerated and once cleared “... were allowed to leave the camps, usually to take jobs in the Midwest or the East. Others were allowed to work as temporary migrant laborers in the West, and still others enlisted in the U.S. Army.” (“Japanese American Internment - Life in the Camps”, Augustyn). All of the Internment Camps would eventually be shut down by the government towards the end of the war and it would be nearly 30 years later during the Ford Administration that the internees and their families would receive a formal apology. Likely an attempt to make amends for inexcusable violation of American civil rights, “A presidential commission in 1982 identified race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership as the underlying causes of the government’s internment program. In 1988 the U.S. Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act, which awarded more than 80,000 Japanese Americans \$20,000 each to compensate them for the ordeal they had suffered.” (“Japanese American Internment - Life in the Camps”, Augustyn). Fred Korematsu, the plaintiff of the 1944 *Korematsu v. United States* case, would later say in a *Washington Post* article that the only crime that was committed was “the crime of looking like the enemy” (“Wartime Hysteria”, Irons).

During times of conflict and potential danger to America and its people, the United States government has taken certain countermeasures in the hope of being able to defend their nation from foreign and domestic threats. An evident example of this in U.S. history is that of America’s complex relationship with Communism and notable eras such as the Second Red Scare and McCarthyism. The Center for European Studies at the University of North Carolina



defines communism as “a political ideology and type of government in which the state owns the major resources in a society, including property, means of production, education, agriculture and transportation. Basically, communism proposes a society in which everyone shares the benefits of labor equally, and eliminates the class system through redistribution of income.”

(“Communism: Karl Marx to Joseph Stalin, UNC Center for European Studies ). Communism had been viewed as a potential threat during the late 1800s to the early twentieth century to the United States’s Capitalist society. America's economic way of life promoted free enterprise and engagement in international trade. In an article written by Dr. Marcie Cowley, she explains that “the first anti-communist alarm, or Red Scare, in the United States occurred between 1917 and 1920, precipitated by the events of World War I and the Bolshevik revolution in Russia” (“Red Scare”, Cowley). In response to the fear of suspected communists and similar American adversaries as well as a series of bombings and political party strikes, “... Attorney General Alexander Palmer sets about a campaign to crush radical “Reds” in the United States. Using legally questionable force and tactics, thousands of suspected anarchists and communists were arrested and hundreds deported during the ‘Palmer Raids’ ” (Mike Saelee). The Zinn Education Project wrote in an article that “On Sept. 5, 1917, in 48 coordinated raids across the country ... federal agents seized records, destroyed equipment and books, and arrested hundreds of activists involved with the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.)”. According to historian Joyce Kornbluh, the I.W.W. was “... a union based on the principles of Marxist conflict and the indigenous philosophy of industrial unionism...” (“The Industrial Workers of the World”, PBS). Palmer likely tried to justify his actions with the recently passed Espionage Act of 1917, where he had perceived the I.W.W. as “... trying to cause insubordination, disloyalty, and refusal of duty in the military and naval forces...” (PBS) which would have violated the bill. Similar legislation

like the Sedition Act of 1918 which criminalized the expression of information that had the potential to damage the nation or the war effort, would continue to suppress Americans' right to freedom of speech (“Espionage Act of 1917 and Sedition Act of 1918 (1917-1918)”, National Constitution Center). This would be the case in the Supreme Court conviction of former Presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs. United States in 1919. Debs, a prominent anti-war and Socialism supporter, was arrested in June of 1918 according to historical accounts for delivering a speech just after visiting three Socialists that were rounded up during the raids. Charged with “...obstructing military recruitment and enlistment...” (“History of Topsfield, Massachusetts, Dow), Debs cited a violation of his first amendment rights and requested a repeal. Even though Debs never directly inserted information that would be in violation of the Sedition Act, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. conveyed that it was Deb’s implied intent that solidified the Supreme Court’s unanimous conviction (“History of Topsfield, Massachusetts”, Dow).

The Second Red Scare occurred in the years following WWII as the United States and the Soviet Union established themselves as ‘superpowers’ in what would be known as the Cold War. With the intention of protecting American interests abroad, President Harry S. Truman issued a foreign policy strategy in 1947 known as the “Truman Doctrine”, which provided strategic aid to prevent the spread of communism through U.S. allied nations. In the same year, Truman would issue a nation-wide oath program, known as Executive Order 9835, which urged all federal employees to announce their loyalty to the U.S. and its fight against communism (“McCarthyism & Red Scare Timeline”, Shmoop). The establishment of the congressional House Un-American Activities Committee would see the blacklist or arrest of several Americans like the Hollywood Ten and John Howard Lawson, who had refused to pledge their allegiance “...on constitutional grounds...” (“McCarthyism & Red Scare Timeline”, Shmoop). These historical

events and several others like it would help build the case for Wisconsin Senator, Joseph McCarthy, who on February 9th, 1950 would deliver a speech to the Ohio County Republican Women's Club in Wheeling, West Virginia. It would be marked by history as the beginning of the era of McCarthyism in the United States. In the Wheeling speech, McCarthy claimed that he had "... a list of 205 [State Department employees] that were known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping the policy of the State Department..." ("Senator McCarthy says communists are in State Department", HISTORY). Though he never provided a list of names nor any credible evidence of his claims, McCarthy's speech would spark a nation-wide panic in the fragile post-war America. McCarthy would rise to prominence during the 1950s, spearheading several Senate investigative committees that sought to expose supposed Communist sympathizers with the federal government. Hundreds of federal employees were thoroughly investigated and accused upon outlandish claims that held questionable weight and evidence. Many if not all were denied their constitutional rights of due process and freely given expression of speech. Over time, McCarthy and his committees would also probe the Department of State and other government agencies for homosexual employees claiming that "...gay men and lesbians could be blackmailed into revealing state secrets..." ("The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government", David Johnson) known as the Lavender Scare. Mark Pufong wrote in an article for the Middle Tennessee State University that "Anti-McCarthyites would later refer to these congressional investigations as 'witch-hunts.'" ("McCarthyism", Middle Tennessee State University). McCarthy's public backing would begin to falter in 1954, when he openly criticized the U.S. Army and their domestic security practices. The Army would counterattack the Senator by charging him in the 1954 congressional hearings with defamation of

the U.S. military in order to advance his and members of his staff's careers. With his back to the wall, McCarthy "...tried to emphasize army lawyer Joseph Welch's Communist ties...", in response "...Welch delivered his famous "Have you no sense of decency?" rebuke" ("Army-McCarthy Hearings", HISTORY). President Eisenhower and his administration aided the Army by issuing an Executive Order which ordered that "...administration officials and all executive branch employees would ignore any call from McCarthy to testify." ("McCarthyism & the Red Scare", UVA Miller Center). Now without the subpoenas "... to compel witnesses to testify before his committee..." ("McCarthyism & the Red Scare", UVA Miller Center), McCarthy's case and reputation would rapidly unravel post-trial. An article written for the HISTORY network states that "The word McCarthyism has become synonymous with the practice of publicizing accusations of treason and disloyalty with insufficient evidence." ("Army-McCarthy Hearings", HISTORY). Fear and paranoia of Communist infiltration into American society would continue for several decades despite McCarthy's downfall until December 26th, 1991 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ending of the Cold War. Though McCarthy's investigations did expose Soviet espionage in the case of the Rosenbergs and their part in passing information about the Atomic Bomb in 1945, there was never concrete evidence of any federal employees committing treason against the United States. The Hundreds of American citizens accused of trying to bring harm to American society were just pawns in the bigger game of U.S. politics. Their reputations in context to their careers or in society would never recover and would spend the rest of their lives picking up the pieces that McCarthy left in his wake.

It is evident in the context of events like the Salem Witch Trials, the Japanese-American Internment Camps, and the hysteria surrounding McCarthyism that the United States has an

extensive history of justifying the violation of Americans constitutional rights and civil liberties. The criminal investigations and convictions prompted by government officials on a local and national level had culminated to form a long, unsettling history of “witch-hunts” and mass hysteria within American society. In almost all of those cases, the Americans who had been investigated, charged, or executed were not who they were accused of being. Yet they were still denied their rights and liberties as bestowed upon them by the leaders and institutions that protected them. The victims and their descendants of those disturbing turn of events have long advocated to make America and the world aware of their experiences and the truth behind what really happened from their perspectives. To combat future occurrences of “witch-hunts” and mass hysteria, it is suggested based upon historical evidence that the United States of America should develop a secure plan to prevent potential misinformation and fear-mongering. Among educating people on how to identify legitimate sources for information and news, it is important to advise the separation of emotions from logical reasoning. Often when faced with the threat of danger and stress, we as humans revert to our natural “fight-or-flight response” says the American Institute of Stress. By fighting those natural instincts, people are able to make a more clear and logical collective opinion. Only when armed with fact-based information, an impartial, logic based opinion, and a sense of self-restraint can Americans prevent future cases of mass hysteria and bias towards marginalized groups.

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