

Governance Through Fear: Comparing The Salem Witch Trials, the Second Red Scare, and Modern Xenophobia

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ABSTRACT

Throughout U.S. history, governing authorities have subjected vulnerable populations to institutional persecution embedded in manufactured fear, misinformation, and mass hysteria. This paper argues that governance through fear, defined as the deliberate cultivation of public anxiety around a perceived threat to justify forceful state action, constitutes a recurring structural pattern in American history. Using historical comparative analysis, the paper examines three crucial time periods: the Salem Witch Trials (1692), the Second Red Scare (1947–1954), and current immigration enforcement, ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), under the 2025 administration. Primary and secondary historical sources are analyzed alongside contemporary legal documents, policy data, and peer reviewed social science research to identify common operational mechanisms across all three time periods. The findings reveal a consistent four stage pattern: a vulnerable population is identified as a threat; public fear and hysteria are cultivated through the spread of misinformation and stereotypes by the American government; punitive policy is constructed around that same fear and hysteria; and finally individuals are stripped of their right to due process. The paper’s analysis demonstrates that historical literacy functions as a civic tool, equipping citizens and legislators to recognize and resist recurring cycles of institutionalized injustice.

INTRODUCTION

September 30th, 2025, was a night like no other. Parents and their children living on the South Shore of Chicago were peacefully asleep, preparing for the busy workday ahead. This peaceful slumber was soon shattered, and nightmares would turn into reality. At 2:00 am, a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid took place. Residents of the South Shore “watched hundreds of federal agents rappel from Black Hawk helicopters, use drones and flash bang grenades to storm an apartment building in the city's South Shore neighborhood.”¹ This incident proved to be more terrifying than any nightmare.

¹ Ali Rogin, Karina Cuevas, Jenna Bloom, Dramatic Chicago ICE raid touted as anti-terror win results in no 1 criminal charges, Nov 14, 2025

Homes were torn open, doors shattered, and “37 individuals were arrested.”² Children were dragged from under their beds. The current administration and ICE have called it “Operation Midway Blitz.” In reality, this was simply a roundup, one that delivered fear, pain, and confusion. However, “of those 37 individuals who were arrested, there were no criminal charges filed against them.”³ If the residents were taken into detention with such extreme measures, it would be reasonable to infer they had definite charges levied against them. This is just one of many examples of people being dragged from their homes and forced to cooperate without explanation. According to the American Immigration Lawyers Association around “68,000 are in ICE detention in February, up about 75% from when Trump took office in 2025. Of those tens of thousands of vulnerable people, just 14% of the nearly 400,000 immigrants detained by the administration in 2025 had charges let alone convictions for violent criminal offenses.”⁴ These uses of extreme measures to enforce legislation on immigrant communities, demonstrate how immigration enforcement resembles formal military operations rather than routine law enforcement. By employing excessive force, authorities create an environment of fear and intimidation that affects all immigrant communities. These demonstrations of ICE raids are not only intended to be legal procedures, but a demonstration of power that is traumatizing communities, even those who are not the intended target. These strategies which are rooted in conjuring fear among American residents is something common seen through events like the Salem Witch Trials (1692), the Second Red Scare (1947–1954).

This study will examine how the current spread of misinformation creates stereotypes, and how fear and hysteria enable the government to expand its influence. This study will examine a pattern consistent throughout the three case studies: a vulnerable population is portrayed as a societal threat, public fear and hysteria are cultivated, disciplinary policy is constructed around that fear, and innocent individuals are punished without their constitutional right to due process. As a result of these analyses, this paper also aims to educate and raise awareness: by empowering those who may feel powerless in times like these, those who may feel as if these events have no end, and those who may have never seen these kinds of events unfold before. By examining how governments used misinformation and stereotypes to spread fear, generating hysteria, this study demonstrates how these strategies of governance through fear are structurally similar to those employed by the 2025 administration’s immigration enforcement apparatus. This study attempts to uncover how governance through fear is not an anomaly in American political history but a recurring institutional pattern, one in which a governing authority creates mass hysteria around a certain groups of minorities, legitimizes their persecution though false or unverifiable evidence, and systematically strips them of due process, a mechanism as visible in the Puritan courts of Salem, as in the immigration detention facilities of 2025.

² Rogin, Cuevas, Bloom, Dramatic Chicago ICE raid touted as anti-terror win results in no criminal charges, 2 Nov 14, 2025

³ Rogin, Cuevas, Bloom, Dramatic Chicago ICE raid touted as anti-terror win results in no criminal charges, 3

⁴ American Immigration Lawyers Association, *Think Immigration: The Reality of Trump’s Immigration Policies by the Numbers*, <https://www.aila.org/>

METHODS AND KEY TERMS

This study employs historical comparative analysis across three significant case studies to identify structural and procedural parallels in how governing authorities in America have used fear to consolidate power and legitimize persecution to vulnerable communities. Primary and secondary historical sources are examined alongside contemporary legal documents, governing statistics, and peer-reviewed social science research. Before proceeding, there are key terms that require definition. First, “Governance through fear” refers to the deliberate and institutionalized use of public anxiety around a perceived threat to justify coercive state action against a targeted group. “Mass hysteria” describes a collective social phenomenon in which an unfounded or greatly exaggerated threat lights widespread panic that overrides rational public deliberation. “Institutional persecution” refers to the systemic targeting of individuals acts of bias or through formal legal and governmental mechanisms. “Misinformation,” as used in this paper, refers to false or misleading factual claims that are propagated by state actors or their proxies to shape public opinion and justify policy. “Spectral evidence”⁵ in the context of the paper refers to a witness's testimony that an accused person's spirit or “specter” appeared to the witness in a dream at the time the accused person's physical body was someplace else.

It is crucial to acknowledge that this comparative framework does not claim that all three historical episodes are equivalent in every respect. Each case differs in legal context, political motivation, historical scale, and final outcome. The legal framework of Puritan Massachusetts, Cold War America, and contemporary immigration enforcement are products of entirely different constitutional and institutional environments.

The Salem Witch Trials (1692)

The Salem Witch Trials are one of the earliest and most documented examples of a government institutionalizing fear to consolidate power over its constituents. Central to this power was the Puritan government's use of spectral evidence, testimony claiming that the accused had appeared to the witness in a dream or vision, a standard of proof inherently unverifiable making innocence near impossible to claim for villagers. Before drawing comparisons between the Salem Witch Trials with the present-day ICE raids to address the central claim of this study, it is necessary to first understand the context, specific details, and impacts of these trials. The Salem Witch trials took place in the settlement of Salem (now modern-day Danvers, Massachusetts). The trials first began after young girls in Salem experienced fits and accused local women of being witches, sparking widespread panic that was exacerbated by existing rivalries, resentments, and a belief that the devil was actively working in the community. These accusations were fueled by the deep religious Christian beliefs that were prominent in the Massachusetts Bay colonies. Accusations started spreading around Salem, most of which were false. What made the trials effective as an instrument of control and influence over society was the legal

⁵ 1692 Salem Witch Museum, Spectral Evidence, <https://salemwitchmuseum.com/2013/02/15/spectral-evidence/>, February 15th 2013

framework put in place by the Puritan government, constructed around them to systematically eliminate any path to acquittal.

The culture of coerced confession that would define 1692-1693, had precedent set decades earlier. For instance, Alice Lake of Dorchester (a villager at Salem) was hanged in 1651 for the accusation of being a witch placed upon her. Alice Lake, however, believed she was innocent of the crime of witchcraft. But to her, she “deserved to be exposed as a witch”⁶ as “when she was a single woman, she behaved immorally and became pregnant. To hide her sin, she tried to get rid of the baby, which, in Puritan beliefs, is a sinful and shameful act. Because of this, the minister overseeing her confession, John Hale, “concurred-that she had covenanted with him through the commission of her sin.”⁷ This fear and anxiety were being spread throughout the village from false accusations and pressure from ministers, causing innocent people to be subjected to severe punishment. These incidents only became worse as more and more people were accused.

The case of Alice Lake of Dorchester reveals that coercion did not need to come from direct force by government, instead, the Puritan government framework itself was the mechanism, pressuring the accused into confessions that served only the court’s agenda. By 1692, this dynamic between the Puritan government and coercion had become systematized: confession was no longer simply a spiritual act, instead it was a survival strategy. By 1692, a confession by a villager was the most valuable source of information. If an accused admitted they were guilty, and accused someone else of witchcraft, then they would be punished significantly less than if they were to admit they were under the influence of the devil, Satan, making them commit the crime of witchery (or other sins/crimes not related to witchcraft, as discussed above. Historian Elizabeth Reis, in her book, “*Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*,”⁸ explains the thought process of the court in deciding who to hang⁸ and who not to hang. Reis underscores how, “very early in the Salem witchcraft episode of 1692, the court decided not to hang those who confessed, hoping that they could be persuaded to name others involved in this wicked affair.”⁹ This hostile and fear-engulfed⁹ environment led to even more accusations and false testimonies from the accused. For the government (including ministers and justices of the Puritan courts), an accusation meant their Puritan beliefs were indeed true, and that their ways of determining who in the village was guilty of committing witchcraft were working and correct. Due to the fear and pressure of the court system and the church, the confessions were often aligned with what the justices and ministers wanted to hear, namely, confessions of witchcraft from the villagers. These confessions from the villagers served as a form of justification for the Puritan government’s methods of conducting witchcraft investigations. To the government and church, “Consent was crucial, and mention of it in the confession validated not only Puritan theology but the court’s procedures as well.”¹⁰ This intense fear and

⁶ Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Cornell University Press, 1997), Chapter 4. (Pg.125),

⁷ Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, Chapter 4. (Pg.125)

⁸ Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, Chapter 4.

⁹ Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, Chap. 4 (Pg.124)

¹⁰ Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, Chap. 4 (Pg.139)

anxiety of accusation spread around the ¹⁰ village, making everyone subject to the whim of the church and court in Salem.

In the Salem witch trials, injustices did not just stop at accusations and manipulation of people; they also extended to the complete violation of basic rights. If an individual who was accused pleaded their innocence, they were consequently thought to be a witch or at least an accomplice to the devil: Satan. Those who did not admit to being witches or being related in any way to Satan would end up being further questioned, exiled, or executed. This happened because, to the court, “for the court and community, “witehes” were more valuable alive than dead.”¹¹ In other words, the court's power depended on extracting information from the accused, making them a tool of the state's agenda rather than individuals of the village. The court believed that if those who admitted to witchery were in a “pact in blood”¹² with Satan, and if they were kept in detention long enough, then they would, “expose this secret sin and establish guilt.”¹³ This thought process of the court, of admission and coercion to get their desired results of confession, reveals how the court manufactured a self-reinforcing cycle: the longer an individual was detained, further pressure would form forcing confessions and naming of others, expanding the court's reach and influence with each accusation. Once the accused admitted to their relationship with Satan, then the court would begin the process, “of admission, repentance, and redemption.”¹⁴ Since the image of a witch was more associated with being a woman rather than a man, women were thought to be witches more often than men. Historian Elizabeth Reis argues that gender bias shaped the Salem accusations:

“The court, the accusers, the witnesses, and even the accused themselves believed that women were more likely to be witches than men. Women had much more difficulty establishing their innocence.”¹⁵

If a female suspect pleaded hard enough and admitted to working with the devil out of “force” and assured the court that she would do anything to go back to religion and God, then the court would let them go. Confessions by villagers were often detailed and emotionally persuasive, increasing the likelihood that the court would show leniency. For instance, one accused woman offered the following statement: “I have seen sights and been scared. I have been very wicked. I hope I shall be better, if God will help me I hope God will forgive me.”¹⁶ By analyzing these confessions, it becomes evident that confessions acted as a survival strategy for accused villagers. The woman who gave the confession

¹¹ Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, Chap. 4 (Pg.126)

¹² Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, Chapter 4. (Pg.127)

¹³ Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, Chapter 4. (Pg.127)

¹⁴ Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, Chapter 4. (Pg.127)

¹⁵ Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, Chap. 4 (Pg.146)

¹⁶ Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, Chap 4 (Pg.138)

above was Abigail Hobbs. Her confession was recorded by justice John Higginson. Historian Elizabeth Reis emphasizes “the possibility exists that the justice who penned her confession, John Higginson, imposed his own interpretation.” The process of the courts legal bases being coerced confessions highlights a key systematic factor that is still prevalent today: since the confessions that formed the legal basis for execution were being actively shaped by the very officials conducting the trials, than the Puritan government, instead of discovering guilt, was manufacturing guilt. The court held a dangerous consolidation of power, with no mechanism for challenge or appeal by the residents of Salem.

Misinformation being spread about witches and false accusations being made by people to save themselves further fueled the power of the government. The fear and hysteria allowed the Puritan government at the time to prosecute and execute its citizens purely based on spectral evidence. An example of spectral evidence would be Mary Walcott’s testimony in court. Mary Walcott had accused Sarah Buckley of persuading her to sign the contract with the devil. In her testimony, she stated that “Buckley "brought me a book and would have me write my name in it or elce give my consent that she might write it for me. I told her that I would not touch her book nor write in it, nor give consent to her tho she killd me then she choaked me.”¹⁷ The church would heavily rely on spectral evidence provided by the accused so they could round up all the witches present in Salem. But in reality, the fear of being prosecuted by the church led villagers who were innocent to further accuse other innocent villagers.

Prior to drawing parallels between Salem witch trials and recent immigration enforcement, arguments can be made that the event that took place in Salem is too remote, too theocratic, and too legally primitive to say anything meaningful about modern enforcement. Many historians argue that during the trials the court truly believed what it was doing was saving the community from a real threat. In fact, Dr. John Howard Smith, a history professor at Texas A&M University emphasizes how the real cause for the hysteria in Salem was due the political instability of the time, mixture of war trauma, and massive family feud. Dr. John Howard Smith highlights how, "It all started with King Philip's War... The violence of the wars drove many displaced settlers to seek refuge in Salem. Many of the refugees were small children who had witnessed extreme violence, and those traumatized children grew into teenagers who accused many people of witchcraft.”¹⁸ Religiously and politically Dr. Smith emphasizes how due to King James II of Europe having a strong disdain for the Puritan colonies, he targeted these communities. But, when he was suddenly dethroned and Queen Mary II was crowned in his place there was hope of a new king and queen who could restore the Puritan colonies to their original power, but it never came. “So the nasty dominion regime was gone, but there was still a lot of political instability and uncertainty,”¹⁹ Dr. Smith proclaimed. This left the Puritans nervous, unsure and in a suspicious state of mind. Lastly, for the family

¹⁷ Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, Chap 4 (Pg.133)

¹⁸ Rachel McShane, Ph.D., “TAMUC History Professor Busts Myths About the Salem Witch Trials,” East Texas A&M University, October 24, 2023, <https://www.etamu.edu/tamuc-history-professor-busts-myths-about-the-salem-witch-trials/>.

¹⁹ McShane, “TAMUC History Professor Busts Myths About the Salem Witch Trials,” East Texas A&M University, October 24, 2023,

feud aspect Salem was split into two distinct regions: Salem Village, a poorer, more rural farming area, and Salem Town, a wealthier, more developed area close to a large port utilized for importing and exporting goods. The village wanted to be separate from the town and claim their autonomy from it. Each area had a respective prominent family: the Putnams from Salem Village and the Porters from Salem Town. “The Putnams greatly supported separation from Salem Town, and the Porters fought it. So even though they were from different parts of town, there was major competition for land and seats in government,” Dr. Smith explains. This feud played a large role in who was accused during the trials. Dr. Smith conveys how, “60 or 65% of the accusations came from people living in the west end, and the vast majority of them were somehow connected to the Putnam family. And the bulk of those accused were from the East end of the village, and either belonged to or were connected to the Porter family.” Hence, from these accounts a strong argument can be formed that the hysteria during the Salem trials was rooted in deeply local conditions. Conditions so historically specific and ancient, that drawing a direct line from Salem’s Puritan theocracy to a modern constitutional enforcement apparatus may not be equally comparable to one another given the different situations and time periods.

Dr. Smith’s account is persuasive on its own terms, and this study does not dispute it. War trauma, political instability, and the Putnam-Porter rivalry all contributed to the conditions that made Salem susceptible to hysteria in 1692. But explaining why the hysteria ignited is different from explaining how the legal apparatus then sustained and expanded it. Once the hysteria existed, the Puritan court structure allowed for the court to make a series of deliberate choices that guaranteed escalation rather than containment. Historian Elizabeth Yuko explains how the courts did not have, “a charter, and their courts were dysfunctional”²⁰ and how this allowed the courts to, “make unusual procedural decisions that lead to so many people being convicted of witchcraft.”²¹ Rather than implementing safeguards to contain the hysteria, the court admitted spectral evidence, as valid proof of guilt despite being inherently unverifiable. The tragedy of the Salem Witch Trials comes down to the structural failure of the Puritan courts, as the courts implemented laws, “that made such things as visions, dreams, and even the testimony of spirits permissible evidence. And a court that accepted accusations so flimsy they would seem laughable today if they weren’t so horrifyingly unjust.”²² The court enforced these unjust practices and targeted vulnerable populations, and during the Salem Witch Trials this population consisted mostly of, “women.”²³ The court built a system structurally dysfunctional, which gave way for the court to

²⁰ Elizabeth Yuko, “Salem Witch Trials: What Caused the Hysteria?,” HISTORY, September 26, 2023, last updated August 26, 2025, <https://www.history.com/articles/salem-witch-trials-hysteria-factors>.

²¹ Yuko, “Salem Witch Trials: What Caused the Hysteria?,” HISTORY, September 26, 2023, last updated August 26, 2025,

²² “A True Legal Horror Story: The Laws Leading to the Salem Witch Trials,” New England Law | Boston, April 30, 2026, <https://www.nesl.edu/blog/detail/a-true-legal-horror-story-the-laws-leading-to->.

²³ “A True Legal Horror Story: The Laws Leading to the Salem Witch Trials,” New England Law | Boston, April 30, 2026,

abuse their power, in turn resulting in the targeting of vulnerable individuals, and further allowed for fear and hysteria to persist in the village. The parallel to modern immigration enforcement emerges precisely here. The 2025 administration did not manufacture anxiety about immigration from nothing, public concern about border security and immigration policies predates this administration. Under new policies like the “Big Beautiful Bill,”²⁴ the National Immigration Law Center explains how this acts, “lashes health care, nutrition, and tax benefits while expanding detention and enforcement—harming immigrant communities and endangering the U.S. economy.”²⁵ Policies of this kind under the current administration put on display how stereotypes against immigrants can cause severe amplification on the national level, causing specific communities to be targeted.

The structural failure and a government authority taking advantage being a common aspect in both Salem and current immigration detention policies similarity allows the study to draw a strong parallel between the two.

Recently, many immigrants report an increased fear of government action against them, due to recent policies. The KFF (Kaiser Family Foundation), an independent source for health policy research, polling, and news, emphasizes how, in their study with immigrants living in America under the current administration found that, “Nearly all participants said that they are experiencing resounding levels of fear and uncertainty due to shifting policies under the Trump administration. These fears extended beyond those who were undocumented to those with lawful status.”²⁶ They are scared of the actions that can be taken against them regarding their immigration status, similar to those being accused and fabricating accusations while accusing others under the pressures of the Puritan government during the Salem Trials. A contemporary example of individuals being scared of the government is the process called “self deportation.” The current administration “has terminated or announced its intent to terminate TPS [Temporary Protected Status] for over one million of these individuals, including over 50,000 Hondurans, over 330,000 Haitians, and over 600,000 Venezuelans. These terminations are being challenged in court, and the ultimate outcome of these lawsuits remains unclear.”²⁷

Due to the termination of programs that aid immigrants, legal immigrants who have been living here for years have now been deemed ‘deportable.’ Because of this, many residents (including those of,

²⁴ “The Anti-Immigrant Policies in Trump’s Final ‘Big Beautiful Bill,’ Explained,” National Immigration Law Center, July 8, 2025, <https://www.nilc.org/resources/the-anti-immigrant-policies-in-trumps-final-big-beautiful-bill-explained/>.

²⁵ “The Anti-Immigrant Policies in Trump’s Final ‘Big Beautiful Bill,’ Explained,” National Immigration Law Center, July 8, 2025,

²⁶ Drishti Pillai, Isabelle Valdes, Alisha Rao, Samantha Artiga, Liz Hamel, and Shannon Schumacher, *Living in an Undocumented Immigrant Family Under the Second Trump Administration: Fear, Uncertainty, and Impacts on Health and Well-Being*, May 8, 2025

²⁷ American Immigration Council, *Temporary Protected Status (TPS): An Overview*, November 25, 2025 <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/temporary-protected-status-tps-overview/#:~:text=As%20of%20March%2031%2C%202025,of%20these%20lawsuits%20remains%20unclear>

“Afghanistan, Cameroon, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, and Venezuela”²⁸) have fled the country in fear of being wrongfully removed. These actions taken by legal immigrants inherently stem from the fear and phobia of deportation that is being spread by the current administration. The targeting of immigrants is similar to the targeting of innocent villagers in the Salem Trials, who were only accused to shift the blame. This similarity occurs because in both historical events a governing authority identified a vulnerable population, assigned them the role of a disturbance to peace in society, and then constructed a legal apparatus to justify the group’s persecution. In Salem, it was the Puritan court manufacturing witches through spectral evidence and coerced confession. In 2025, it is the current administration manufacturing the image of immigrants being criminals through misleading statistics and militarized enforcement operations. Although the targeted population—from mostly women in the witch trials to immigrants in modern times—the underlying mechanism remains identical: fear of being considered a danger to society is manufactured at the institutional level to justify the expansion of governmental power, through the use of misleading evidence and mass hysteria.

Another present-day example of this is a tactic that ICE agents are trained to use, called “ruses.” This tactic consists of ICE agents being legally allowed to lie about who they are to get information out of immigrants they may be trying to deport or detain. Explained by the Immigration Defense Project, “When Immigration & Customs Enforcement agents go to homes and the community to arrest non-citizens, it’s common for them to lie about who they are and what they want from the individuals they encounter.”²⁹ A concerning fact is that, “ICE’s use of ruses has escalated since 2017.”³⁰ The federal government has allowed ICE agents to mislead immigrants into possibly accepting things they would have never said if not under false pretenses. Thus, it is comparable to the pressures, manipulations, and coercions of the accused into false pretenses by the Puritan government, leaving no room for individuals to prove their innocence.

Today, the current administration uses misleading statistics to manufacture the image of the criminal immigrant and justify mass detention. The usage of misleading and out-of-context statistics related to crime, healthcare, or interactions with law enforcement have been cited in shaping immigration policies, reflecting the distortions of information that still impact institutional behavior today. A contemporary example of this, is the misleading statistics used to support the common assertion of ICE focusing on removing criminal aliens—the “worst of the worst,” and not undocumented persons with no criminal record. However the Center of Migration Studies (CMS) explains how, “profiles of those detained by

²⁸ Kevin G. Andrade, *De-documentation: Legal immigrants being stripped of status, targeted for deportation*, December 22, 2025, <https://newbedfordlight.org/de-documentation-legal-immigrants-being-stripped-of-status-targeted-for-deportation/#:~:text=Those%20protections%20disappeared%20for%20many,Nepal%2C%20Nicaragua%2C%20and%20Venezuela>.

²⁹ Immigrant Defense Project: ICE Ruses, n.d., <https://www.immigrantdefenseproject.org/ice-ruses/>

³⁰ Immigrant Defense Project, “ICE Ruses.”

ICE in the last year, about 75 percent of the 74,000 detained have no criminal records. Moreover, the number of persons removed per month without a criminal record has jumped six times.”³¹ In both events, the government controls not only the enforcement of the law but the construction of the evidence used to justify it.

Although bearing many similarities, there are some key differences between modern day immigration enforcement and the 1692 Salem Witch Trials that are important to highlight. The main difference is the constitutional backing of both events. The Salem court operated with no constitutional floor, there was no mechanism to appeal, no right to counsel, no evidentiary standard beyond the word of an accuser, and there was no mass media to spread the message of the unfair practices that were taking place in court. On the other hand, modern immigration enforcement exists within a legal framework that includes habeas corpus (“a judicial order forcing law enforcement authorities to produce a prisoner they are holding, and to justify the prisoner's continued confinement.”³²), judicial review, and statutory protections. The *Abrego Garcia* case is a prime example of court intervention. Another key difference between the two events are the outcomes. The Salem Witch Trials had a definitive end. By 1693, after Governor Phips’s wife was accused of witchcraft, “he again interceded and ordered that a new court be established that would not allow so-called spectral evidence. By May 1693 everyone in custody under conviction or suspicion of witchcraft had been pardoned by Phips.”³³ After this intervention from Governor Phips there was a formal ³³ legislation passed in 1711, the “Act to Reverse the Attainders of George Burroughs and Others,”³⁴ which restored the reputations of the condemned and compensated serving ³⁴ families. The Puritan government essentially admitted, institutionally, that it had been wrong. However, modern immigration ICE enforcement has no comparable resolution in sight. There is no concrete endpoint, no formal repudiation, and the legal success that exists currently—for example the *Abrego Garcia* ruling—addresses individual cases rather than the structural pattern of immigration detention. The administration has not acknowledged wrongdoing; instead they have simply described it as an “administrative error,”³⁵ and continued with their operations. The parallel this paper draws is therefore not

³¹ Center of Migration Studies (CMS), *Correcting the Record: False or Misleading Statements on Immigration*, Kevin Appleby, February 7, 2026

³² United States Courts, <https://www.uscourts.gov/glossary-legal-terms/habeas-corpus>

³³ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "How Did the Salem Witch Trials End?," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed July 1, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/question/How-did-the-Salem-witch-trials-end>.

³⁴ An Act to Reverse the Attainders of George Burroughs and Others for Witchcraft," Province of Massachusetts Bay, October 17, 1711, Essex County Court Archives, Salem — Witchcraft Vol. 2, no. 136, Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, hosted by 4score.org, accessed July 1, 2026, <https://4score.org/historical-documents/act-reverse-attainders-george-burroughs-and-others-witchcraft>.

³⁵ KRISTI NOEM, SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY, ET AL. v. KILMAR ARMANDO ABREGO GARCIA, ET AL., 604 U. S. (2025)

equivalence of exact legal systems, nor exact outcomes, but more so of equivalence in the repetitiveness of the mechanism utilized: in both events, a governing authority's enforcement power substantially outran the evidentiary basis for it, and the targeted, vulnerable, population had limited practical ability to mount a meaningful defense.

The Salem Witch Trials serve as the first example, in this study, of how fear and hysteria can infiltrate legal institutions, warping and corrupting their procedures. The trials were one of the first historical documented events where the pattern of governance through fear first emerges: a vulnerable population is portrayed as a threat to society, fear and hysteria are cultivated in the public, punitive policy is constructed around that very fear, and innocent groups of individuals are punished without their constitutional right to due process. What makes Salem particularly instructive is not merely that injustice occurred, but that the government used the legal framework to their advantage and engineered the unfair treatment of villagers, women villagers specifically. They abused spectral evidence, coerced confessions, and courts that conflated accusation with guilt which made innocence structurally impossible to prove.

However, this pattern did not disappear with the dissolution of the Salem courts. Less than three centuries later, a structurally identical mechanism resurfaced in a different political environment, directed at a different vulnerable population, but driven by the same institutional logic. The following section examines how the Second Red Scare (1947–1957) reproduced the core features of governance through fear that Salem did as well: manufactured threat, cultivated hysteria, and the erosion of due process for the vulnerable population.

The Second Red Scare (1947–1957)

The Second Red Scare began following the end of World War II during the 1950s. The start of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was the main contributor to the fear and hysteria that spread in the US during the second Red Scare. The Cold War was a decades-long geopolitical struggle between the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union after World War II. The war was characterized by ideological conflict, an arms race, and proxy wars rather than direct physical combat between the two superpowers. Tensions grew over communism spreading to countries around the world, and created fear that communist spies and sympathizers were secretly working within the US government and society.

During this period of time, many nations were being governed or taken over by communist regimes, such as the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), China, and North Korea. This spread of communism around the world played a major role in spreading fear among American citizens about the emergence of communism that may potentially take over the government. As American citizens saw it, communism had largely negative effects, especially in light of the USSR's government's promise to carry out free and fair elections, which was ultimately broken. In chapter five of *“Red Scare: Blacklists, McCarthyism, and*

the Making of Modern America,”³⁶ Clay Risen explains that although Stalin pledged to allow “free elections in all the liberated territories”³⁷ while joining the war against Japan and the United Nations, this was eventually “a promise Stalin would break.”³⁸ Witnessing the negative effects of communist regimes in other countries around the world solidified domestic resentment toward communist ideologies and intensified the growing anxiety that such a government might eventually seize power in the United States.

To Americans, communism was seen as a form of government where freedom, under the democratic process, is taken away. It was, therefore, a form of government that citizens feared and did not want in the United States of America. China’s transition to a communist ruled nation also had similar effects on American citizens. More than Europe’s fall to communism, China’s fall affected American citizens to a greater extent, compared to Europe’s, as they feared America would be the next country in line to fall to communism. The fear among the people was leveraged by politicians. As historian Clay Risen emphasizes, “It is understandable that many Americans—especially Polish-Americans and Catholics—would be bitterly unhappy about the Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe, but, oddly, it was the success of Communists in China that played the larger role in the Second Red Scare.”³⁹ The successive falls of Europe and China to communist rule made the prospect of American vulnerability feel frighteningly more realistic for Americans. Politicians who channeled this fear found a receptive and were much more tolerated among American citizens.

These rising tensions were exploited by politicians, such as Senator Joseph McCarthy: who was known for giving fiery speeches about the dangers of communism. He was a Republican Senator for Wisconsin famous for using the fear of communism in American society to his advantage. He began his political career during President Truman’s presidency and died in office during President Eisenhower’s presidency. More importantly however, McCarthy was notorious for accusing people of being communists without real, substantial evidence. These accusations were often successful because they led to various negative outcomes for the accused and even those associated with the accused. McCarthy was popular for “using evidence that was exaggerated, distorted, and in some cases utterly false,” he also “accused hundreds of individuals of Communist activity, recklessly mixing the innocent with the assuredly guilty when it served his political purposes.”⁴⁰

These unsubstantiated claims worked for a particular reason. Americans were scared of a communist

³⁶ Clay Risen, *Red Scare: Blacklists, McCarthyism, and the Making of Modern America*, Chapter 5

³⁷ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chapter 5 (Pg.152)

³⁸ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chapter 5 (Pg.152)

³⁹ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.151)

⁴⁰ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.169)

takeover in America, as they had seen it occur in other parts of the globe, like “China,”⁴¹ “Soviet Union,”⁴² Korea,⁴³ and “other Asian nations.”⁴⁴ as well. Senator McCarthy used this fear and evoked it further in people by blaming the government of the time for letting “communist spies” into the country. McCarthy would use this fear and justify his accusations by emphasizing that this was helping the country get rid of communism, and helping save American lives, as to McCarthy, the “main point here is that whether these agreements were wise or misguided, the primary intention behind them, from the American side, was to save American lives.”⁴⁵ Although McCarthy’s stated intentions were ostensibly ⁴⁵ patriotic, his methods did not align with his rhetoric.

Senator McCarthy would publicize and televise his allegations at the court trials, where he would accuse someone of being a communist and impose punishment. “McCarthy’s charges represented more smoke than fire (conservative Republican leader, Robert Taft, called it a “perfectly reckless performance,”⁴⁶) given how widely they had been publicized,” These widely televised court trials further instilled fear and hysteria, leaving citizens wondering who among them was a Communist, further spreading fear and panic through the population. This gave much power to McCarthy as people would often believe what he was saying: “The television audience certainly got the impression that documents backed up his charges; many in the audience probably also got an impression that McCarthy was actually calling these people Communists.”⁴⁷ This mirrors the Salem Witch Trials, where the Puritan church were spreading rumors and fear of witches being present in the village by using coerced confessions and accusations. Comparably, in the Second Red Scare, this study has shown how Senator McCarthy employed almost the same tactic, and how he instituted unsubstantiated accusations to spread fear among the American population causing the public to question the loyalty of their neighbors. This gave a certain power to Senator McCarthy as people would pay attention, believe his statements, his actions, and his accusations.

Another reason why McCarthy, and even the Conservative party as a whole, was so successful was that using the fear of communism as a tactic to benefit their opinions or policies was a common tactic at the time, and was not fought against or brought to light as being unjust or wrong. McCarthy had institutionalized fear of communism into a political currency that the entire Republican Party drew upon

⁴¹ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.151)

⁴² Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.163)

⁴³ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.163)

⁴⁴ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.160)

⁴⁵ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.155)

⁴⁶ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.155)

⁴⁷ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg. 170)

to advance its legislative agenda and discredit structural reform. As historical Clay Risen states “The right also used the fear of communism to taint policies that aimed at structural reform.”⁴⁸ This normalization is what made McCarthy’s tactics so effective. A key parallel between the Second Red Scare and the Salem Witch Trials is the use of fear and hysteria to gain influence and power. In the Salem Witch Trials, the church had the absolute authority over determining guilt, deciding who stood accused of witchcraft and who went free without punishment, a power that extended to every major decision governing the village. Similarly, during the Second Red Scare, Senator Joseph McCarthy built his political career around publicly “exposing” alleged communists. As historian Clay Risen explains in *“Red Scare: Blacklists, McCarthyism, and the Making of Modern America,”* McCarthy and other anti-communists not only accused individuals of disloyalty towards the American government, but also trapped “liberals”⁴⁹ into a political dilemma: defending civil liberties and risk being labeled as “soft on [the] Reds,”⁵⁰ alienating their constituents, while distancing themselves from civil liberties to avoid suspicion of communist sympathy meant abandoning the very principles their political identity rested upon. By leveraging the already established fear of communism in society, against the liberals, the conservative government utilized this to influence policies, public support, and legislation their way.

During the Second Red Scare, similar to the Salem Witch Trials, women were frequently made scapegoats and accused of being communists. Many women were at the forefront of progressive movements in the US. An example would be, “Mary Dublin, a top official of both the National Consumers’ League and the New York League of Women Shoppers.”⁵¹ The League of Women shoppers was a prominent progressive organization that led multiple progressive initiatives, like their effort to, “highlight workers’ struggles.”⁵²

Most of these movements were left-wing movements, and as discussed above, the right-wing politicians were trying to use the fear of communism to gain power and advance their legislative agenda. Right-wing politicians would mostly accuse women in progressive unions or organizations, “including the League of Women Shoppers (1935–49), Consumers’ Union (1935–present), and Consumers’ National Federation (1937–41) and its successor, the National Association of Consumers (1946–54)”⁵³ of either being communist or supporting the communist agenda.

⁴⁸ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.155)

⁴⁹ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.163)

⁵⁰ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.163)

⁵¹ Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare*, Chap. 2 (Pg.60)

⁵² Robinson, Beth, author, compiler, *How Did the League of Women Shoppers Use Their Privilege to Act in Solidarity with Workers, 1935-1948?* 2014

⁵³ Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare*, Chap. 2 (Pg.68)

The right-wing conservative party labelled these organizations with progressive goals as “Un-American”, and the gender roles during the 1940s and 50s further disadvantaged women in defending themselves against accusations. For example, “The League of Women Shoppers, after being cited as a Communist front group several more times, eventually did begin to lose its most distinguished members.”⁵⁴ Continuous accusations of harboring and supporting communism against progressive women-led organizations resulted in the dissolution of these organizations. The deliberate targeting of women’s progressive organizations, and by labeling these groups as ‘Un-American,’ right wing politicians simultaneously discredited the progressive policy agenda and silenced rhetoric communities most likely to oppose their consolidation of power. This mirrored the Salem Witch Trials with structural logic: in both cases, a governing authority identified women as politically convenient scapegoats, weaponized existing social anxieties around gender to legitimize their persecution, and emerged from that persecution with significantly expanded institutional authority. The scapegoating of a marginalized group was not a byproduct of governmental overreach, it was the instrument used through which overreach was achieved.

The Conservative Party did this due to a few reasons: first, due to concern over the federal government’s expansion of power with the New Deal, which was a series of economic relief and reform initiatives intended to help the American people and businesses recover from the Great Depression. “Implemented under the direction of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the New Deal legislation broke from the American tradition of laissez-faire government.”⁵⁵ The Conservative party was against the New Deal progressive legislation. Under legislation like the Wagner Act (an act released under the New Deal),⁵⁶ the policy “greatly increased the authority of the federal government in industrial relations and strengthened the organizing power of labour unions.”⁵⁷

The Conservative Party used fear and hysteria on the topic of communism in the American community to achieve its goal of limiting both the powers of the federal government and the Democratic Party. What made McCarthy’s and the Conservative party’s strategy so effective was the political environment they were operating in: an environment fueled by public fear that communism would infiltrate and overtake their government, having witnessed it spread across Europe and China. This pervasive anxiety meant that the mere accusation of communist sympathies, or as a communist, carried devastating social and political consequences. Individuals would fear that being publicly labeled a communist would strip them of their reputation, career, and standing in society. As historian Clay Risen

⁵⁴ Y. Storrs, *The Second Red Scare*, Chap. 2 (Pg.75)

⁵⁵ Britannica, *How FDR's New Deal changed the U.S.*, Dec. 8, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/video/did-you-know-New-Deal/-256760>

⁵⁶ Britannica, *FDR's “Fireside Chats,” the role of Eleanor Roosevelt, and crucial New Dealers*, Dec. 10, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/New-Deal/FDRs-Fireside-Chats-the-role-of-Eleanor-Roosevelt-and-crucial-New-Dealers>

⁵⁷ Britannica, *FDR's “Fireside Chats,” the role of Eleanor Roosevelt, and crucial New Dealers*, Dec. 10, 2025,

documents, McCarthy used, “evidence that was exaggerated, distorted, and in some cases utterly false, he accused hundreds of individuals of Communist activity, recklessly mixing the innocent with the assuredly guilty when it served his political purposes.”⁵⁸ His demagoguery found a ready audience precisely because fear of communism was already so engrained in the American population. This is precisely the same mechanism observed in Salem and in modern immigration enforcement: the government did not need conclusive evidence to persecute, it utilized a population already frightened enough that the threat of accusation alone was sufficient to compel silence, compliance, and conformity from targeted communities and political opponents alike.

Although pressing many similar features, there are some key differences between the Salem Witch Trials and the Second Red Scare that are important to distinguish. The main difference is the source of the fear of communism, which was heavily abused by Senator McCarthy, came from a place of real substance compared to the fear generated by the Puritan court during the Salem Witch Trials, which was fabricated and based on lies and rumors. Soviet espionage was real, documentation of communism taking over China, North Korea and Eastern Europe, confirmed that communism was on the rise, and that the U.S. could be next to fall. These worries were based on genuine geopolitical realities, not fabrications. Compared to the fear spread in Salem, which was based on false accusations, rumors, and fear of the court. The legal system of mid-twentieth century America was also vastly different from Puritan Salem: Congress, the Judiciary, and a free press all existed as checks on executive and legislative overreach, checks that simply had no equivalent in 1692. However, the pattern of governance through fear reasserted itself precisely because those legitimate concerns of communism were systematically amplified beyond what the evidence supported. The key distinctions between the Salem Witch Trials and the Second Red Scare shows us the defining factors of the Red Scare that made it similar yet different than the trials.

A compelling argument can be made however that the Second Red Scare emerged from genuine geopolitical concerns, and at the time, was an appropriate response to the growing concern of a communist takeover of the American government. The reasons for this fear were real concerns as well. Historian Ronald Martin, along with Britannica Editors, explain how after a turbulent wartime alliance among the U.S. and the Soviet Union had begun to unravel, “by 1948 the Soviets had installed communist governments in the countries of eastern Europe that had been liberated by the Red Army.”⁵⁹ Due to these sudden events many Americans were, “likewise alarmed by developments in 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong, took power in China and the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb.”⁶⁰ The expansion of communism around the world was a very real phenomenon that was occurring instantly among American citizens, and assuming that the U.S. may be next was not

⁵⁸ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.169)

⁵⁹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Red Scare,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, last updated June 17, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Red-Scare-politics>.

⁶⁰ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Red Scare,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, last updated June 17, 2025,

far-fetched. When some high ranking officials were outed as being communist, this spread more fear in the American people and pushed belief that all politicians can be communist as well. A prime example of this is Alger Hiss, a well-educated and well-connected former government lawyer and State Department official who had helped create the United Nations in the aftermath of World War II. However, he was sent to prison for espionage. In August of 1948, “Whittaker Chambers—a senior editor at Time magazine— was called by the House Committee on Un-American Activities to corroborate the testimony of Elizabeth Bentley, a Soviet spy who had defected in 1945 and accused dozens of members of the U.S. government of espionage. One official she named as possibly connected to the Soviets was Alger Hiss.” Hiss had persistently denied the accusations, but after further probing by the committee and federal officials, and because of certain key events in November 1948, Whittaker Chambers produced “documents showing both he and Hiss were committing espionage.” In early December of the same year Chambers provided the Committee on Un-American Activities, “with a package of microfilm and other information he had hidden inside a pumpkin on his Maryland farm. The two revelations, which became known as the “Pumpkin Papers,” contained images of State Department materials—including notes in Hiss’ own handwriting.” With this evidence Hiss was charged with perjury and was sentenced to five years in prison. This sent a shock through American citizens as a high ranking government official had been outed as a communist, which added on to the pre existing fear of communism taking over American democracy.

But, even though the concerns about communism were substantiated, politicians used it in their favor to gain influence and power. This study has gone through how Senator McCarthy abused his power as Senator through using fear of communism to his advantage. Not only would Senator McCarthy make baseless accusations of individuals being communist, but he blatantly abused his power as Senator, for example “when Republicans gained control of the Senate and Senator McCarthy became chair of PSI [Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations], he intensified his misuse of his investigative authority. He hired the abrasive 26-year-old Roy Cohn, one of the U.S. prosecutors who had tried Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, as his chief counsel and instructed him to search for communists in the U.S. government.”⁶¹ On top of this McCarthy had denied his fellow colleagues in the PSI to the “information being gathered, provided inadequate notice of hearings and meetings, and refused to allow subcommittee Democrats to hire their own staff. In addition, he embarrassed the subcommittee by engaging in outrageous conduct, including appearing inebriated at some hearings.”⁶² Additionally, McCarthy’s claims would often turn out false, for instance McCarthy had launched, “an investigation and 11 hearings examining the State Department’s foreign-language radio station Voice of America, which he alleged employed many communist sympathizers. None were found, but morale of the 2,000 employees plummeted, and one, Raymond Kaplan, committed suicide.”⁶³ Politicians like Senator McCarthy also used this fear of

⁶¹ “Senator Joe McCarthy’s Oversight Abuses,” Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy, accessed July 3, 2026, <https://levin-center.org/joe-mccarthys-oversight-abuses/>.

⁶² Senator Joe McCarthy’s Oversight Abuses,” Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy, accessed July 3, 2026,

⁶³ Senator Joe McCarthy’s Oversight Abuses,” Levin Center for Oversight and Democracy, accessed July 3, 2026,

communism to suppress rights of various members of the LGBTQ+ community, this resulted in a mass firing and immense moral panic among federal employees, this was termed the “Lavender Scare.”⁶⁴ Senator McCarthy’s rhetoric, “rhetoric explicitly associated Communists and gay people, turning the slow burn of repression into a firestorm.”⁶⁵ Members of the LGBTQ+ were unfairly targeted during the Second Red Scare, and politicians used the fear among citizens to make stereotypes and label gays and lesbians as communist. This had a huge effect on the livelihood of individuals a part of this community. An instance of this was when Francis Flanagan, the chief counsel to the Hoey committee (the Senate subcommittee investigating homosexuality in the federal workforce in 1950), “selectively used evidence that the committee had gathered, largely ignoring, for example, the complexities raised by medical authorities. The report also dismissed the hesitations, qualifying statements, and more tolerant attitudes voiced by a minority of agency officials.”⁶⁶ This selectively using evidence led to false perceptions of members in the LGTBQ+ community and false premises of what these employees actually did. The committee as a result of this, “urged government agencies and the Civil Service Commission to aggressively enforce their existing policies banning employees guilty of “immoral conduct.”⁶⁷ The committee also called for, “a tightening of sex crime laws in the District and for better communication among the agencies, the Civil Service Commission, and law enforcement officials.”⁶⁸ These laws resulted in, “somewhere between 5,000 and tens of thousands of gay workers lost their jobs during the Lavender Scare”⁶⁹

But, Senator McCarthy’s downfall would soon come through. “Senator Joseph McCarthy, had already destroyed his own potency by his abysmal performance on a widely televised and widely watched set of hearings to investigate his charges of Communist infiltration into the Army.”⁷⁰ When attorney Joseph Welch responded to McCarthy’s accusations during the ⁷⁰ Army-McCarthy hearings (court proceedings where McCarthy would accuse army members of being communist), with the now famous rebuttal—“Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?”—the crowd’s reaction signaled a decisive shift in public opinion. Journalist

⁶⁴ “Executive Order 10450: Eisenhower and the Lavender Scare,” U.S. National Park Service, last updated February 19, 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/lavender-scare.htm>.

⁶⁵ “Executive Order 10450: Eisenhower and the Lavender Scare,” U.S. National Park Service, last updated February 19, 2025

⁶⁶ “Executive Order 10450: Eisenhower and the Lavender Scare,” U.S. National Park Service, last updated February 19, 2025

⁶⁷ “Executive Order 10450: Eisenhower and the Lavender Scare,” U.S. National Park Service,

⁶⁸ “Executive Order 10450: Eisenhower and the Lavender Scare,” U.S. National Park Service,

⁶⁹ “Executive Order 10450: Eisenhower and the Lavender Scare,” U.S. National Park Service,

⁷⁰ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.142)

Edward R. Murrow had been building toward that shift for months, warning audiences that "the line between investigating and persecuting is a very fine one,"⁷¹ and reframing McCarthy's campaign as a threat to constitutional principles rather than a defense of national security. Although Murrow's broadcasts were critical in turning the public against McCarthy, the dismantling of his campaign ultimately required sustained collective pressure, accumulated ridicule, institutional resistance, and shifting public opinion, rather than a single journalistic intervention. This is a striking contrast to the Salem Witch Trials, where there was no one singular voice to challenge the Puritan's courts methods of removing witches in the village. By June 1954 due to Edward R. Murrow's persuasive nation wide broadcasts combined with public fatigue of McCarthy's attack on the American public by using fear of communism, "McCarthy's favorable ratings in the Gallup Poll had fallen from 50 percent to 34 percent." He was finally censured by the Senate that December and passed away in office in 1957.

This resolution to the second Red Scare stands in contrast to the Salem Witch Trials, which ended with formal legislative repudiation and compensation to surviving families, and to modern immigration enforcement, which has produced neither outcome. The Red Scare occupies a middle position: McCarthy was discredited, but no institution formally acknowledged the harm done to those blacklisted. It is the absence of structural accountability, not merely the presence of fear, that connects all three events together. The following examination demonstrates how the same four-stage pattern that connects all the three events together, targeting of vulnerable population, manufactured threat, punitive policy, erosion of due process, has resurfaced in modern times through the recent immigration enforcement done under the current administration. Instead of attacks being on witchcraft or communism, it is now on immigration and immigrants.

Current Day ICE detentions and immigrant stereotypes (2025-present)

With both the Salem Witch Trials and the Second Red Scare being critically analyzed, patterns can be identified about how present-day administrations, in 2025, implement the same strategies used in the Salem Witch Trials and the Second Red Scare: manufactured threats, public hysteria, and institutional persecution. In the Salem Witch Trials and Second Red Scare, villagers and citizens were being blamed for being something they were not. Immigrants in recent decades are being labeled as criminals without concrete evidence, and this has only increased significantly under the current administration. In recent times, immigrants are being accused of being criminals, thieves, and murderers. However, empirical evidence contradicts this characterization. As noted above, the current administration has cited multiple misleading statistics to justify immigration enforcement. A 2020 study by Michael T. Light, Jingying He, Jason P. Robey, comparing felony arrest rates among undocumented immigrants, legal immigrants, and native-born citizens in Texas found results that directly contradict the administration's characterization of immigrants and immigrant communities.

⁷¹ Risen, *Red Scare*, Chap. 5 (Pg.175)

The study done in Texas compared crime rates between undocumented immigrants, legal immigrants, and native-born US citizens in Texas. In the study, they began, “by presenting aggregate crime rates from 2012 to 2018.”⁷² The study collected data on crimes like “violent, property, drug, and traffic arrest rates...” of three particular groups who were “native-born citizens, legal immigrants, and undocumented immigrants.”⁷³ With the data, the results were opposite of what one might expect. “Relative to native-born citizens and legal immigrants, undocumented immigrants have the lowest felony arrest rates across all four crime types.” The current administration intends to deport all non-legal immigrants, and their main argument is that these undocumented immigrants are “rough people, in many cases from jails, prisons, from mental institutions, insane asylums.”⁷⁴ Under the current administration immigrants are viewed in a negative light, as quoted from President Trump on his position on immigrants and how they are “poisoning the blood of our country...They poison mental institutions and prisons all over the world.”⁷⁵ The study by Light, He, and Robey, disproves this, by stating:

“Relative to native-born citizens and legal immigrants, undocumented immigrants have the lowest felony arrest rates across all four crime types. For violent, property, and drug offenses, legal immigrants occupy a middle position between undocumented immigrants and U.S.-born citizens. The gaps between native-born citizens and undocumented immigrants are substantial: US-born citizens are over 2 times more likely to be arrested for violent crimes, 2.5 times more likely to be arrested for drug crimes, and over 4 times more likely to be arrested for property crimes.”⁷⁶

With the information from the study it is clear that information about undocumented citizens being harmful to society or “animals” who break the law, is false and rooted in stereotypes rather than evidence. This clearly resembles the Salem Witch Trials and the Second Red Scare. Similar to then, fear and hysteria are being spread among the immigrant communities in America, and among non-immigrants, painting a narrative that undocumented citizens are harmful and should be deported. The bigger issue is that these deportations are taking place without fair trial or representation, which is exactly what happened during the Salem Witch Trials, how the church conducted the trials using forced

⁷² Michael T. Light, Jingying He, Jason P. Robey, *Comparing crime rates between undocumented immigrants, legal immigrants, and native-born US citizens in Texas*, December 7, 2020

⁷³ Light, He, Robey, *Comparing crime rates between undocumented immigrants, legal immigrants, and native-born US citizens in Texas*, December 7, 2020

⁷⁴ American Civil Liberties Union, *TRUMP ON IMMIGRATION: TEARING APART IMMIGRANT FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, AND THE FABRIC OF OUR NATION*,

⁷⁵ Danielle Kurtzleben & Franco Ordoñez, *What Did Trump Say? Explaining the Former President's Favorite Talking Points*, Nat'l Pub. Radio (May 11, 2024, 7:00 AM), <https://www.npr.org/2024/05/11/1245900177/trump-rally-speech-talking-points-rhetoric-immigration-abortion>.

⁷⁶ Light, He, Robey, *Comparing crime rates between undocumented immigrants, legal immigrants, and native-born US citizens in Texas*, December 7, 2020

and coerced accusations and confessions, and with the Second Red Scare, where accusations were made on hardly any concrete evidence. A prominent example from this year is that of Kilmar Abrego Garcia.

Kilmar Abrego Garcia's legal case is legally complex, but the premise is that he was illegally deported by the Trump administration on March 15, 2025. The US Supreme Court later admitted that this action was illegal: "The United States acknowledges that Abrego Garcia was subject to a withholding order forbidding his removal to El Salvador, and that the removal to El Salvador was therefore illegal. The United States states that the removal to El Salvador was the result of an "administrative error."⁷⁷ But this "administrative error", explained by the George Washington Law Review, was unlawful as "Abrego Garcia was subject to a withholding order forbidding his removal to El Salvador, and that the removal to El Salvador was therefore illegal."⁷⁸ This action was a clear violation of the Constitution and ⁷⁸ the human rights of Kilmar Abrego Garcia. However, even after this admitted mistake from the administration, the detention of immigrants did not slow down. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Administrative Arrest Statistics, display statistics showing "527,459 arrests being made, from the fiscal year of 2021-2025, and in the fiscal year of 2025, over 26,606 arrests were made."⁷⁹ However, the Cato Institute (Cato Institute is a prominent libertarian think tank based in Washington, D.C., founded in 1974)⁸⁰ shows data supporting the fact that, "65 Percent of People Taken by ICE Had No Convictions, 93 Percent No Violent Convictions."⁸¹ Additionally, the Cato Institute's data shows statistics providing further details: "As of June 14, ICE had booked into detention 204,297 individuals (since October 1, 2024, the start of fiscal year 2025). Of those book-ins, 65 percent, or 133,687 individuals, had no criminal convictions. Moreover, more than 93 percent of ICE book-ins were never convicted of any violent offenses."⁸²

From Kilmar Abrego Garcia's Supreme Court case, and CATO Institute's findings, a pattern can be identified in how the current administration conducts its governmental affairs. By using the current

⁷⁷ KRISTI NOEM, SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF ⁷⁷
HOMELAND SECURITY, ET AL. v. KILMAR
ARMANDO ABREGO GARCIA, ET AL, 604 U. S. (2025)

⁷⁸ George Washington Law Review, *Supreme Court Affirms Lawlessness of the Removal of Kilmar Abrego Garcia*, April 18, 2025

⁷⁹ U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, *ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations Statistics*,

⁸⁰ Tyler Biscontini, *The Cato Institute*, 2025,
<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/politics-and-government/cato-institute#full-article>

⁸¹ David J. Bier, *65 Percent of People Taken by ICE Had No Convictions, 93 Percent No Violent Convictions*, June 20, 2025

⁸² Biscontini, *The Cato Institute*, 2025,
<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/politics-and-government/cato-institute#full-article>

arguments against immigration to their favor, President Trump has passed legislation and enforced unjust laws on immigrants in the U.S. in their favor of removing dangerous immigrants from the country. The administration has repeatedly emphasized how they intend to undertake the “largest domestic deportation operation in American history,”⁸³ but as analyzed previously most immigrants in detention facilities are not dangerous and do not have a criminal record. The current administration follows a similar pattern we have analyzed prior in the paper: the government portrays a group of people as dangerous, the public fears and generates stereotypes of this group, harsh policies are extended, and innocent people are punished.

However many critics may argue that both enforce harsher policies in favor of border security and consider mass deportation policies as legitimate government functions. Although this argument is a popular opinion among some of the American population, multiple studies show that immigrant communities not only majorly contribute to the American economy, but they also commit the least crimes. As Light et al demonstrates (cited above), undocumented immigrants have the lowest felony arrest rates across all four crime types compared to both legal immigrants and native-born citizens. The stereotypes of illegal and undocumented immigrants committing crimes has been disproven by multiple studies. Not only this, but immigrants contribute massively to the U.S. economy. Julia Gelatt at the Migration Policy Institute highlights their contributions by stating, “immigration, on balance, is a net positive for the U.S. economy...Immigrants boost overall economic growth by expanding the labor force and increasing consumer spending. Immigrants were involved in the development of 30 percent of patents in strategic industries in recent years, and more than 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants.”⁸⁴ Many also argue that immigrants are hogging the job market, and stake the jobs of American citizens, however this has also been proven false on multiple accounts. Gelatt explains how, “immigration is driving job growth and productivity and is projected to continue doing so in the coming years: The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that the greater level of immigration expected between 2024 and 2034 will boost gross domestic product (GDP) by \$8.9 trillion.”⁸⁵ Additionally immigrants are the heart of the labor force, and without them a large percentage of labor would be left empty and business would suffer. Sara Estep and Kennedy Andara from the Center for American Progress emphasize how immigration, “is the driving force behind America’s labor supply growth, accounting for about half of labor force growth each year for the past three decades and an even larger share in recent years...In an economy with low birth rates, immigration is an integral component of America’s labor supply. If reductions to immigration continue on this aggressive path, negative job growth could become the new normal according to some estimates.”⁸⁶ They also show how the current

⁸³ ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), *TRUMP ON IMMIGRATION TEARING APART IMMIGRANT FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, AND THE FABRIC OF OUR NATION*, June 6, 2024

⁸⁴ Julia Gelatt, “Explainer: Immigrants and the U.S. Economy,” Migration Policy Institute, October 2024,

⁸⁵ Julia Gelatt, “Explainer: Immigrants and the U.S. Economy,” Migration Policy Institute, October 2024,

⁸⁶ Center for American Progress, “Immigrants Make the Labor Market Great,” March 6, 2026, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/immigrants-make-the-labor-market-great/>.

administration's enforcement instead of bringing positive employment outcomes, will actually do the opposite. "Indicators such as the employment-to-population ratio (EPOP) and labor force participation rate (LFPR) for native-born workers demonstrate that the Trump administration's policies do not seem to be pulling these workers off the sidelines as promised...the LFPR for native-born workers fell in the fall of 2025 and remains lower than the forecasted LFPR, with today's latest data showing the LFPR for native-born workers fell to 61 percent. Meanwhile, the native-born unemployment rate remains elevated in February 2026 at 4.7 percent, compared with 4.4 percent at this time last year."⁸⁷ By using a three-month average system to address unadjusted data collected by the study, their analysis found that native-born workers' labor market outcomes look significantly worse in comparison to pre-pandemic levels. By nearly all metrics immigration has seen be a net positive to the U.S. economy and society in general. The available evidence therefore suggests that stricter enforcement policies, absent proportionate evidentiary justification, risk compounding economic and social harm rather than addressing a documented threat.

The Salem Witch Trials, the Second Red Scare, and current administration decisions all employ the same strategy: spreading fear and hysteria to consolidate governmental power. Although events like the Salem Witch Trials and Second Red Scare were resolved over time, their impact is still seen in today's politics. Baseless claims made during these eras led to imprisonment, and stereotypes functioning as vehicles for misinformation, and all of this results in fear and hysteria among immigrant communities. Instead of replicating the mistakes of the past, it is beneficial to learn from them. With this knowledge about past events and their usage of fear and hysteria, the goal is to equip citizens with historical awareness so they can recognize and resist patterns of institutional persecution.

DISCUSSION

The three case studies examined in this paper reveal a consistent institutional pattern, but they are not identical in their causes, contexts, or consequences. The Salem Witch Trials emerged from a tightly knit Puritan theocracy in which religious authority and governmental authority were effectively the same: the court manufactured guilt through a legal framework built on spectral evidence and coerced confession, with no mechanism for appeal or rebuttal from its villagers. The Second Red Scare, by contrast, operated within the constitutional democratic borders, yet the pervasive fear of communist infiltration created conditions in which Senator McCarthy and his allies could subvert due process norms with minimal institutional resistance. Modern immigration enforcement operates within a more developed legal and constitutional framework than either previous case, and the existence of judicial review, as illustrated by the Supreme Court's ruling in the *Kilmar Abrego Garcia* case, represents a check that simply did not exist in Puritan Salem. This paper argues that the mechanisms of governance through fear operate in structurally comparable ways across all three episodes, and suggests that governing authorities have

⁸⁷ Center for American Progress, "Immigrants Make the Labor Market Great," March 6, 2026,

drawn on this mechanism across vastly different political contexts, consistently leveraging public fear to justify enforcement action against vulnerable populations.

Critics of this comparative framework might argue that equating these historical episodes risks giving less importance to the genuine security concerns that motivated Cold War anti communism or contemporary immigration enforcement. For example, an argument can be made that Soviet espionage was quite a real threat; communist governments were suppressing democratic institutions across Eastern Europe. Supporters of current border enforcement policies argue that sovereignty over immigration is a core governmental function and that enforcing these policies on illegal immigrants is fair. These are legitimate points that this paper acknowledges. However, the pattern this study identifies is the systematic exaggeration of a governmental concern beyond what the evidence supports, and the consequent application of state power towards individuals who pose little to no actual threats. The available data, used in this paper, consistently demonstrates this: 65 percent of those detained by ICE had no criminal convictions; McCarthy's charges were built on evidence that was—by historical consensus—exaggerated and often false; and the Salem courts executed individuals on testimonies that was inherently unverifiable and based on spectral evidence. In each case, the state's enforcement apparatus substantially outran its evidentiary foundation. That gap, between the scale of the fear and the scale of the actual threat, is what this study identifies as the recurring and defining feature of governance through fear by the governing authorities in the the three case studies.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that governance through fear, the deliberate cultivation of mass anxiety around a manufactured or exaggerated threat to justify institutional persecution of a mass vulnerable population, constitutes a recurring structural pattern in American political history. The Salem Witch Trials of 1692, the Second Red Scare of 1947-1954, and modern immigration enforcement under the 2025 administration each exhibit the same four-stage mechanism: a vulnerable group is identified as a threat; public fear and hysteria are cultivated through misinformation and stereotypes; punitive policy is constructed around that fear; and individuals are stripped of due process. The specific populations targeted, the legal frameworks employed, and the historical outcomes differ substantially across the three cases. What remains consistent is the underlying mechanism and the gap between the scale of enforcement and the evidentiary basis for it.

Two key findings emerge: one, each episode eventually encountered institutional resistance, through shifting public opinion, journalistic scrutiny, or judicial review, that exposed and partially curtailed the pattern. This shows the corrective mechanisms of democratic governance, though vulnerable to exploitation of fear, retain some capacity to self-correct. Two, in each case that resistance was delayed, this resulted in consequences: executions in Salem, careers and lives destroyed during the Second Red Scare, as well as thousands being detained with no criminal record in 2025. The conclusion here is that

earlier recognition of the pattern matters immensely, and that historical literacy is a vital tool which is capable of enabling that recognition. Future research would benefit from examining additional comparative cases, including the War against Islamic State and its impact on the American population, as well as post 9/11 Muslim community surveillance, to test the generalizability of this framework, and from studying what specific conditions allow corrective institutional mechanisms to activate more rapidly. Historical literacy is not merely an academic exercise; it is a crucial civic pillar that allows legislators, jurists, politicians, and citizens alike to recognize the architecture of governance through fear before it fully constructs itself.

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