

McCarthy transcripts released in Washington

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The release this month of transcripts of closed hearings conducted 50 years ago by witch-hunting anti-communist US Senator Joseph R. McCarthy could not have come at a more appropriate time. McCarthy's interrogation of such figures as composer Aaron Copland and writer Langston Hughes, among many others, contains no major surprises, but sheds additional light on the historical significance of what came to be known as McCarthyism.

McCarthy was first elected as the Republican Senator from Wisconsin in 1946. This was the dawn of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, and the Wisconsin demagogue took full advantage of the anti-communist campaign that was steadily escalated during the late 1940s. Advancing himself as the most intransigent of the crusaders against the "Soviet menace," he used his Senate position to extend the red baiting and witch hunting to the Democratic Party, academia and the arts.

After the Republicans won a Senate majority in the 1952 elections, McCarthy gained a new platform as head of the Government Operations Committee and its Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. The subcommittee held 161 private sessions in 1953 and 1954, questioning 395 witnesses. This testimony, totaling some 4,000 pages, has now been made public. The transcripts had been held in the National Archives, which only received instructions two years ago to prepare them for release.

Donald Ritchie, the Senate Associate Historian, told the press that the transcripts demonstrated that McCarthy had utilized the sessions as the equivalent of grand jury hearings, preparing his "case" for the public hearings. In other words, he sorted through potential witnesses, weeding out some who stood up to his abuse, and selecting others whom he believed were most useful because they invoked the Fifth Amendment to avoid testimony, or because he felt able to intimidate them.

Much of McCarthy's attention was focused on intellectuals and the entertainment industry. The witnesses included, in addition to Hughes and Copland, many of the most talented and important writers and artists of the time. Writers Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett, playwrights Clifford Odets and Arthur Miller, actors Lena Horne and Charlie Chaplin—these were only some of those subpoenaed by the witch-hunting committee.

Howard Fast, the best-selling novelist who died just two months ago, berated McCarthy for the way he had been served with the subpoena to appear. "At about 1:30 a.m. there was a pounding on the door...which woke my children and terrified them in the time-honored Gestapo methods, and I came down there, and here was this offensive character again, and this time, for the first time, he stated he had a subpoena with him." Fast was not called back for public testimony.

The witnesses clearly did not want to collaborate with McCarthy. They adopted a variety of tactics to try to dodge his attacks. At the same time, it is striking how none were able to directly denounce McCarthy's redbaiting.

Dashiell Hammett, the author of *The Maltese Falcon* and other famous mysteries, defended himself on the grounds of the Fifth Amendment to the Bill of Rights and its protection against self-incrimination. McCarthy's assistant Roy Cohn questioned him about a short story called "Night Shade," which Hammett explained "had to do with Negro-white

relations..." "Did that story in any way reflect the Communist line?" asked Cohn. Hammett's response: "That is a difficult—on the word 'reflect' I would say no, it didn't reflect it. It was against racism."

Cohn asked Langston Hughes, the towering literary figure whose centennial was commemorated last year, "Have you ever been a believer in socialism?"

"My feeling, sir," Hughes replied, "is that I have believed in the entire philosophies of the left at one period of my life, including socialism, communism, Trotskyism. All isms have influenced me one way or another, and I can not answer to any specific ism, because I am not familiar with the details of them and have not read their literature."

Hughes went on to claim that he had "not read the Marxist volumes. I have not read beyond the introduction of the *Communist Manifesto*." When Cohn asked if one of his poems followed the Communist Party line, Hughes replied, perhaps with some irony, "It very well might have done so, although I am not sure I ever knew what the Communist Party line was since it very often changed."

McCarthy questioned Copland, the most famous American composer of his day, whose works include *Appalachian Spring*, *Billy the Kid* and *Rodeo*. When he was asked whether he had ever been a communist sympathizer, he parried, "I am not sure I would be able to say what you mean by the word 'sympathizer.'" Copland was not called back to testify in public.

Then there was Eslanda Goode Robeson, the wife of blacklisted singer-actor Paul Robeson, whose career was essentially cut short as a result of the persecution he faced as a prominent sympathizer of the Communist Party.

Mrs. Robeson initially befuddled and irritated McCarthy when she cited the Fifteenth Amendment (enacted after the Civil War to grant blacks the right to vote) as well as the Fifth in refusing to answer whether she was a member of the CP.

"The Fifteenth Amendment has nothing to do with it," said McCarthy. Mrs. Robeson said, "[Y]ou see, I am a second-class citizen in this country and, therefore, feel the need of the Fifteenth... I am not quite equal to the rest of the white people."

After she said that she would stand on the Fifth Amendment, McCarthy, who inveighed constantly against "Fifth Amendment communists," decided her testimony would be useful and called her back for the public session.

There were several reasons why McCarthy was able, to a great extent, to intimidate these witnesses. They had all been sympathetic to the American Communist Party, but instead of proudly affirming their political views and exposing the redbaiters, they tried to get out of the line of fire.

First, their political outlook was shaped by the Popular Front period and the influence of the Communist Party after it had been turned into a political tool of the Stalinist bureaucracy. The Popular Front's uncritical glorification of American liberalism and democracy (Stalinist leader Earl Browder had called communism "20th century Americanism") left its sympathizers unprepared for the sharp political shift that took place after the end of the Second World War. They could not explain that the US ruling class did not represent the best democratic traditions of this

country, and certainly did not represent the interests of the American working people.

There is another important element involved. The artists and intellectuals lacked any understanding of the need for political intransigence. They were devoted to democratic rights, but they lacked any deeper insight about how to defend them. There were profound social and historical reasons behind the fact that people like Hughes had never read Marx or Trotsky. There was an element of conformism involved, of a search for immediate popularity rather than the defense of principles.

The American Stalinists made use of the pragmatism that was widespread in the US, attracting a layer of left-wing artists and intellectuals and at the same time holding them back. The idea was encouraged that dedication to the struggles of the working class and the oppressed meant appealing on the basis of the lowest common cultural denominator, along with a toothless political liberalism. These conceptions held back the aesthetic as well as the political development of these artists. Then, when they were called upon to defend certain ideas they had upheld in the past, even those who refused to embrace anti-communism were unable to stand up to the likes of McCarthy.

Another contributing factor was the sharp shift to the right within the American labor movement. A whole layer of union officials who had been cultivated by the Stalinists shifted their allegiance. The political backwardness of the unions, for which the Stalinists shared major responsibility, contributed decisively to the isolation felt by those who were called to testify before McCarthy's committee.

Several other things need to be pointed out about the McCarthy transcripts and the context in which they have been released.

The two Senators who carried out the project of preparing these documents, Michigan Democrat Carl Levin and Maine Republican Susan Collins, used a May 5 news conference to suggest that the new revelations show the strength of American democracy. The press conference took place in the same room where the Army-McCarthy hearings unfolded in 1954. The witch-hunter-in-chief was censured by the Senate in December 1954. Shunted aside, he died in semi-disgrace less than three years later.

"By providing broad public access to the transcripts from this era, we hope that the excesses of McCarthyism will serve as a cautionary tale to future generations," said Senator Collins.

Levin added, "McCarthyism now stands for an approach to life which people want to avoid. To attack people personally for their political beliefs and to browbeat them for asserting their rights, is no longer something which people are willingly engaged in, or want to be labeled as engaging in."

The two Senators' comments are premature, to say the least. Smug and disingenuous are adjectives that better describe their remarks.

McCarthy was not an aberration. He was the noisiest and most prominent in a long line of government witchhunters extending through most of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st. There was Attorney General Palmer, who carried out the notorious raids deporting immigrant workers in 1920; the House Un-American Activities Committee, with its decades of witch hunting; and the 48-year reign of J. Edgar Hoover at the FBI, including his notorious hounding of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the COINTELPRO campaign against the socialist, civil rights and anti-war movements.

The real complaint of many of McCarthy's establishment critics about what they call McCarthyism is that the Wisconsin Senator, by going after those who had little or no association with left-wing activity, gave anti-communism a bad name. Those "innocent" of political dissent, or those who could be characterized as "politically naïve," were punished along with the "guilty."

There were unquestionably elements of fascism in McCarthy's technique—his social demagoguery and anti-establishment rhetoric, his

extreme chauvinism, and the conspiracy theories targeting the "enemy within," the "soft-on-communism" crowd that could be held responsible for the "loss" of China in the Chinese Revolution. He never constructed a fascist movement, however, and his operation was shut down when he outlived his usefulness for the most powerful sections of the US ruling class.

The immediate cause of McCarthy's downfall was his expansion of targets to include the military and other loyal supporters of the Republican administration of President Dwight Eisenhower. The more essential reason, however, lies in the social and economic context. The postwar prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s was well underway. This was to be a period of modest political and economic reforms, including wage and benefit improvements and civil rights legislation. Of course it was period of mass struggles, but the authorities were able to grant certain concessions and maintain a relative political stability.

Here a comparison with the early years of the present century is important. Far from McCarthyism being a "cautionary tale to future generations," as Senator Collins suggested, there are plenty of present-day parallels that are apparent. We live under conditions of deepening global economic stagnation and crisis, of growing global tension, of war and threats to civil rights and liberties at home. The threats to "watch what you say" are coming, not simply from one Senator, but from the White House itself. It is the president himself who, in Senator Levin's words, is "attack[ing] people personally for their political beliefs." The so-called Patriot Act and other repressive legislation, the police attacks on peaceful protesters, the holding of US citizens incommunicado without charges, and the media functioning to marginalize and demonize political opposition—all this is happening in 2003. And the very same Senators who point sanctimoniously to the McCarthy transcripts are saying nothing about the obvious threats to free speech and assembly today.

While the extreme chauvinists and their fascistic allies have cowed the Democrats into submission as they did 50 years ago, it is also true that the popular opposition to incipient McCarthyism today is bolder and broader than it was during the Cold War. There are many who, if called before a modern-day McCarthy, would respond much more aggressively than the witnesses of 50 years ago. The growing movement of opposition to war and police state methods of rule must base itself on the lessons of McCarthyism to build an independent political movement of the working class against the bipartisan assault on democratic rights today.



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