

The Cold War: How did anti-communist fear affect American politics and Culture in the 1950s?

INTRODUCTION FOR STUDENTS

During the course of the twentieth century, Americans frequently worried about the impact of communism on society. In 1919, the United States experienced its first “Red Scare,” as government officials attempted to deport foreign-born labor activists. During the Depression, however, some Americans who were disenchanted with capitalism joined the Communist Party (CP). Then, during World War II, the USSR was an ally with the United States. As the Cold War began to take shape, fears about the threat of domestic communism reappeared. During this period, politicians such as Senator Joseph McCarthy used accusations of communism to attack political opponents. At the same time, the federal government began a series of anticommunist campaigns aimed at finding communists in American institutions such as labor unions, schools, universities, and the entertainment industry. The most famous of these efforts was the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), a Congressional committee that pressured witnesses to “name names” of associates involved in their activities.

In this lesson, you will begin by discussing the First Amendment and some of the limits that were placed on the freedom of speech between 1919 and 1950. In the second half of the lesson, you will

review testimony and government surveillance documents to learn about communism in American society during the 1940s and 1950s. You will then discuss whether the threat of communist subversion justified restrictions on civil liberties in the United States during the Cold War.



Cover of *Is This Tomorrow*, a color comic book published by the Catechetical Guild Educational Society of St. Paul, MN

Source: Michael Barson and Steven Heller, *Red Scared*, p. 157

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

The first four documents of this workshop will ask you to think about freedom of speech. It will also ask you to consider how fear of communism caused Americans to place limits on this freedom.

Document 1: First Amendment (1789)

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

1. What does “freedom of speech” mean? Can you give any examples of “freedom of speech”?

“freedom of speech” means:

examples of “freedom of speech”:

2. According to the excerpt, under what circumstances may the government limit the freedom of speech? Do you think there should be limits?

limitations on “freedom of speech”:

agree/disagree with limitations:

Document 2: *Schenck v. United States* (1919). In 1919, the Supreme Court upheld a decision against several Socialist Party members who had printed out pamphlets urging young men to resist joining the armed forces. The decision, written by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, placed a limit on freedom of speech. It is partially excerpted below.

...the character of every act depends upon the circumstances in which it is done. The most **stringent** protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theatre and causing a panic. It does not even protect a man from an **injunction** against **uttering** words that may have all the effect of force. The question in every case is whether the words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create clear and present danger that they will bring about the **substantive** evils that Congress has a right to prevent. It is a question of **proximity** and **degree**. When a nation is at war many things that might be said in time of peace are such a **hindrance** to its effort that their **utterance** will not be **endured** so long as men fight and that no Court could regard them as protected by any constitutional right.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS:

stringent—tight or strict

injunction—a court order

uttering—saying

substantive—substantial, considerable

proximity—closeness

degree—a measure of depth or rank

hindrance—a drag (on a cause)

utterance—vocal expression

endured—suffered patiently

1. According to the *Schenck v. United States* decision, what are the limits of free speech? What analogy [comparison based on similarity] does Holmes make to explain the decision?
2. Why, according to Holmes, might the definition of “free speech” in a time of war be different from “free speech” during a time of peace?
3. Do you agree or disagree with these limits?

Document 3: Smith Act. Congress passed the Smith Act in 1940. In 1949, the Justice Department used the Smith Act to jail Communist Party leaders. The Supreme Court upheld the conviction in 1951 (*Dennis et al. v. United States*). The law is partially excerpted below.

Whoever knowingly or willfully **advocates**, **abets**, **advises**, or teaches the duty, necessity, **desirability**, or **propriety** of **overthrowing** or destroying the government of the United States or the government of any State, Territory, District or Possession thereof, or the government of any political subdivision therein, by force or violence, or by the assassination of any officer of any such government; or...

...Whoever organizes or helps or attempts to organize any society, group, or assembly of persons who teach, advocate, or encourage the overthrow or destruction [of the United States] by force or violence; or becomes or is a member of, or affiliates with, any such society, group, or assembly of persons, knowing the purposes thereof--

Shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than twenty years, or both, and shall be ineligible for employment by the United States or any department or agency thereof, for the five years next following his conviction.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS:

advocates—calls for

abets—actively helps or aids

advises—gives suggestions or advice

desirability—the fact of believing that something would be good

propriety—appropriateness

overthrowing—bringing the downfall or defeat of

1. What kind of actions or activities were illegal under the Smith Act?
2. Look at how you defined “freedom of speech” on the previous page. Is this a limit on free speech or free assembly as you defined it? Explain why or why not.
3. Do you think membership in the Communist Party is itself proof that party leaders wanted to overthrow the government? Explain your answer.
4. When the Supreme Court upheld the conviction of CP leaders in 1951, two justices dissented. Why might they have disagreed with the majority of the court?

Document 4: National Security Council Paper 68 (1950). This top-secret document claimed that only the United States could stop Soviet expansion. It argues for the foreign policy of “containment” (definition: the act of preventing the expansion of a hostile power). The following excerpt addresses fears about communism in American society.

...It is quite clear from Soviet theory and practice that the Kremlin seeks to bring the free world under its **dominion** by the methods of the cold war. The preferred technique is to **subvert** by **infiltration** and **intimidation**. Every institution of our society is an instrument which it is sought to **stultify** and turn against our purposes. Those that touch most closely our material and moral strength are obviously the prime targets, labor unions, civic enterprises, schools, churches, and all media for influencing opinion. The effort is not so much to make them serve obvious Soviet ends as to prevent them from serving our ends, and thus to make them sources of confusion in our economy, our culture, and our body politic...

GLOSSARY OF TERMS:

dominion—rule

subvert—to ruin or corrupt

infiltration—enter secretly

intimidation—threat of force

stultify—to make useless

1. According to the document, how did the Soviets plan to gain control of the free world?
2. What organizations or institutions would be the target of Soviet threats? Are these institutions the same as those outlined in the Smith Act?
3. How could anticommunists use NSC-68 to support their crusade against domestic communism? Who would be the targets of the crusade?

HOUSE UN-AMERICAN TESTIMONY

During the 1940s and 1950s, many individuals testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee. The next section will ask you to consider the activities of some Americans who testified before HUAC and/or were investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. As you read these documents, you will be asked to decide whether the person's activities constitute subversion. Before you begin reading, you may want to think about how you would define "un-American activities."

Testimony #1 (October 23, 1947)

Ronald Reagan was the president of the Screen Actor's Guild in 1947. He later became Governor of California (1966) and then President of the United States (1980).

STRIPLING: As a member of the board of directors, as president of the Screen Actors Guild, and as an active member, have you at any time observed or noted within the organization a clique of either communists or fascists who were attempting to exert influence or pressure on the guild?

REAGAN: ...There has been a small group within the Screen Actors Guild which has consistently opposed the policy of the guild board and officers of the guild, as evidenced by the vote on various issues. That small clique referred to has been suspected of more or less following the tactics that we associate with the Communist Party.

STRIPLING: Would you refer to them as a disruptive influence within the guild?

REAGAN: I would say that at times they have attempted to be a disruptive influence.

STRIPLING: You have no knowledge yourself as to whether or not any of them are members of the Communist Party?

REAGAN: No, sir, I have no investigative force, or anything, and I do not know.

STRIPLING: Has it ever been reported to you that certain members of the guild were communists?

REAGAN: Yes, sir, I have heard different discussions and some of them tagged as communists.

STRIPLING: Would you say that this clique has attempted to dominate the guild?

REAGAN: Well, sir, by attempting to put their own particular views on various issues, I guess you would have to say that our side was attempting to dominate, too, because we were fighting just as hard to put over our views, and I think, we were proven correct by the figures—Mr. Murphy gave the figures—and those figures were always approximately the same, an average of 90 percent or better of the Screen Actors Guild voted in favor of those matters now guild policy.

Questions about Testimony 1:

1. Does Ronald Reagan testify that there are communists in the Screen Actors Guild?
2. Does the group to whom Reagan refers seem dangerous or subversive?
3. Why would the FBI be interested in possible communist activities in the entertainment industry? What does the entertainment industry have to do with national security?

Questions about Testimony 2 (on the following page):

1. Why, according to Mr. Scherer, has Mr. Robeson been asked to testify in front of HUAC?
2. Mr. Robeson claims that he felt like “a full human being” when he went to Russia. What does he mean? Besides the Cold War, what else was happening in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s?
3. When Mr. Scherer asks Robeson “Why do you not stay in Russia,” what is Robeson’s response? What Americans or American images does Robeson mention? Do you think the response was effective?

Testimony #2 (June 12, 1956)

Paul Robeson was an African-American actor and singer. Angered by racism and discrimination in American society, Robeson developed leftist beliefs during the 1930s; he protested lynchings and urged African Americans to resist the draft after World War II. Because the government determined that the actor and his wife were members of the Communist Party, they were not able to use their passports between 1947 and 1958, when the Robesons moved to Europe. Robeson appeared before HUAC in 1956. His testimony is excerpted below:

MR. ARENS [*quoting a speech by Paul Robeson*]: If the American warmongers fancy that they could win America's millions of Negroes for a war against those countries (i.e., the Soviet Union and the peoples' democracies) then they ought to understand that this will never be the case. Why should the Negroes ever fight against the only nations of the world where racial discrimination is prohibited, and where the people can live freely? Never! I can assure you, they will never fight against either the Soviet Union or the peoples' democracies.

Did you make that statement?

MR. ROBESON: I do not remember that. But what is perfectly clear today is that nine hundred million other colored people have told you that they will not. Four hundred million in India, and millions everywhere, have told you, precisely, that the colored people are not going to die for anybody: they are going to die for their independence. We are dealing not with fifteen million colored people, we are dealing with hundreds of millions.

[*more testimony*]

MR. ROBESON: In Russia I felt for the first time like a full human being. No color prejudice like in Mississippi, no color prejudice like in Washington. It was the first time I felt like a human being. Where I did not feel the pressure of color as I feel [it] in this Committee today.

MR. SCHERER: Why do you not stay in Russia?

MR. ROBESON: Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay here, and have a part of it just like you. And no Fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear? I am for peace with the Soviet Union, and I am for peace with China, and I am not for peace or friendship with the Fascist Franco [Spain], and I am not for peace with Fascist Nazi Germans. I am for peace with decent people.

MR. SCHERER: YOU are here because you are promoting the Communist cause.

MR. ROBESON: I am here because I am opposing the neo-Fascist cause which I see arising in these committees. You are like the Alien [and] Sedition Act, and Jefferson could be sitting here, and Frederick Douglass could be sitting here, and Eugene Debs could be here.

FBI FILES; DALTON TRUMBO

Between 1942 and 1958, the FBI investigated the Communist Party's supposed infiltration of the motion picture industry. Ten individuals—later known as the “Hollywood Ten”—refused to answer HUAC's questions regarding their affiliation with the Communist Party; they were convicted of contempt and blacklisted by Hollywood.

Dalton Trumbo, a screenwriter with leftist sympathies, was one of the “Hollywood Ten.” During World War II, he wrote the screenplay for films such as “Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo,” but he was blacklisted by Hollywood after he refused to testify before HUAC. Writing under a different name, Trumbo wrote the Oscar-winning original

stories and screenplays for films like “Roman Holiday” and “The Brave One.”

The following information is an excerpt from the FBI's files on communism in Hollywood. The blackened marks represent information—like informant names—that is still considered confidential.

Source: <http://foia.fbi.gov/compic.htm>

Figure 1: Dalton Trumbo

— Dalton Trumbo was born in Montrose, Colorado, December 9, 1905. He is said to have been the writer of “Tender Comrade”, recently produced by RKO and has also been employed as a screen writer by MGM Studios. Available Communist Party membership lists in Los Angeles indicate he was a member of Branch A, Northwest Section, Communist Party, Los Angeles County, under the Party name Hal Conger. Trumbo is a member of the Screen Writers' Guild, the League of American Writers, and was a contributor to the “Clipper”, the publication of the Hollywood Writers Mobilization. He was a member and speaker at the meetings of the American Peace Mobilization, and the National Federation for Constitutional Liberties. [REDACTED] states Trumbo wrote a pamphlet in defense of Harry Bridges, and has written articles appearing in the Communist West Coast news organ, the “Peoples World.” He has been one of the most active members in the Hollywood Democratic Committee and was extremely active in working against the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of Democratic Ideals, an anti-Communist group formed recently to fight Communism in the motion picture industry.

Figure 2. Excerpt from document concerning the CP influence on Hollywood unions and cultural organizations. Dalton Trumbo was the editor of the Screen Writers Guild member publication, "Screen Writer."

Screen Writers Guild

The Motion Picture Almanac for 1942 and 1943 reflected that the Screen Writers Guild was an affiliate of the Authors League of America, Inc. The Hollywood Press Times for November 10, 1944, reflected that the Screen Writers Guild was organized in 1933 in the Hollywood motion picture industry. Informant [REDACTED] has reported that this was one of the first unions in the cultural field to come under the influence of Communists in Hollywood. He related that among the original organizers were John Howard Lawson, Samuel Ornitz, and Guy Endore. These individuals who have been identified as Communists are referred to in Section I of this memorandum where their Communist affiliations are set forth. According to [REDACTED] John Howard Lawson, Robert Rossen, Lester Cole, Hugo Butler, Waldo Salt, and Ring Lardner, Jr., are among the leading Communists in the Guild who have been most influential in the forming of its policies. All of these individuals have been identified as Communists and their Communist affiliations are set out in Section I of this memorandum.

According to the organization's official publication in June of 1945 there were approximately 13,000 members of the Screen Writers Guild. Of this number about 100 were identified as Communists at that time through the information obtained [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The names of these individuals who are still affiliated with the motion picture industry are set out in Section I of the memorandum. In addition, a great many others, according to [REDACTED] were associates of Communists reported to be sympathetic to Communist ideologies and/or members of Communist front organizations. 107

As an example of the influence had by these Communists within the organization, I desire to call to your attention the October, 1946, issue of the "Screen Writer." In this publication, an editorial appears concerning the Communist inspired American Authors Authority; an article concerning the scope of the Screen Writers Guild; a third article by Communists Howard Dimsdale and Guy Endore; a fourth article on a technical phase of writing; the fifth on opinions and motion pictures; and the sixth by Communist screen writer Lester Cole on wage negotiations for screen writers. The Communist affiliations of Howard Dimsdale, Guy Endore and Lester Cole referred to as Communists are set out in Section I.

It is through the Communists in this group, the Screen Writers Guild, that Communist ideology is disseminated to the fellow traveler, Communist sympathizer and unsuspecting writers who are affiliated with the Guild in the motion picture industry. The Communists and Communist pressure in the Guild thus caused the injection into motion picture scripts of Communist propaganda and the elimination of anti-Communist statements and scenes from original motion picture scripts.

Questions about Dalton Trumbo:

1. Was Dalton Trumbo a member of the Communist Party?
2. According to the files, what kind of activities did CP members like Trumbo engage in? Do you think these activities were subversive (i.e., a threat to American institutions)?
3. When Dalton Trumbo testified before HUAC, he refused to answer questions about his CP membership on the grounds that the First Amendment guaranteed his right to free speech. Looking back at the First Amendment, do you agree that the amendment protected his decision?