

Civil Liberties and Free Speech As Essential Weapons in the Struggle for Civil Rights

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All through what is known as the McCarthy period great numbers of people simply stopped going to meetings, quit signing petitions, ceased joining organizations. McCarthy died in 1957, but it is a truism now to state that McCarthyism did not die with him; the House Un-American Activities Committee and its fellow travelers have continued; fear once started is difficult to halt. Thousands and thousands of Americans still conclude without thinking that there is something a bit dangerous about action on social issues; sometimes they do not even spell out in their own minds just what it is that they fear—they simply feel in their bones that it is safer to stay at home and be quiet. . . .

Let us now examine . . . the effect of all this on the South. In squelching citizen activity for peaceful social progress, McCarthyism and its aftermath have debilitated the whole nation. The result has been especially tragic in the South—for in this part of the country society is in the throes of a great social change, the throwing off of segregation and the winning of equal rights for all. If such changes are to reach deep and be brought about peacefully, it is an absolute necessity that we have an atmosphere where democracy can flourish—where citizens can explore new ideas and organize to promote them and publicize them.

The South has always been limited in that kind of atmosphere. It has been even more limited in the last 15 years because of the curbs placed on civil liberties nationally. Senator McCarthy himself never came South and HUAC only rarely, but the nationwide atmosphere they created and the techniques they used were seized upon by the Southern segregationists for their own use.

Senator Eastland and his committee harassed Southern integrationists, and there developed in the South a rash of state un-American activities committees. These committees draw on the files of the House Committee and the Eastland Committee to label people working for social change as “subversive.”

Even more important, the private organizations seeking to preserve segregation in the South have been able to take up the cry that derives essentially from the national witchhunt, and to attack advocates of integration as subversives and traitors. These private groups have been able to draw upon the files of the state and federal committees for material to use against persons favoring desegregation and integration.