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USA

Trump's Repression: "Worse than McCarthyism"

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America had two previous political purges of the left, the Red Scare of the 1920s and McCarthyism in the 1950s, and now we're in the midst of the Trump purge—and it's worse than the earlier ones.

The 1920s Red Scare, in the wake of the Russian Revolution of October 1917, and immediately provoked by self-proclaimed anarchists sending bombs to Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer and Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, led the U.S. government to arrest thousands of anarchists, Socialists, and Communists, including several thousand immigrants from Russia, Eastern Europe, and Southern Europe who were deported.

The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union that began in the late 1940's led to what came to be called McCarthyism. Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, chairman of the Senate Permanent Investigation Subcommittee, held hearings on Communist subversion and those he called to testify often found their lives destroyed by that alone, losing their jobs and reputations. Other Congressional and state legislative committees also held hearings. In 1954, Congress passed and president Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Communist Control Act, outlawing the Communist Party. In this period hundreds were jailed and thousands lost their jobs.

Today, Trump and the Republicans are attacking those whom Trump calls "lunatic leftist, Socialists, and Communists" or "part of a global Hamas Support Network," or "antisemites." Immigrants are declared to be "criminals" without due process, arrested and deported.

Trump has been deporting immigrants in increasing numbers, sometimes using the dubious Enemy Aliens Act of 1798 and at other times violating the immigrants' right to due process. Notoriously the U.S. illegally deported Kilmar Abrego García to his home country of El Salvador and despite a court order has refused to return him. Trump has terminated the temporary protective status for hundreds of thousands of Venezuelan, Cuban, Haitian and Nicaraguan migrants and the Supreme Court has upheld his decision. Trump has also changed the status of 1,800-plus international students and recent graduates, making them more vulnerable to deportation.

There are echoes of the Cold War, now a cold war with Communist China. The Trump administration says it will "aggressively" revoke the visas of Chinese students studying in the U.S. of whom there are 280,000. In danger are those with ties to the Chinese Communist Party, studying in critical fields such as science, engineering and medicine, or "causing trouble," that is joining protests.

Ellen Schrecker, a historian of McCarthyism, says that "today's assault on the university is immeasurably worse than McCarthyism." The attack is broader, more powerful, and aims at disciplining and taking control of all of higher education. In 2021 Vice-President J.D. Vance gave a speech titled, "The Universities are the enemy" and under Trump that has certainly become the case. In an attempt to discipline the universities, Trump has frozen about 11 billion in research funding."

McCarthyism threatened only individual professors, but says historian Schrecker, Trump has cracked down "on campus protests against Israel's war on Gaza and the threatened deportations of students and faculty members, it also reaches into classrooms, laboratories, curricula, libraries, dormitories, DEI programs, admissions offices, personnel decisions, athletics, accreditation agencies" and even remade entire institutions such as the New College of Florida.

But unlike the McCarthy period, we see the growing resistance. At Columbia University, which gave in to Trump's demands, students booed acting president, Claire Shipman. And at MIT, the class president, Megha Vemuri, gave a powerful speech attacking MIT's ties to the Israeli military and the genocidal war against the Palestinian people. She paid for it by being barred from the graduation ceremony. But the fight goes on.

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