

STATEMENT ON CIVIL LIBERTIES IN AMERICA 1956

----- *Paul Robeson* -----

By the mid-1950s, Paul Robeson (1898–1976) had earned international acclaim for his talents as an actor and singer, but it was his commitment to political and social concerns, such as his support for the Communist Party, the Soviet Union, and African independence movements, that attracted the notice of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). HUAC, intent on ridding America of all Communists, called Robeson to testify before them in 1956. As part of his testimony he prepared this statement, which he was not allowed to read before the committee.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Issues

What does this statement suggest about the right to free speech and the consequences of political dissent in the United States?

It is a sad and bitter commentary on the state of civil liberties in America that the very forces of reaction, typified by Representative Francis Walter and his Senate counterparts, who have denied me access to the lecture podium, the concert hall, the opera house, and the dramatic stage, now hale me before a committee of inquisition in order to hear what I have to say. It is obvious that those who are trying to gag me here and abroad will scarcely grant me the freedom to express myself fully in a hearing controlled by them.

It would be more fitting for me to question Walter, Eastland and Dulles than for them to question me, for it is they who should be called to account for their conduct, not I. Why does Walter not investigate the truly “un-American” activities of Eastland and his gang, to whom the Constitution is a scrap of paper when invoked by the Negro people and to whom defiance of the Supreme Court is a racial duty? And how can Eastland pretend concern over the internal security of our country while he supports the most brutal assaults on fifteen million Americans by the white citizens councils and the Ku Klux Klan? When will Dulles explain his reckless irresponsible “brink of war” policy by which the world might have been destroyed.

And specifically, why is Dulles afraid to let me have a passport, to let me travel abroad to sing, to act, to speak my mind? This question has been partially answered by the State Department lawyers who have asserted in court that the State Department claims the right to deny me a passport because of what they called my “recognized status as a spokesman for large sections of Negro Americans” and because I have “been for years extremely active in behalf of independence of colonial peoples of Africa.” The State Department has also based its denial of a passport to me on the fact that I sent a message of greeting

to the Bandung Conference, convened by Nehru, Sukarno and other great leaders of the colored peoples of the world. Principally, however, Dulles objects to speeches I have made abroad against the oppression suffered by my people in the United States.

I am proud that those statements can be made about me. It is my firm intention to continue to speak out against injustices to the Negro people, and I shall continue to do all within my power in behalf of independence of colonial peoples of Africa. It is for Dulles to explain why a Negro who opposes colonialism and supports the aspirations of Negro Americans should for those reasons be denied a passport.

My fight for a passport is a struggle for freedom—freedom to travel, freedom to earn a livelihood, freedom to speak, freedom to express myself artistically and culturally. I have been denied these freedoms because Dulles, Eastland, Walter and their ilk oppose my views on colonial liberation, my resistance to oppression of Negro Americans, and my burning desire for peace with all nations. But these are views which I shall proclaim whenever given the opportunity, whether before this committee or any other body.

President Eisenhower has strongly urged the desirability of international cultural exchanges. I agree with him. The American people would welcome artistic performances by the great singers, actors, ballet troupes, opera companies, symphony orchestras and virtuosos of South America, Europe, Africa and Asia, including the folk and classic art of the African peoples, the ancient culture of China, as well as the artistic works of the western world. I hope the day will come soon when Walter will consent to lowering the cruel bars which deny the American people the right to witness performances of many great foreign artists. It is certainly high time for him to drop the ridiculous “Keystone Kop” antics of fingerprinting distinguished visitors.

I find no such restrictions placed upon me abroad as Walter has had placed upon foreign artists whose performances the American people wish to see and hear. I have been invited to perform all over the world, and only the arbitrary denial of a passport has prevented realization of this particular aspect of the cultural exchange which the President favors.

I have been invited by Leslie Linder Productions to play the title role in a production of “Othello” in England. British Actors’ Equity Association has unanimously approved of my appearance and performance in England.

I have been invited by Workers’ Music Association Ltd. to make a concert tour of England under its auspices. The invitation was signed by all of the vice-presidents, including Benjamin Britten, and was seconded by a personal invitation of R. Vaughn Williams.

I have been invited by Adam Holender, impresario, to make a concert tour of Israel, and he has tendered to me a proposed contract for that purpose.

“Mosfilm,” a Soviet moving picture producing company, has invited me to play the title role in a film version of “Othello,” assuring me “of the tremendous artistic joy which association with your wonderful talent will bring us.”

The British Electrical Trades Union requested me to attend their annual policy conference, recalling my attendance at a similar conference held in 1949 at which, they wrote me, “you sang and spoke so movingly.”

The British Workers' Sports Association, erroneously crediting a false report that I would be permitted to travel, wrote me, "we view the news with very great happiness." They invited me "to sing to our members in London, Glasgow, Manchester or Cardiff, or all four, under the auspices of our International Fund, and on a financial basis favourable to yourself, and to be mutually agreed." They suggested a choice of three different halls in London seating, respectively, 3,000, 4,500 and 7,000.

The Australian Peace Council invited me to make a combined "singing and peace tour" of the dominion.

I have received an invitation from the Education Committee of the London Co-operative Society to sing at concerts in London under their auspices.

A Swedish youth organization called "Democratic Youth" has invited me to visit Sweden "to give some concerts here, to get to know our culture and our people." The letter of invitation added, "Your appearance here would be greeted with the greatest interest and pleasure, and a tour in Sweden can be arranged either by us or by our organization in cooperation with others, or by any of our cultural societies or artists' bureaus, whichever you may prefer."

I have an invitation from the South Wales Miners to sing at the Miners' Singing Festival on October 6, 1956, and in a series of concerts in the mining valley thereafter.

In Manchester, England, a group of people called the "Let Paul Robeson Sing Committee" has asked me to give a concert at the Free Trade Hall in that city either preceding or following my engagement in Wales.

I have been requested by the Artistic and Literary Director of the Agence Littéraire et Artistique Parisienne Pour les Echanges Culturels to sign a contract with the great French concert organizer, M. Marcel de Valmalette, to sing in a series of concerts at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris.

There is no doubt that the governments of those countries and many others where I would be invited to sing if I could travel abroad, would have no fear of what I might sing or say while there, whether such governments be allies and friends of America or neutrals or those others whose friendship for the American people is obstructed by Dulles and Walter and like-minded reactionaries.

My travels abroad to sing and act and speak cannot possibly harm the American people. In the past I have won friends for the real America among the millions before whom I have performed—not for Walter, not for Dulles, not for Eastland, not for the racists who disgrace our country's name—but friends for the American Negro, our workers, our farmers, our artists.

By continuing the struggle at home and abroad for peace and friendship with all of the world's people, for an end to colonialism, for full citizenship for Negro Americans, for a world in which art and culture may abound, I intend to continue to win friends for the best in American life.

Source: Statement by Paul Robeson, from *Paul Robeson Speaks*, edited by Philip S. Foner. Permission granted courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that this statement suggests the serious consequences of free speech and political dissent that contradict federal government policies. Students may cite the fact that Robeson was not allowed to actually read this statement at the congressional hearing to which he was called to testify. They may also cite Robeson's reference to the restrictions placed on foreign artists who wish to perform in the United States. Students may note that the government punished Robeson for freely speaking his political views by denying him a passport. They may conclude that the federal government sometimes restricts individual liberties when there are **concerns about national security**.