

PAUL ROBESON HUAC TESTIMONY

Date: June 12, 1956

Role	Name	Description
Witness & Counsel	Paul Robeson	Singer, actor, athlete, and activist
	Leonard Boudin	Robeson's lawyer (non-speaking role)
	Milton Friedman	Robeson's friend and counsel
Committee	Honorable Francis E. Walter	Chairman of the Subcommittee, Democratic Representative from Pennsylvania
	Gordon H. Scherer	Republican Representative from Ohio
	Bernard W. Kearney	Republican Representative from New York (non-speaking role)
Staff	Richard Arens	Investigator

The Chairman: The Committee will be in order. This morning the Committee resumes its series of hearings on the vital issue of the use of American passports as travel documents in furtherance of the objectives of the Communist conspiracy. . . .

Mr. Arens: Now, during the course of the process in which you were applying for this passport, in July of 1954, were you requested to submit a non-Communist affidavit?

Mr. Robeson: We had a long discussion—with my counsel, who is in the room, Mr. [Leonard B.] Boudin—with the State Department, about just such an affidavit and I was very precise not only in the application but with the State Department, headed by Mr. Henderson and Mr. McLeod, that under no conditions would I think of signing any such affidavit, that it is a complete contradiction of the rights of American citizens.

Mr. Arens: Did you comply with the requests?

Mr. Robeson: I certainly did not and I will not.

Mr. Arens: Are you now a member of the Communist Party?

Mr. Robeson: Oh please, please, please.

Mr. Scherer: Please answer, will you, Mr. Robeson?

Mr. Robeson: What is the Communist Party? What do you mean by that?

Mr. Scherer: I ask that you direct the witness to answer the question.

Mr. Robeson: What do you mean by the Communist Party? As far as I know it is a legal party like the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. Do you mean a party of people who have sacrificed for my people, and for all Americans and workers, that they can live in dignity? Do you mean that party?

Mr. Arens: Are you now a member of the Communist Party?

Mr. Robeson: Would you like to come to the ballot box when I vote and take out the ballot and see?

Mr. Arens: Mr. Chairman, I respectfully suggest that the witness be ordered and directed to answer that question.

The Chairman: You are directed to answer the question.

(The witness consulted with his counsel.)

Mr. Robeson: I stand upon the Fifth Amendment of the American Constitution.

Mr. Arens: Do you mean you invoke the Fifth Amendment?

Mr. Robeson: I invoke the Fifth Amendment.

Mr. Robeson: Gentlemen, in the first place, wherever I have been in the world, Scandinavia, England, and many places, the first to die in the struggle against Fascism were the Communists, and I laid many wreaths upon graves of Communists. It is not criminal, and the Fifth Amendment has nothing to do with criminality. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Warren, has been very clear on that in many speeches, that the Fifth Amendment does not have anything to do with the inference of criminality. I invoke the Fifth Amendment.

Mr. Friedman: Excuse me, Mr. Arens, may we have the photographers take their pictures, and then desist, because it is rather nerve-racking for them to be there.

The Chairman: They will take the pictures.

Mr. Robeson: I am used to it and I have been in moving pictures. Do you want me to pose for it good? Do you want me to smile? I cannot smile when I am talking to him.

Mr. Arens: I put it to you as a fact, and ask you to affirm or deny the fact, that your Communist Party name was "John Thomas."

Mr. Robeson: I invoke the Fifth Amendment. This is really ridiculous.

Mr. Arens: Now, tell this Committee whether or not you know Nathan Gregory Silvermaster.

Mr. Scherer: Mr. Chairman, this is not a laughing matter.

Mr. Robeson: It is a laughing matter to me, this is really complete nonsense.

Mr. Arens: Have you ever known Nathan Gregory Silvermaster?

(The witness consulted with his counsel.)

Mr. Robeson: I invoke the Fifth Amendment.

Mr. Arens: Do you honestly apprehend that if you told whether you know Nathan Gregory Silvermaster you would be supplying information that could be used against you in a criminal proceeding?

Mr. Robeson: I have not the slightest idea what you are talking about. I invoke the Fifth—

Mr. Arens: I suggest, Mr. Chairman, that the witness be directed to answer that question.

The Chairman: You are directed to answer the question.

Mr. Robeson: I invoke the Fifth.

Mr. Scherer: The witness talks very loud when he makes a speech, but when he invokes the Fifth Amendment I cannot hear him.

Mr. Robeson: I invoked the Fifth Amendment very loudly. You know I am an actor, and I have medals for diction.

Mr. Robeson: You are the author of all of the bills that are going to keep all kinds of decent people out of the country.

The Chairman: No, only your kind.

Mr. Robeson: Colored people like myself, from the West Indies and all kinds. And just the Teutonic Anglo-Saxon stock that you would let come in.

The Chairman: We are trying to make it easier to get rid of your kind, too.

Mr. Robeson: You do not want any colored people to come in?

The Chairman: Proceed. . . .

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, 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.

Mr. Arens: Now I would invite your attention, if you please, to the *Daily Worker* of June 29, 1949, with reference to a get-together with you and Ben Davis. Do you know Ben Davis?

Mr. Robeson: One of my dearest friends, one of the finest Americans you can imagine, born of a fine family, who went to Amherst and was a great man.

The Chairman: The answer is yes?

Mr. Robeson: Nothing could make me prouder than to know him.

The Chairman: That answers the question.

Mr. Arens: Did I understand you to laud his patriotism?

Mr. Robeson: I say that he is as patriotic an American as there can be, and you gentlemen belong with the Alien and Sedition Acts, and you are the non-patriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.

The Chairman: Just a minute, the hearing is now adjourned.

Mr. Robeson: I should think it would be.

The Chairman: I have endured all of this that I can.

Mr. Robeson: Can I read my statement?

The Chairman: No, you cannot read it. The meeting is adjourned.

Mr. Robeson: I think it should be, and you should adjourn this forever, that is what I would say.

Source: American Social History Productions, Inc. (2018, March 22). "You are the Un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves": Paul Robeson appears before HUAC. History Matters/George Mason University. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6440BA>