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Pete Seeger and the Turning Season of the US Government

by Jason Brown-Gallindo

Introduction

In 1994, four decades after “America’s tuning fork” Pete Seeger was blacklisted by the House Un-American Activities Committee, President Bill Clinton awarded the Kennedy Center Honor to the once communist-affiliated musician for his life-long musical contributions to American culture.¹ In the bourgeois, tuxedo-filled halls of the gala at the John F. Kennedy Center of the Performing Arts, Seeger modestly accepted his award wearing his father’s suit made in 1922.² CBS filmed and broadcast the event nationwide—the same network that had censored Seeger’s performance of his anti-Vietnam song, “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy” in 1967. President Clinton said that Seeger’s seventeen-year ban from television was a “badge of honor” and praised the musician for being “an inconvenient artist who dared to sing things as he saw them.”³ What had changed? What caused the shift in the U.S. government’s opinion of the protest singer? How did the...

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¹ Poet and writer Carl Samberg created the nickname, “America’s tuning fork” for Seeger. It is unclear when and where it first appeared. At the 1959 Newport Folk Festival, radio personality Studs Terkel used the phrase to introduce the musician. Life Magazine further popularized the name after using it in a photo spread with Seeger in 1964.


³ Ibid.
government’s once discordant relationship with the musician transform into one in which they were now his supporting choir?

The genesis of this controversial banjo-playing folk singer is deeply entrenched in the American social climate of the 1930s and 1940s. Seeger was the son of two extremely accomplished scholars and teachers of music, Charles and Constance Seeger. As a young man, Seeger attended Harvard, majoring in sociology while playing music in the banjo tenor society. He joined the American Student Union, which was a coalition of pacifists, communists, and socialists. Seeger sympathized with the communists at school and their positions regarding workers’ right, anti-segregation, and World War II. This led him to join the Young Communist League. Shortly before exams in his second year, the young musician dropped out of school and bicycled west across New York State. He immersed himself in the folk music he encountered people playing around campfires and in front of their houses, learning many of the labor songs, written during the workers’ struggles of the early twentieth century. In 1939, at age twenty, Seeger moved to New York City where he joined the Vanguard Puppeteers. The group of musician puppeteers travelled and played the majority of their shows for picket lines of dairy farmers. Seeger often stepped onto stage and sang union songs such as, “The Farmer is the Man” and “Seven-Cent Cotton and Forty-Cent Meat, How in the World Can a Poor Man Eat?”

That same year, Seeger met folk-music legend Woody Guthrie (1912-1967) while playing a gig in Manhattan. Seeger later recalled performing “amateurishly” before Guthrie took the stage becoming the star with his backward tilted cowboy hat. The two became close, travelling to perform at labor protests while Guthrie taught Seeger to hop freight trains and sing “well-known

6 Wilkinson, 55.
commercial country songs worth a quarter in any Western bar.”⁷ Alan Lomax, a coworker of Seeger’s father at the Library of Congress, invited Guthrie to Washington to record for the Archive of American Folk Song. Seeger followed and later that year the two began transcribing and recording folk songs that they felt worth preserving.⁸ Both Seeger and Guthrie left the archives after this work, and parted ways temporarily until reuniting in New York City in 1940 to form The Almanac Singers with Lee Hayes, a popular union song compiler, and Mill Lampell. The group primarily performed at workers’ rallies and became popular amongst readers of the communist magazine, the Daily Worker.⁹ The group’s momentum came to a halt when promoters refused to book them after New York newspapers had red-baited them for being sympathetic toward communism.

The Almanacs disbanded in 1942 when Seeger was drafted into the army. While in Mississippi for training, the banjo-picker became Private First Class Seeger and was trained as a B-24 bomber hydraulic mechanic. Before deploying to Saipan Island, he was held for an additional six months due to Military Intelligence’s suspicions of his political opinions—Seeger had become a card-carrying communist just before the war.¹⁰ While on a furlough in 1943, Seeger married Toshi Aline Ohta whom he had met at a square dance in 1939. Toshi was the daughter of an American mother and Japanese father, who came from a leftist background and had been exiled from Japan for his and his father’s views and writings. Toshi’s paternal grandfather was punished with exile for his translations of Marxist texts, but, under the laws of the Japanese empire, her father had been permitted to take her grandfather’s place in exile, leaving first for Germany and then the United States.¹¹ Toshi and Pete Seeger were partners in marriage,

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⁷ Ibid., 63.
⁸ Ibid., 57-59.
⁹ Ibid., 3.
¹⁰ Ibid., 69.
music, and activism until her death in 2013, a week before their seventieth anniversary.

After their wedding, Seeger returned to military service, but now, instead of working on aircrafts, he led music workshops and held concerts on the island. While in Saipan, he realized that in order to maximize the power of song as a tool for social change, support from a national organization was needed. In 1945, Seeger created the *People’s Songs* quarterly bulletin hoping to bring together socially conscious people to sing labor songs. Following the war, Seeger and his organization, along with a large portion of the Communist Party stood firmly behind presidential candidate Henry A. Wallace (1888-1965) and the Progressive Party’s platform against segregation and the powerful corporate influences that had deep roots within the government. Following the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, which heavily restricted the power of unions, union leaders strayed away from the Communist agenda and supported incumbent President Harry S. Truman. By 1949, the country reelected Truman, Cold War politics were dominant, and *People’s Songs* had accrued a debt of $12,000. Unable to gain sufficient backing to pay rent and its printers, the organization shut its doors.

The dream of a collective group of people singing for the same cause was over, and Seeger took the loss hard. He found little purpose in staying in New York City. With Toshi and their two children, he left and bought a seventeen-and-a-half acre plot of land in Beacon, New York on the Hudson River, seventy miles north of the city. After researching in the New York Public Library how to build a log cabin, Seeger cleared two acres of land and began building. That year, Seeger was invited to perform with

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14 Winkler, 51.
15 Wilkinson, 24.
renowned singer, actor, and activist Paul Robeson (1898-1976) to raise money for the Communists’ civil rights wing. Although Seeger had recently left the Party, he enthusiastically accepted the chance to play for any cause he believed in. When he arrived to the venue in Peekskill, New York, he met opposition from anti-communist crowds and members of the Ku Klux Klan and the American Legion yelling “dirty Commie,” “go back to Russia,” and “nigger-lovers.” When the performance was over, Seeger and his family left the venue while protestors lined the streets waiting to pelt the musician’s car with stones. After making it to safety, he and his family went to a hotel and washed the shards of glass out of their children’s hair.

Many in the country were wary of change, and communist ideology was dangerous in post-World War II America. The songs of workers’ rights that Seeger had been singing for a decade represented, to some, a counterculture of anti-democracy Soviet sympathizers. Seeger formed a new group, The Weavers, with Fred Hellerman, Ronnie Gilbert, and ex-Almanac member Lee Hays. They played at friends’ parties and for left-wing causes, but had little success until 1950 when they recording “Tzena, Tzena” and Leadbelly’s “Goodnight, Irene.” By the end of the year, the group had sold four million records. It was Seeger’s first taste of commercial success but he did not enjoy the fame or the business side of music. In an interview with Time magazine, he said “It’s not so much fun now,” and that playing in clubs made him happier where “we could improvise, sing what we felt like singing.” That year, the group was offered their own television show, but the contract was destroyed after a right-wing organization published a pamphlet titled “Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television.” Among the 151 artists listed, the pamphlet mentioned Seeger thirteen times. Then in 1952, a former member of the People’s Songs quarterly journal reported

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16 Winkler, 53.
17 Ibid., 54.
18 Pete Seeger: The Power of Song.
19 Wilkinson, 70.
that three of the four members of the Weavers were Communists, causing the bountiful well of work to dry up and the group to separate.20

The musician’s valiant attempt to pioneer a musical avenue for social change was further frustrated when he received a letter summoning him to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1955. Commonly, defendants’ cases were dismissed after pleading the Fifth Amendment, but Seeger was reluctant to do so for that the action implied guilt. Alternatively, he could plea the First Amendment that guarantees the freedom of speech. A group of screenwriters and producers (the Hollywood Ten) took this route in 1947 and were charged with contempt, jailed for a year, and blacklisted. Knowing the risk at hand, Seeger still chose this latter option.21

During the hearing, the committee relentlessly pressed Seeger to confess his communist ties. When they tried to corner the musician with questions regarding whom he had performed for, Seeger told the committee these were “improper questions for any American to be asked,” and offered to tell them about his life and songs.22 They did not want to hear it and continued to pressure him to answer their questions. Seeger refused and told them he had already given his answer, but never relied on the Fifth Amendment. Finally, the musician told the committee, “I greatly resent this implication that some of the places that I have sung and some of the people I have known, and some of my opinions, whether they be religious or philosophical, or that I might be a vegetarian, make me any less of an American.”23 On March 26, 1957, he was indicted on ten counts of contempt of Congress. In 1961, he was found guilty and sentenced to a year in jail.

21 Wilkinson, 73-75.
22 Ibid., 77.
23 Huac online
The hearing and Seeger’s blacklist restricted what he was able to do in his career in the 1950s and 1960s. He played for school children and for small colleges to earn money for when he left to jail. He later said that the blacklist was a blessing and that he was happy to leave the nightclubs and the commercial spotlight and to be singing back in the environment where he had started. In 1962, the Court of Appeals found that the indictment was faulty, dismissed his case, and he was not required to serve the year in jail. Seeger had single-handedly faced down the HUAC and won. By the mid-1960s, Seeger had fashioned his music into a weapon for the Civil Rights Movement. He sang for demonstrations, voter registration lines, and churches that supported the movement and in 1965, after receiving an invitation from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Seeger and Toshi joined the now legendary march from Selma to Montgomery. Although the blacklist was over, and McCarthyism largely discredited as ideological zealotry, by 1967 Seeger had been informally banned from network television for seventeen years for his social and political activism. Finally, CBS’s Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour invited the musician to perform. Seeger agreed and played several songs. One of the songs told the story of a platoon in 1942 commanded by their captain to cross a river causing a soldier to drown. The lyrics included, “we were waste deep in the big muddy, and the big fool said to push on.” The song was an allegory about Vietnam and the “big fool” was President Lyndon B. Johnson. When the show aired, CBS had cut out Seeger’s song. The Smothers Brothers were outraged and told the press that their show was being censored. In 1968, CBS folded under the pressure and allowed Seeger to come back to perform the song. The network aired it later that year.

The performance of “Waste Deep in the Big Muddy” signaled a change for both the folk singer and America. His
uncompromising beliefs that were once part of the country’s counter-culture had now become part of mainstream American culture. His tours of colleges and universities, even during his blacklist, helped catapult American folk music into the spotlight, with figures like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Simon and Garfunkel, and countless others following his artistic and political lead and owing much to his example. Seeger was also an original board member of the Newport Folk Music Festival, which was first held in 1959, and was the impetus of the folk revival that America experienced in the 1960s. In 1962, Seeger’s labor song “If I Had a Hammer” was repurposed and turned into a popular hit by Peter, Paul and Mary. In 1965 the Byrds topped the Billboard Hot 100 with their version of Seeger’s timeless musical adaptation of a verse from the Book of Ecclesiastes, “Turn! Turn! Turn!” Both songs became anthems for world peace.

Aside from advocating workers’ rights, civil rights, and an end to the Vietnam War, Seeger became heavily involved in environmental issues in the 1960s. After sailing the Hudson River in 1962, he became concerned with the level of chemicals, oil, and sewage in the river. Just as he had begun from scratch with his log cabin, the musician began reading how to build a replica of the sloops that sailed the river during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Seeger created the Clearwater Festival in 1966 to fund the construction of the sloop, and later to support the Hudson River Sloop Clearwater environmental organization. The hundred-ton boat was built and in 1969 it became an important symbol of environmental consciousness. The Clearwater Festival is still held annually for some 15,000 visitors and continues to help maintain the Hudson River and its tributaries. The remarkable improvement in environmental conditions along the Hudson River came in no small part to Seeger’s efforts, following of course on the heightened awareness of these issues brought about by Rachel Carson’s 1962 book, Silent Spring and other influences.

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28 Wilkinson, 103-104.
decades, from hopping freight cars with Woody Guthrie to
headlining folk festivals and countless adventures in between,
Seeger delighted audiences with his music, and inspired millions of
people who looked to him as an example of integrity, strength, and
hope in a troubled world.

While Seeger’s seventeen-year ban from television is in
some ways a “badge of honor” in Bill Clinton’s words, it is also a
blighted scarlet letter for the American government and its
inability to understand the value of Seeger, his music, and ideas.
Seeger’s early political opinions were not that of a subversive,
dangerous, or Stalinist ideology, but rather an innocent and
perhaps naïve form of communism in which he saw hope for
deprived and exploited people. In a time when communism was
anything but American, Seeger, as a member of the Party, was as
much a patriot as one could be. He was Ivy League educated yet he
chose to build his log cabin home as though he were a seventeenth-
century American pioneer. In his own right, he was in fact a
pioneer of music and social equality in the twentieth century.
Music was his tool—his hammer that he hammered continuously
in the morning, in the evening, and across the land to bring people
together and create change. And finally, how did Seeger make his
way from the House Un-American Activities Committee to a gala
in his honor at the Kennedy Center? Ultimately it was not Seeger
who transformed, but the American political and cultural
consensus. The official embrace of Seeger, expressed through this
honor in 1994, came about because Seeger’s notions of improving
the human condition were neither radical nor dangerous. They
were simply ahead of their time and the government’s season had
finally turned, turned, turned.

Pete Seeger died at the age of 94 on January 27, 2014.
Bibliography


