

## Red Scare Rising

Written by By Fred Jonas, Special to the BT  
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### Trump whips out an old playbook from the 1950s



Hazel Scott was born in 1920 and died in relative obscurity in 1981. She was born in Trinidad to a well-to-do family that moved to New York when she was four. Her mother was a classically trained pianist, and Hazel grew into a musical prodigy who achieved renown for her unique keyboard style, a synthesis of classical and jazz.

Back when the Juilliard School wasn't accepting students under age 16, she won admittance at age eight. An accomplished singer as well as pianist, she became one of the most famous black entertainers of her time. She even had her own television show in the 1950s, decades before Oprah Winfrey's.

In 1945, Scott married U.S. Rep. Adam Clayton Powell (her first marriage, his second) and was with him for 15 years. Like him, she was an outspoken advocate for civil rights. But she was also one of the many people working in Hollywood "listed" as possibly having communist ties, which she did not.

She wasn't compelled to testify before Sen. Joe McCarthy's kangaroo committee but chose to

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do so in September 1950. Her testimony was eloquent. She denied connections to Communists and took pains to distinguish them from socialists, whom she admired and said they loathed Communists “longer and more fiercely” than any other groups had.

She’d had an acting career in Hollywood but had troubles with her studio because she refused to work in films that failed to portray blacks with respect. Within a week of her McCarthy testimony, her television show was canceled. She lost concert bookings and finally moved with her son, Adam Clayton Powell III, to Paris, where she embarked on a successful career, performing around the continent and worldwide.

When her son grew up and had a family of his own, he moved back to the States. His mother followed to be part of the lives of her son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. Scott’s own mother had been a performer but was foremost a dedicated and protective mother. Hazel Scott harbored the same instincts.

We often think the McCarthy hearings were brought down by Joseph Welch, a lawyer representing the U.S. Army, which McCarthy somehow also implicated in his Red Scare.

We remember Mr. Welch by the quote: “Have you no decency, sir?” In fact, Welch actually said, “At long last, have you left no sense of decency?” It’s clear why we misremember it in the more concise and elegant way we do. And according to our understanding today, this is what it took to introduce a needle to the toxic, gas-filled balloon that was Joe McCarthy and his Scare. Before the needle, he seemed to attract more support than resistance.

A lot of people got caught up in the Red Scare. It was made to seem real, and the public almost reflexively believed it. At the time, those in seats of power could implicate anyone, and the implication would seem to have automatic legitimacy. Innocent until proven guilty? Not for an instant. Just a suggestion or a whisper could destroy livelihoods, and sometimes, even lives.

It persisted for some decades after the country was finished with Joe McCarthy and his chief counsel, Roy Cohn, who would later become Donald Trump’s attorney and mentor. However toxic was the gas in McCarthy’s balloon, it was also hypnotic. This country supported wars and propped up tyrannies, all on the theory that it was essential to fight the Red Menace at any cost.

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We Americans suspended logic and common sense over the Cold War and its terrible consequences. Even today, it is common for some Americans to try to discredit other Americans as “socialists” or communists. For them, the spell is not broken. The devils are communists or not-good-enough Christians or African Americans or Muslims or Chinese or Mexicans or any of a number of others.

And the juggernaut, piloted by the demagogue du jour who is bent on whipping up mindless hysteria, continues to rumble. The scheme is to slash and burn frantically enough to prevent any perspective or rational thought.

Joe McCarthy wasn't the first demagogue, and he isn't the last.

“Have you no decency, sir?” It had precisely the effect of the boy who pointed out that the emperor had no clothes.

The emperor and his nakedness are a fable. Hazel Scott, Joseph Welch, and Joe McCarthy were real, and though their time in the spotlight was long ago, they remain relevant.

The question today is this: What will it take for the public to realize we are actors in the same old play?

It will take more than a defiant Hazel Scott, Black Lives Matter, or Colin Kaepernick. It will take more than a U.S. Congress filled with overpaid and underachieving Americans.

Who will point out that this emperor has no clothes? Who will cry out: “Have you no decency, sir?”

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