

**W**hen I was a kid, I loved what I learned about the Bill of Rights, especially the First Amendment. To be free to express yourself must be close to almost every child's heart. Proud to live in a country that granted freedom of speech to all its citizens, I also loved the stirring story of the American Revolution. I liked to imagine myself as Paul Revere riding across New England, at great risk to life and limb, to warn my compatriots that the British were coming. I was fond of quoting Patrick Henry's fiery words uttered at the end of a speech calling for revolution: "Give me liberty or give me death." These were my earliest action heroes, models of courage and conviction that I wished to emulate.

The founders of American democracy were gigantic figures to me, larger than anyone, I believed, whom I had ever met or even hoped to meet. I thought I would have little opportunity in my own life to demonstrate the bravery in the cause for freedom that they displayed. As a child I was taught that, since the American Revolution had been fought and won, the right to free speech would belong to every citizen, including me, for all eternity.

Nevertheless, I found other ways to engage in democracy. As I write in my recent book, *Wrestling with the Angel of Democracy: On Being an American Citizen*, I was such an enthusiast for freedom of speech that I memorized *Robert's Rules of Order*, the procedural manual for fair discussion that had, by that time, been used for over seven decades by self-governing bodies in America. I raised my hand to call out, "Point of Order!" so frequently that, though my teacher was initially impressed, she finally had to discourage me from the practice.

Still young in the middle of twentieth century, I was not aware that an intense battle over the right of free speech was being waged. Some of the battles were even occurring in Hollywood, not far from the heart of Los Angeles, where I lived. Later, I would even meet a few of the participants in this drama. Since my father and I loved to go to the movies together, I had seen films starring actors and actresses such as Stella Adler and Edward G. Robinson, and written by countless screenwriters who were being targeted by McCarthyism.

But my only knowledge of Senator McCarthy's infamous hearings, and the ones held in Congress by the House Un-American Activities Committee, came from sitting occasionally with my grandfather as he watched these sessions on TV. He got red in the face and blustered as he told me his opinions, delivered as if they were indisputable truths, that Communists and whoever else had socialist ideas constituted a grave threat to our country. McCarthy and his cohort, he claimed, were just protecting us from the "red scourge."

I neither believed nor disbelieved my grandfather. Nothing he said compelled me like the stories of the Revolution or the newsreels of World War II I had seen. Was it intuition, an almost animal sense of something off-kilter in his attitude? I'll never know. Since his arguments did not appeal to me, I simply ignored the whole subject until, not many years later, I began to meet other students in my high school who were the children of actors, writers, artists, and even dancers who had been persecuted by McCarthyism. One of the parents I met had gone to jail for a few years until the Supreme Court overturned his conviction as unconstitutional. Others had lost work in the film industry or were forced to write under pseudonyms, sometimes at half the pay; singers like Pete Seegar, and many other performers, were blackballed from many theaters; writers including Dorothy Parker, Lillian Helman, author of *The Little Foxes*, or Dashiell Hammett, who wrote the *Thin Man* series of mysteries, were persecuted and hounded not only by HUAC, but also by the IRA.

I realized then that the struggle for free speech in

## WRESTLING WITH JOE McCARTHY

**A Historian Reflects  
on McCarthyism  
& Its Legacy**

by Susan Griffin



America was hardly over. Along with the brave men and women who had risked their careers for the right of free speech, I became aware of the atmosphere of fear and repression in which I had grown up. I knew that just before World War II, the Nazis had burned books they called subversive. Now, many hid the books they owned or discarded them for fear of being labeled as too liberal.

Not long after I became aware of this titanic struggle for freedom, I began to attend college at the University of California, Berkeley, which had already become the epicenter of resistance to politicians who wanted to dictate what books you could read, what you said, and even what you thought. The semester before I arrived, a group of students had staged a protest at San Francisco's City Hall, where HUAC was interrogating union leaders and others who had spoken out for a number of liberal causes. I joined a campus group these students had organized. We debated current events, ran candidates for student government, participated in marches for banning atomic weapons, and joined picket lines protesting racial segregation.

One night, a group of us went to see a propaganda film that was being shown on campus. With ominous music, and a warning tone, it was intended to raise the fear of communism, and in this way, defend the illegal witch-hunts that were being conducted against American citizens. From the audience we asked questions, shouted out comments, and posed a challenge to the misinformation and open lies the film was promoting. As the battle continued in many forms, I became part of it. By the time I graduated from college, the FBI had accumulated a thick file on me, listing all the protests in which I had participated. But the tide was turning. In 1964, another documentary film named after the debating strategy I so favored as a child, *Point of Order*, exposed McCarthyism as an assault on the First Amendment. And in the fall of that same year, students would organize a massive strike at UC, Berkeley, to protest limitations on free speech on campuses.

In 1992, along with Stephen Most and the director, Mark Kitchel, I wrote the script for an Academy Award-nominated film called *Berkeley in the Sixties*, which depicts that history. But the issue of free speech is not just a part of history. The battle is alive and well today. Recently, when I read from my book about democracy at a famous bookstore called Tattered Cover in Denver, I learned that the owner, Joyce Meskis, had resisted a court order to turn over customer purchase records as part of a drug investigation. The case went all the way to the Colorado Supreme Court before it was thrown out on the grounds that the Constitution protects, "an individual's fundamental right to purchase books anonymously, free from governmental interference."

As I write now, advocates of free speech struggle against the government's attempts to read their mail and listen to the private conversations of Americans. As it has been argued many times before, those who would curtail our liberty say that these infringements are necessary for the sake of national security. This is a battle we have fought before, and will have to continue fighting if we are to choose freedom and protect the most valuable legacy we have inherited: democracy. ■



#### About the Writer

SUSAN GRIFFIN has won dozens of awards for her work as a feminist writer, poet, essayist, playwright, and filmmaker. She is the author of more than twenty books including *A Chorus of Stones*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. She is the recipient of an Emmy, a MacArthur grant, and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. She is a frequent contributor to *Ms. magazine*, the *New York Times Book Review*, and numerous other publications. She lectures widely and is a frequent guest on national and local radio programs. She lives in Berkeley, California.

#### WRESTLING WITH THE ANGEL OF DEMOCRACY

On Being an American Citizen  
By Susan Griffin

In this unique and timely exploration of American history, which emphasizes the inner lives of pivotal historical figures, leading feminist thinker Griffin demonstrates that ultimately democracy is not only a system of governance—in its fullest form it represents a revolution in consciousness that is still unfolding today.

'Unique . . . fresh and probing . . . strikes at the very heart of America's cruel paradoxes. With a light, yet devastating touch, Griffin charts our continued 'wrestling' with democratic ideals—her incisive search for the soul of democracy stirs up pride, despair, and hope.'

—*Booklist*, starred review

Trumpeter, HC, 978-1-59030-297-2, 304pp., \$24.95

