

Defending Peace:

W.E.B. Du Bois in the McCarthy Era

Context

This collection of documents from the W.E.B. Du Bois Papers helps students and teachers to explore:

- McCarthyism and the Red Scare (1945–1955)
- Antinuclear activism and the Cold War (1954–1975)
- Using official documents as historical evidence

Introduction and Background Information for Students

Most U.S. history survey courses leave students with a broad understanding of Joseph McCarthy, the Red Scare, and the House Committee on Un-American Activities. This document collection gives students the opportunity to ask, and answer, more specific and complex questions about the period: how did the U.S. government gather information on, and prosecute, suspected “Communist subversives”? How did individuals and groups respond to these indictments by their government?

Students should have basic knowledge of McCarthyism and the Red Scare, including an understanding of the persecution of African American civil rights leaders as during this period, before beginning their analysis of the documents. Begin the lesson by providing students with a brief overview of the events leading up to, and following, Du Bois' indictment. The second volume of David Levering Lewis' biography of Du Bois, *W.E.B. DuBois--the fight for equality and the American century, 1919-1963*, pages 446–53, gives a detailed account of these events.

If you plan to focus on using official documents as historical evidence, students may need additional information on the Freedom of Information Act. George Washington University's National Security Archive provides an [overview of the law](#), as well information on making FOIA requests. The site also includes an extensive [discussion of redacting in FOIA documents](#).

Discussion

Frame the discussion of this document collection in terms of two questions:

- What can these documents tell us about the way ordinary people responded to McCarthyism?
- What can these documents tell us about the way the government assessed the threat of communism among its citizens?

Divide the class into pairs. Distribute two documents to each pair: one document from Du Bois' FBI files, and another from the National Committee to Defend Du Bois. Give students ten minutes to review their document and discuss it with their partner.

At the end of five minutes, ask for volunteers who can summarize their partner's document for the rest of the class. Open the floor to discussion. Guide the discussion to address the questions above.

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Assignments and Additional Questions for Discussion

- Assign reading from the short online essay, “14 Million New Secrets Last Year,” published by the National Security Archive at George Washington University. Ask students to examine the redactions in Du Bois' FBI files, make educated guesses about what information was redacted, and assess whether releasing this information would have harmed individuals or the U.S. government.
- Re-read the letter from an unknown individual to J. Edgar Hoover, enclosing a newspaper clipping about Du Bois and identifying him as “subversive.” Ask students to write down their responses to the letter before and after reading the enclosed clipping. Are the individual's actions in writing to Hoover warranted?
- During discussion, ask students to reflect on the tools for organizing that were available to the National Committee, such as the pre-addressed postcards for President Truman. Have students compare these tools to those available to contemporary activists or protestors, such as those who used social networking tools to organize resistance in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010–2011. Were Du Bois' defenders any less effective because of the tools at their disposal?