

# PETE SEEGER AND THE COLD WAR BLACKLIST

## Authentic Leadership Through Music in the Face of Un-Americanism

*Abstract: This article examines Pete Seeger's leadership through use of his music and platform from the early 1930s. Helping to bring about a folk revival throughout the 1930s-50s, Seeger developed an authentic leadership style and gained a grassroots following supporting liberal causes throughout the period. His subsequent 17 year media blacklist following summons to the House un-American Affairs Committee brought about the use of cultural guerilla warfare, though non-violent in nature, to the United States. Diaries, interviews, newspaper transcriptions from Duke University and The New York Times, and congressional testimony were used for this research.*

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*Editors Note: This article was edited extensively by Patrick Mills*

From 1941, when his *Almanac Singers* published their first folk album, *Songs for John Doe*,<sup>1</sup> until 2012, when he performed at President Obama's inauguration with Bruce Springsteen, Pete Seeger captivated American and world audiences. Seeger's hits, "Guantanamera," (1966) "Turn Turn Turn," (1962) and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone" (1955) all made *Billboard's* top 10 charts when they were released.<sup>2</sup> His ability to stay relevant within the popular music scene indicates why he continued to produce and perform music.

Seeger focused exclusively on creating music that not only acted as social commentary, but also served as a call to action for those Seeger viewed as marginalized by the American elite. In addition to his music, Seeger used his network and platform to disseminate his criticisms of the American economic system, the U.S. wars throughout the era, and the institutional racism and discrimination towards African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Seeger's body of work became essentially inseparable from the man himself, and an American government afraid of Soviet influence throughout the Cold War viewed him as dangerous. Due to the efforts of the House un-American Activities Committee, Seeger was blacklisted from the two mediums that most effectively reached audiences of the time, radio and TV.

Though he faced institutional adversity for expressing his beliefs, whether through his platform or otherwise, Pete Seeger used the folk revival he helped bring about in the 1930s-50s to rally political activism throughout the Cold War and the House un-American Activities Committee, the Vietnam War, and the American civil rights movement. Although he was not allowed to sing on radio or TV, Seeger's uncompromising tactics within his platform separated and shielded him from the cycles and tribulations of popular media and culture. These tactics included creating a paradigm of "cultural guerilla

warfare" that kept him and his message relevant throughout his time on the blacklist. In challenging the idea that American political activism couldn't leave a set spectrum of ideas, Seeger furthered the causes of these social movements to their ultimate successes. His relevance was thereby solidified for American generations from the 1940s to today.

### AUTHENTICITY OF LEADERSHIP; SEEGER'S RISE IN ACCRUING SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Born to a Berkeley musicologist and a concert violinist in 1919, Seeger was raised in the intellectual elite rather than the typical "folksy" American family; he was soon sent to a boarding school in Connecticut before attending Harvard.<sup>3</sup> Although his musical education allowed him to perform, he did not have the skills nor the cult of personality necessary for reaching out and connecting to audiences like the premier folk artist of the time, Woody Guthrie.<sup>4</sup>

In discussing the problems with acquiring an authenticity factor in leadership, American historian James MacGregor Burns subscribes to the "circulation of the elite"<sup>5</sup> theory: while talent or expertise may be found in the upper echelons of society, as was the case of the young Seeger, an intellectual gap still remains. Young ideologues need to connect with the masses, and often, the differences between northeastern and southern American lifestyles could not be breached. This gap causes what Burns defines to be an "absence of doctrine of leadership."<sup>6</sup>

Seeger used Guthrie to bridge that gap. Alan Lomax, one of Seeger's friends and compilers of American folk music, spoke thoughtfully about meeting Guthrie. He said, "You can date the renaissance of American folk song from that night. Pete knew it [Guthrie's] was his kind of music, and he began working to make it everybody's kind of music."<sup>7</sup> Seeger and Guthrie soon departed on a year-long trip across the country, performing for local saloons and bars to earn money for their

food and gas. Seeger learned two critical skills from Guthrie: the first was the ability to write and adapt verses from the folk songs they learned in each place they went, from Virginia to Oklahoma to Missouri.<sup>8</sup> The second was more innate: “[I learned the] ability to identify with the ordinary man and woman, speak their own language.”<sup>9</sup> Seeger melded his New England intellectual background with Guthrie’s down-to-earth Oklahoma background. With music as the medium, Pete allowed himself to be influenced by both Guthrie and the larger folk-constituency in the United States. In doing so, Seeger accumulated the cultural capital necessary to engage with audiences across the country, whether they were urban coastal residents or rural Americans in the middle of the country.

The audience was taken aback; this was the first time that a performer had sang to them directly about the cause they were fighting for.<sup>15</sup> Like the shanties and work songs of times past, Seeger’s song dotes on current labor problems of the time, but more directly as a focal point calling for a social movement. The songs speak of the formation of the union and incorporate the specific goals that labor workers all around the country vied for: shorter hours and better working conditions. His lyrics also add a dimension of what to hope for, an ultimate humane goal that the workers could get behind, something not seen previously in Seeger’s time. In doing so, Seeger adapted to the wants and needs of his following, as Burns indicates as happening in the formation of an authentic leader. Even though Seeger notes in an interview

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## “Seeger melded his New England intellectual background with Guthrie’s down-to-earth Oklahoma background.”

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Seeger’s new position was a unique one; in the 1940s United States, the type of music that one listened to depended on where one lived, often a function of the distribution of record labels. It was common practice at the time for record companies to record two versions of the same song, one pop and one country. A geographic rift came about because these companies would distribute the two releases in different areas.<sup>10</sup> But where one lived did not necessarily indicate what music one connected with. According to census data, between 1910 and 1950, roughly 20% of Americans had moved from rural parts of the country to urban cities,<sup>11</sup> but they carried with them the traditions and heritage of their yeoman past. By not only understanding the music of the American people, but also understanding the basis by which their music was created, Seeger was able to add his own political messages and social commentary into his folk music and still reach his audience.

Identifying the pivotal moment of becoming an authentic leader, Northwestern Professor of American History Gary Wills sees a final test taking place before such a leader emerges in his book *Certain Trumpets*: “The orator’s final test is his ability to create heroism in himself to match what he has been preaching.”<sup>12</sup> Such a moment took place in May 1941 when Seeger and the Almanac Singers took the stage at Madison Square Garden in front of 20,000 striking transit workers, after a failed performance one year prior.<sup>13</sup> Seeger differentiated himself during this performance by *directly* singing about unions and the plight of the worker:

“Now, if you want higher wages let me tell you what to do. You got to talk to the workers in the shop with you. You got to build you a union, got to make it strong, But if you all stick together, boys, it won’t be long. You get shorter hours, better working conditions, Vacations with pay. Take your kids to the seashore.”<sup>14</sup>

in 2006 that after meeting Guthrie, in order to truly impact people with his music, “I was *eager* to change.”<sup>16</sup>

### INSTITUTION BUILDING AS A PRECURSOR TO THE HUAC

Consistent with his belief that people should sing to his music rather than simply listen to it, Seeger understood the role that other forms of media could play in interacting with music as an art form. After returning from his World War II service, Seeger helped found a *People’s Music Bulletin*, which, after financial changes, would eventually become the more known publication *Sing Out!*<sup>17</sup> He wrote, “The printed page is a handy device, and there is value in being able to count on a certain number of pages appearing regularly with up-to-date information on a certain subject.”<sup>18</sup> The *New York Times* lauded *Sing Out!* as “a musical stethoscope on the heartbeat of the nation, translating current events into notes and lyrics.”<sup>19</sup> *Sing Out!* served as a music bulletin providing the scores, arrangements, and lyrics for new songs pertaining to subjects of labor movements, union strikes, and pacifism as well as providing a medium for writers to produce opinion pieces. In his management practices of the publication, Seeger became what Keohane defines as a “public leader,”<sup>20</sup> someone who, through the development of institutions, whether they be mass-media (like *Bulletin* and *Sing Out!*) or non-profits, gains a large audience and provides his or her own mechanism for reaching them.

Though *Bulletin* and *Sing Out!* provided him with an audience, Seeger’s experienced his biggest failings while managing these groups. Seeger’s biggest failings were during his time as manager of groups such as *Bulletin* and *Sing Out!* Because he did not have the experience to make managerial decisions with a focus on his bottom line, Seeger’s decision-making, although equity-focused, proved ineffective and disastrous. For example, the first *Bulletin* amassed over \$8,000

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in debt.<sup>21</sup> Seeger made similar decisions in other publications and projects, financially failing because he brought a public leadership community mindset into the singular decision-making that befalls the executive of a profit-driven mass media publication.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, after both the popularity of his songs on the national stage, including several appearances of his records on *Billboard's* Top 10<sup>23</sup>, and the mechanisms of dissemination of his and other pro-labor workers, Seeger had a national platform.

Although *Sing Out!* and *Bulletin* focused on music and music as it related to social engagement, several of Seeger's associates were already under the scrutiny of Chairman Francis E. Walter's House Un-American Activities Committee.<sup>24</sup> Seeger himself was not a communist, but played venues in the national spotlight and was involved with communists under investigation by Chairman Walter's committee. The interaction between the different arms of the media drove a sensationalist and fear-mongering American communist conspiracy network narrative because of their profit-motive, namely the work of *Red Channels' Counterattack*.

*Counterattack* was a right-wing journal bent on challenging the American loyalties of people that worked in entertainment media throughout the Cold War frenzy. Their methods were particularly effective because they understood the profit-driven motive behind the everyday operations of media companies. Understanding that sponsors had a big say in the decision-making of media companies, they employed a strategy of harassing the companies that were sponsors of shows. *Counterattack* would first call a company to tell them they had heard a specific actor with potential un-American ties was employed on a show they sponsored. They would then ransom companies demanding the equivalent of \$9000<sup>25</sup> to "investigate" the actor. If the company refused, the editors would run a story in the publication that the actor was a "fellow traveler," (someone who was not a card carrying member of the communist party but nevertheless a sympathizer) avoiding the legal troubles of slander or libel in the process.<sup>26</sup> In June of 1950, *Counterattack* published the booklet *Red Channels*, which named among the likes of Aaron Copland and Leonard Bernstein, Pete Seeger.<sup>27</sup> Being named 13 times,<sup>28</sup> Seeger was cited foremost for being the chairman of *People's Songs*, then for being the entertainer and singer affiliated with the daily worker.<sup>29</sup> Among the accusations was "led singing at dinner."<sup>30</sup> Even though Seeger's primary occupation and platform was his musician status, to the publishers and McCarthyists, he was the leader of a powerful civil society institution that was mobilizing political power. As a result, Seeger was summoned to Congress with a subpoena by the House un-American activities committee.

### **CULTURAL GUERRILLA WARFARE AND THE HUAC**

In preparing to testify before HUAC, Seeger had before him three possible answers to lines of questioning. He could either 1) choose to not answer any of the questions on the

grounds of self-incrimination in the Fifth amendment and be branded a "fifth-amendment Communist," 2) choose to answer the questions of being a communist or leftist for himself but not answer for any of his associates, or 3) refuse to answer the questions using a first-amendment defense as to the right of free expression<sup>31</sup> and to "petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Musicians before and after him brought before the board used the fifth-amendment defense; Seeger recognized the problems of answering their questions because his father was fired from his job for taking this approach and not revealing any of the people he associated himself with. However, the last time the First Amendment defense was taken, the infamous Hollywood Ten in the film industry were sentenced to a year of jail for being in contempt of Congress and eventually blacklisted.<sup>32</sup> While Seeger understood the consequences of each decision, he ultimately chose the First Amendment rebuttal because it was the reasoning he felt he could most get behind<sup>33</sup>; being a proponent of free speech was evident throughout his life, both within and surrounding the singing of his songs. Seeger confused the committee for the first portion of the hearing by challenging whether any of the lines of questioning were "proper."<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, even as Seeger recognized the consequences of his actions on his work disseminating music to the masses through media (the blacklist), he had transformed the methods by which he could reach a large American audience through a "cultural guerilla warfare" paradigm.<sup>35</sup> Seeger's appearance before HUAC and his continued use of his platform to express his views on civil and social society challenged what it meant to be an American.

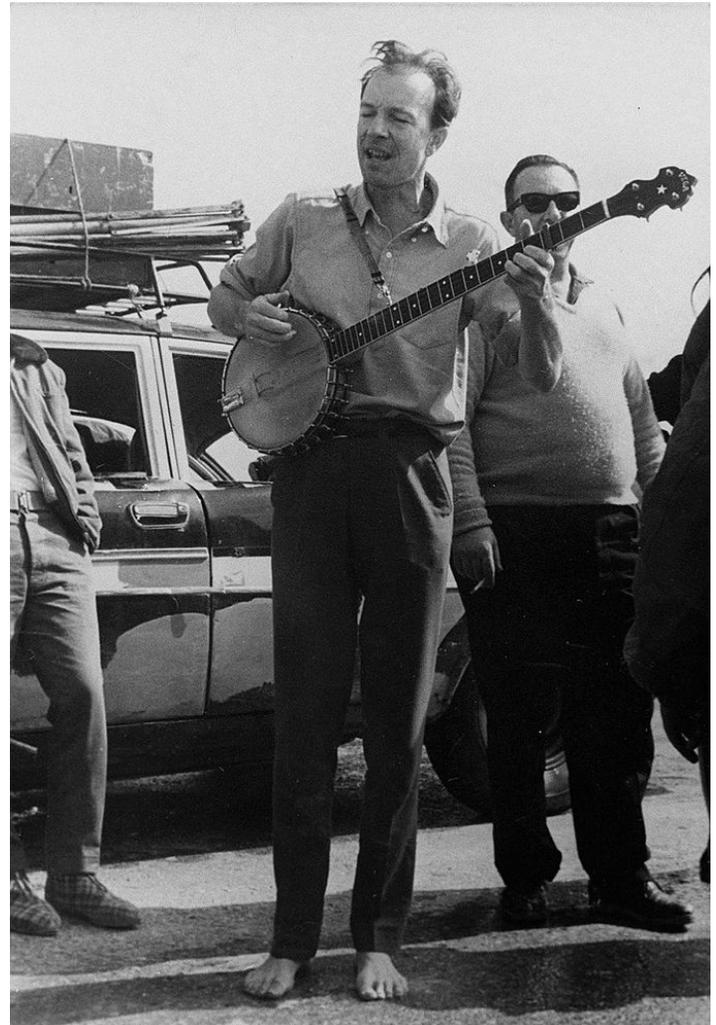
Do certain American civil and governmental institutions enjoy a higher sense of legitimacy than others? In today's society, for example, those serving in the military are seen as the truest patriots in the eyes of the American public. Not only does polling show that support for the military has increased significantly between now and Seeger's appearance before HUAC<sup>36</sup>, but we see the left and right both ideologically shift in the same direction during that time period to more pro-military and even more anti-Soviet resentment. While the right in Congress, HUAC, and America generally did not approve of Pete Seeger, the left's disenchantment with the armed forces did not allow for a patriotic argument to arise. The argument, present from the Lincoln era, follows from his Gettysburg Address as the "cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion."<sup>37</sup> Seeger and the left in general had idealistic failings during the era, because no military argument was made on behalf of Seeger, by himself or his associates.

From his unorthodox answering style before HUAC to reaching audiences across the country, Seeger designed his tactics to provide an element of surprise. Before arriving in a new area, he would contact local TV and radio stations to inhibit groups like the American Legion from mobilizing their forces against him. During the TV or radio broadcast,

he would advertise a performance he would be giving at a local high school or college the same evening.<sup>38</sup> Colleges made perfect audiences; they were pivotal institutions for Seeger to interact with because they were responsible for the education of the intellectually malleable young, who were hungry for a variety of ideas. Liberal arts colleges including Oberlin, Stanford, Smith, and Duke were immune to outside, anti-communist intervention; for example, Seeger was slated to perform at the Ohio State Fair, but the governor of Ohio did not permit him to perform.<sup>39</sup> The same can be said for the hundreds of summer camps that Seeger would play for, albeit to a lesser extent. HUAC's cultural directives were ineffective for the groups in society most susceptible to the ideas presented due to free speech and expression.

Leaders within the art and performance industries were not only cognizant of the role that money plays in advancing the interests of musical expression, but aware of music's role as a social tool in the era. The most widely regarded orchestras, ballets, and other high arts were sponsored by corporations and large banks.<sup>40</sup> While Seeger aspired to attach as little commercial value to his music as possible, he understood the critical role additional money could serve in his advocacy efforts. Part of the cultural guerilla warfare included playing for business management in nightclubs and private venue bookings for investment bankers and consultants.<sup>41</sup> He structured his responses to questions about his bookings in a way that supported his transformational paradigm: whenever asked about these matters, his response was always that he would play for anyone, whether in answering to the media or before the HUAC.<sup>42</sup>

While Seeger worked for years to establish a cult of authenticity within his music presence and platform, the legitimization had to come *externally*, due to Seeger's own advocacy efforts. Externally, he had only previously received pushback and hyper-criticism from media, business, and government. Seeger needed a source of legitimization, one that would resonate with the ever-challenging idea that he was as American as a pro-war anti-Communist Congressman. To accomplish this, Seeger used the institution of American power that most directly looks for breaches in the Constitution, the judicial system. Because all of the tactics within his "cultural guerilla warfare" paradigm were legal, he would take up any threats to it in court; most common were challenges from school boards in allowing him to use auditoriums as performance spaces. Challenging these decisions in court culminated in the New York State Supreme Court decision in *East Meadow Concert Association vs. Board of Education*, where the use of the W.T. Clarke High School on Long Island, New York was in contention. The court's decision affirmed the narrative that Seeger used in his HUAC defense: "The expression of controversial and unpopular views... is precisely what is protected by both the Federal and State Constitutions."<sup>43</sup> Thus, while one branch of the government served to ostracize him, another affirmed his beliefs and actions.



Singer Pete Seeger, A Member Of The "Weavers", Performing For Idf Soldiers (1964)

Source: Motke Avivi, *Israel National Photo Collection* (Wikimedia Commons)

#### THE US CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: A DUKE UNIVERSITY VIGIL CASE STUDY

As the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s started to take shape, Seeger was active from the start, both from a participatory role as a pro-integration activist as well as a leadership role as a folk singer. Seeger made his entry as a singer after adapting the lyrics of Zilphia Horton's popularized protest song, "We Will Overcome" to "We Shall Overcome,"<sup>44</sup> and as an activist by marching alongside Dr. King in the Selma protests.<sup>45</sup> However, his methods were not as successful with the black constituency and organizers as he had anticipated. Apart from "We Shall Overcome," Seeger's music, which was aimed toward a white labor constituency, would not resonate with the African-American audiences he was targeting. A failed October 1962 performance in a black church in Albany, Georgia<sup>46</sup> proved to Seeger the existence of an unbreachable gap between the culture and style of some of his music to certain audiences. Grassroots institutions agreed.

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Seeger's dilemma followed the larger narrative of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the group that Seeger would organize with the most. From the mid-1960s, their leader, John Lewis, began a policy directive of a SNCC "more Black dominated and Black led."<sup>47</sup> Seeger did not find a place in an organization that would publish position papers against his integrated, American identity over racial identity beliefs:

"If we are to proceed toward true liberation, we must cut ourselves off from white people. We must form our own institutions, credit unions, co-ops, political parties, write our own histories."<sup>48</sup>

As his doctrine was tied to his performances, his income, Seeger had to adapt his audience without changing his picture of what an American could do with free expression. When an opportunity arose for an audience that he could capture, he would take it.

On April 4, 1968, when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, Seeger received a call from the poet John Beecher:

"Pete, you've got to come down here. I've never seen anything like it on any southern campus. After King's assassination about two hundred white students decided they must do something, not just talk. They went to the million-dollar home of the president, demanded he resign from his white-only country club, that he bargain collectively with the Negro employees' union, and several other things. He refused to talk further to them. They refused to leave...and moved their vigil to the quadrangle. Will you come down and sing for them?"<sup>49</sup>

After Seeger sang, the *Duke Chronicle* reported that his protest songs, anthems, and folk music were "keyed to the occasion."<sup>50</sup> Using his standard repertoire for cultural guerilla warfare, Seeger successfully kept the students going and continued the students' vigil. He identified a means to achieve his goal of using music to bring Americans together that was practical- he understood that the young, malleable white students knew the folk music that he had imparted on their parents a generation before. The Duke students' anger was not made violent (even though news stations in Durham had told students that they would only cover the vigil if it had turned "violent"<sup>51</sup>), and was also driven forward using non-violent protest, with the prose, poetry, and music of Pete Seeger and John Beecher acting as guides.

### **"WAIST DEEP IN THE BIG MUDDY" AND LEADERSHIP THROUGH SONG: A CASE STUDY OF THE ANTI-VIETNAM WAR MOVEMENT**

In March of 1963, Seeger and his family arrived in Vietnam and saw the place he had started to champion for years prior. He noted in interviews that the omnipresent reminders of American bombings made the entire trip disturbing.<sup>52</sup> Seeger opposed the war morally and practically long before the rest of America did. Gallup polling shows 61% of Americans believed

U.S. military involvement was not a mistake in 1965; that number dwindled to 28% in 1971.<sup>53</sup> Seeger's disillusionment with Vietnam is found within the song, "Where have all the flowers gone,"<sup>54</sup> which peaked in the Billboard's 25 when released.<sup>55</sup> As Seeger evolved and formed his opinion, he would galvanize his listener base in the process.

Seeger's most effective actionary measure through song was found in "Waist deep in the big muddy." In it, he portrays a regiment of American trainees doing maneuvers in Louisiana and being ordered to cross a river too deep to cross by foot:

It was back in nineteen forty-two,  
I was a member of a good platoon.  
We were on maneuvers in-a Louisiana,  
One night by the light of the moon.  
The captain told us to ford a river,  
That's how it all begun.  
We were -- knee deep in the Big Muddy,  
But the big fool said to push on.

All at once, the moon clouded over,  
We heard a gurgling cry.  
A few seconds later, the captain's helmet  
Was all that floated by.  
The Sergeant said, "Turn around men!  
I'm in charge from now on."  
And we just made it out of the Big Muddy  
With the captain dead and gone.

Waist deep in the Big Muddy  
And the big fool says to push on.  
Waist deep in the Big Muddy  
And the big fool says to push on.  
Waist deep! Neck deep! Soon even a  
Tall man'll be over his head, we're  
Waist deep in the Big Muddy!  
And the big fool says to push on!<sup>56</sup>

The lyrics were particularly effective when set to Seeger's melody. He makes no mention of Vietnam within the song; rather the narrative of the World War II trainee serves as a poignant reminder to the "fool" mentality of the current period. Rhetorically, the choice of Louisiana as the setting reminds the audience that wanton killing in Vietnam is the same as it is back home. Critics and commentators also saw the death of the captain as an allusion to President Lyndon B. Johnson who continues the narrative of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, pressing the American people to "push on."<sup>57</sup>

Media coverage tactics were the final component of the cultural guerilla warfare. Even though a blacklisted entertainer was not allowed a personal platform, he or she could appear on news media if they happened to make the news. There were limits of course, at the discretion of the artists. Seeger would never allow violence to activate the



Pete Seeger, noted folk singer entertaining at the opening of the Washington labor canteen (1944)  
 Source: Joseph Horne, *Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. (Wikimedia Commons)*

news media; the Duke vigil serves as a clear example. Finally benefiting from the reporting of the news media, Seeger was eventually allowed to perform “Waist deep in the big muddy” on the CBS broadcast.

**FAILINGS IN JUDGMENT:  
 SEEGER AND OTHER WORLD LEADERS**

Observing individual leadership presents its difficulties for those who relied on personality more than policy for Seeger; there is a failing in how Seeger’s viewed other leaders precisely because the organizational skills and mobilizational qualities that he drew on hid the truth behind leaders he steadfastly remained behind. Seeger’s failings came to negatively affect the tactics that he had successfully used in disseminating his ideas and beliefs. He repeatedly publicly stood behind the communist line in the early tenure of Joseph Stalin’s reign as Party Chairman<sup>58</sup>, as well as calling Ho Chi Minh one of his “all-time heroes.”<sup>59</sup> The mechanism behind his failure in leadership was the media.

Alongside his respect for these anti-American leaders, through rhetoric, Seeger allowed the news media to alter one of the cornerstones of Seeger’s argument throughout the blacklist: that he was first and foremost an American, and his expressed beliefs and actions were meant to “preserve its institutions,” as he so openly rebutted the HUAC with.<sup>60</sup> He would openly visit

Russia and Vietnam and fall prey to narratives created by the press such as, “SEEGER SONG IN MOSCOW IS ANTI-US.”<sup>61</sup> The tool narrative-drivers understood that Pete Seeger did not was the importance of striking first; whoever *sets* the narrative directs it.

**CONCLUSION**

While many of Seeger’s personal writings, whether private or published as editorials in *Sing Out!* addressed the power and severe necessity on differing mediums in presenting music, they also were in a time where the very nature of music media was changing. TV was in its infancy, and Seeger wanted to experiment with these new forms of media. True transformational leadership involves taking newer practices, norms, and technologies, and using them to move and uplift the country. Irrespective of understanding of different technologies, Seeger had a scope of authenticity determined to change outlooks and beliefs of environmental, political, and social issues at any micro or macro level. His specific “brand” of authentic leadership spanned through multiple civil and social movements on race, war, and the environment. The same tactics worked regardless of issue. This was the great underlying framework of his cultural guerilla tactics: the critical use of media. 

## Endnotes

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- [3] Ibid, 68.
- [4] Wilkinson, 63.
- [5] Burns, 48-49.
- [6] Ibid.
- [7] Dorian Lynskey, "Pete Seeger: the man who brought politics to music," *The Guardian*, 2014.
- [8] Winkler, 23.
- [9] Seeger in *Incomplete*, 58.
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- [23] Whitburn, 130.
- [24] Dimmitt, 35.
- [25] <http://www.usinflationcalculator.com/>
- [26] Dunaway, 205-206]
- [27] Winkler, 66.
- [28] Ibid, 66.
- [29] "Red Channels," 130
- [30] Ibid, 130.
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- [32] "Hollywood Ten"
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- [43] EAST MEADOW COMMUNITY CONCERTS ASSOCIATION, v. BOARD OF EDUCATION OF UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 3, COUNTY OF NASSAU, Court of Appeals of the State of New York, Jul 6, 1966 18 N.Y.2d 129 (N.Y. 1966).
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- [45] "Letter from Selma," Renata Adler, 1965.
- [46] Cohen, 229.
- [47] Interview with John Lewis, 1988.
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- [53] Lunch and Sperllich. "American public opinion and the war in Vietnam." *Western Political Quarterly* 32.1 (1979): 21-44.
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- [57] "Seeger Song Censored," *Variety Magazine*, September 13 1967 Issue
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