

A new era of McCarthyism?

Since the start of his second term, Donald Trump has used tactics reminiscent of the 1950s to stifle critical voices and institutions. Over the past week, those threats have become even more inflammatory.

Financial Times Europe
19 sept. 2025
By Christopher Grimes

On Monday afternoon, five days after Charlie Kirk was assassinated at a university in Utah, US vicepresident JD Vance presented an episode of the podcast that made the rightwing activist famous.



Broadcasting *The Charlie Kirk Show* from his office, Vance delivered a blistering attack on the leftwing groups he claims are organising violent opposition to the Trump administration. “We’re going to go after the NGO network that foments, facilitates and engages in violence,” he said.

The motivations of the man accused of killing Kirk are still being analysed, and prosecutors have suggested that he was acting alone. However, that has not stopped senior figures in the administration using the killing to demonise opponents on the left.

Stephen Miller, White House deputy chief of staff and another guest on the podcast, went even further in promising revenge on what he said was a “vast domestic terror movement”.

“We are going to use every resource we have . . . throughout this government to identify, disrupt, dismantle and destroy these networks,” he promised.

Even before Kirk’s death, there was a developing pattern of the Trump administration using the instruments of the state to intimidate its perceived domestic opponents. Since

January, the White House has conducted simultaneous campaigns against leading universities, media companies and law firms.

While some of the subjects are familiar targets of President Donald Trump's ire, together they amount to a co-ordinated push to stifle critical voices — a process some have likened to the Red Scare of the 1950s led by Senator Joe McCarthy.

"I think he [Trump] is chilling dissent," says Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of the law school at University of California, Berkeley, and a specialist in US constitutional law. "That's where the analogy of the McCarthy era comes in."

Over the past week, in an environment charged with anger at the murder of Kirk, the rhetoric and threats have become even more inflammatory — reinforcing the impression of a new Red Scare intended to silence potential opponents.

In the podcast, Vance singled out the Ford Foundation and George Soros's Open Society Foundations, two nongovernmental groups that he said received "generous tax treatment". On Tuesday, Trump launched a \$15bn defamation lawsuit against The New York Times, accusing it of being a mouthpiece of the Democratic party.

On Wednesday, ABC said that it was "indefinitely" suspending the late-night talk show of Jimmy Kimmel after the comedian, who often mocks Trump, was attacked by conservatives for misrepresenting the politics of the man accused of killing Kirk. Earlier in the day, Brendan Carr, chair of the Federal Communications Commission, had suggested the regulator could withdraw ABC's broadcasting licence over Kimmel's comments.

"We're dealing with a radical left group of lunatics, and they don't play fair and they never did," Trump told NBC News.

Trump himself believes he is pushing back against the politicians, prosecutors and bureaucrats who tried to punish him when he was out of power. Many of his supporters believe he is right to target media groups and universities, which they accuse of being biased against conservatives.

Charges of McCarthyism have ebbed and flowed in American politics since the death of the senator in 1957. But the evidence of a new type of Red Scare — one where criticism is being muzzled by an administration using the power of the federal government against its perceived enemies — is becoming more widespread.

Ever since he entered politics a decade ago, Trump has often delighted his supporters by launching scathing attacks on the country's cultural elites.

Since the start of his second term, however, many of these attacks have gone beyond the rabble-rousing of culture war politics. Instead, they have amounted to a co-ordinated targeting of the sorts of institutions that could serve as bases of opposition to his agenda.

Trump has even gone so far as to try to reshape some cultural institutions in his image, appointing himself as chair of the John F Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

“Trump clearly wishes to dominate the nation’s attention agenda,” says Walter Olson, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute’s Center for Constitutional Studies. “He sees this as tying into other specific goals such as depriving alternative power centres of agenda-setting juice [and] putting public figures in fear of him. Some of it is culture war, but it goes beyond that.”

Chemerinsky says that Trump “has very much gone after the sources of dissent: universities, the press, law firms”. He argues that in some ways the potential threats are more significant than in the 1950s because McCarthy, for all the influence he once wielded, was only a junior senator from Wisconsin.

“In the McCarthy era, it wasn’t the president of the United States using the enormous powers of the government for retribution and punishment in the way we’re seeing now,” he says. “We’ve never seen anything like this.”

The Red Scare of the 1950s is remembered for the blacklisting of Hollywood screenwriters and actors, McCarthy’s incessant red-baiting and the execution of convicted spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. The prosecution team in the case against the Rosenbergs included Roy Cohn, who later became a mentor to Trump.

Trump and his father hired Cohn to fight a justice department lawsuit accusing them of denying Black and Puerto Rican applicants for apartments in their properties in the 1960s and 1970s. Cohn, who died in 1986, advised Trump: “You might be guilty, but it doesn’t matter . . . Don’t ever admit guilt,” a family member of Cohn’s recounted to PBS.

The Red Scare was part of a fight between New Deal Democrats and Republicans, who wanted to roll back President Franklin Roosevelt’s expansion of the federal government in the 1930s and 1940s. “The Red Scare was, first of all, a cultural war, pitting two visions for America against each other, one progressive, one conservative,” writes Clay Risen in *Red Scare*, an account of the period.

The geopolitical backdrop was the dawn of the cold war, giving rise to concerns about widespread communist infiltration. McCarthy masterfully fanned those fears.

“McCarthyism, to me, is about the willingness to constantly attack your enemies, to be willing to make things up, essentially to use the Joe McCarthy playbook,” Risen says in an interview. “You see a lot of McCarthyism today, particularly around immigration.”

The other similarity, he says, is that there are “not a lot of people standing up” to Trump in his second term. “In the ’50s, institution after institution bowed down to the Red Scare, whether it was school districts, universities, libraries, law firms, Hollywood movie studios — the elite organisations all bent the knee to the red-baiters.”

Instead of an enemy’s ideology and its domestic followers, the Trump administration is targeting illegal immigrants, liberal institutions, the media, members of the transgender community and diversity, equity and inclusion programmes, Risen says.

“And then there’s ‘woke,’ that catchall,” he says. “I would imagine there is a possibility to see another Red Scare, but this time a much scarier one because it’s aimed at a grab bag of ‘others’ who are right here.”

Trump’s rise to political power in 2016 was accompanied by constant attacks on the press, which he labelled “fake news” and later described as “the enemy of the people” — a phrase associated with 20th-century dictators.

But this time round, the attacks are not only rhetorical.

Just days before the November presidential election, Trump filed a \$10bn lawsuit against CBS, for what he claimed was the network’s “deceitful” editing of an interview with then vice-president Kamala Harris on the 60 Minutes news programme. After Trump won the election, there was a widespread assumption that he would drop the suit, which experts in media law agreed was flimsy. He did not.

At the time, Shari Redstone, then the controlling shareholder of CBS parent Paramount, was seeking the administration’s approval for her \$8bn sale of the company to Skydance.

Despite a revolt within CBS News, in which the heads of 60 Minutes and CBS News resigned in protest, Redstone paid \$16mn to settle the lawsuit — and the deal was approved.

Trump has continued his attacks on the press. In July, he sued the Wall Street Journal, including its owner, Rupert Murdoch, for \$10bn over a report that he sent a suggestive birthday card to Jeffrey Epstein. This week he moved against The New York Times, which he said spread “false and defamatory content”.

Meredith Kopit Levien, CEO of The New York Times, told the FT on Wednesday that the suit “had no merit” and was intended to stifle independent journalism. She accused Trump of enacting an “anti-press playbook”, drawing parallels with authoritarian tactics in Turkey and Hungary. “Those countries have elections but they also really work to quash opposition to the regime,” she added.

The latest skirmish is with ABC. On his show on Monday, Kimmel said that “the Maga gang [is] desperately trying to characterise this kid who murdered Charlie Kirk as anything other than one of them and doing everything they can to score political points from it”.

This drew a furious response from conservatives, with Carr, head of the FCC, calling the comments “the sickest conduct possible”. Speaking later on Fox, he said the regulator could put more pressure on broadcasters over content it considered biased or inaccurate. “We at the FCC are going to force the public interest obligation. There are broadcasters out there that don’t like it, they can turn in their licence in to the FCC,” Carr said.

Trump took to social media to celebrate the suspension of Kimmel, who has been a prominent critic of the president. “Congratulations to ABC for finally having the courage to do what had to be done,” Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform.

Although the administration has made threats against certain NGOs, it has so far taken little action. And while it has targeted law firms, several of which have agreed to provide free legal services for initiatives supported by the administration, it has also lost a number of legal cases seeking to test the validity of its executive orders.

But perhaps the biggest target so far this year has been universities.

After an unprecedented pressure campaign against Columbia, Brown and other Ivy League universities that netted hundreds of millions of dollars in fines, the Trump administration has turned its attention to one of the largest public universities in America: UCLA.

In July, the US Department of Justice said the university had violated the rights of Jewish students during pro-Palestinian protests on the campus. It froze \$300mn in medical and science research grants, then came back days later demanding a \$1bn fine to settle the antisemitism charges.

The \$1bn demand is double the amount the Trump administration is seeking from Harvard, and five times the \$200mn paid by Columbia.

Universities have long been a bugbear on the American right. Religious and political conservatives, including Supreme Court justice Samuel Alito, have criticised them for being intolerant of traditional viewpoints.

Many conservatives argue that they are the ones who have been silenced by both the mainstream media and educational institutions. On his first day in office, Trump issued an executive order titled “Restoring Freedom of Speech”, in which he accused the Biden administration of working to “deplatform, or otherwise suppress speech” in a way that was unconstitutional.

Many lawyers and academics believe that the administration’s pressure campaign has less to do with antisemitism among students and more about shifting the culture on campuses.

The administration’s argument that it is cracking down on campus antisemitism is “largely a smokescreen for broader concerns about the ideological leaning of universities”, says Evelyn Douek, associate professor at Stanford Law School.

On the UCLA campus, Trump’s threats to cut funding have frightened students and faculty. “There’s a feeling of paranoia on campus,” says a longtime faculty member. “The feeling of fear, the fear of speaking out, is real.”

There is real anxiety about whether the University of California system will feel compelled to reach a settlement with the Trump administration.

“From the history of the Red Scare, the question is: are we going to stick together or turn on each other,” the faculty member says. “And we’re encouraging the leadership to stick together.”