A Very Un-American Committee on Un-American Activities

McKenna Domalski

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The Cold War was a time of American and Soviet Union political and social differences that evolved into an ideological conflict, an aggressive race of technology, weaponry and doctrine that the world had never seen before. A global phenomenon, this war produced some of the greatest propaganda and paranoia in United States history. This paranoia, comparable to the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, surpasses that created during the time of immigration bans and the first Red Scare in the early twentieth century. The United States government scrambled to create an anti-communist nation, due to genuine fear as well as an initiative to surpass the Soviet Union in world supremacy. The House of Un-American Activities (HUAC), formed in 1938 to identify communists and communist sympathizers living in America, was an investigative committee that would dive into the lives of government and civilians alike, challenging the core values our government was built on. The Truman administration, Congress, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) felt it necessary to amp up HUAC with the conclusion of World War II, as well as the emergence of the Cold War. While HUAC was certainly not the first or only anti-communistic committee in the House or the Senate, it was certainly the most active, influential, and important to American society in the Cold War. HUAC, especially during its amplification post WWII, proved to test the American Bill of Rights, particularly that of the First and Fifth Amendments. Through the acts of the FBI, Senator Joe McCarthy, legislation such as the Smith and McCarran Internal Security Acts, and the policies of the Truman administration, this committee gained undeserved legitimacy that allowed them to conduct a modern day witch hunt. Targeting government officials, liberals, Hollywood elites, and many ordinary citizens, HUAC became a physical representation of the fear that communists posed to capitalists, and their actions expressed the length at which the American government was willing to go to gain public support and root out what they deemed as “evil.” HUAC, from 1945 through the 1960s, was the primary American anti-communist organization that proved to panic the conservative population, enrage the New Left, and accuse both accurately and erroneously numerous American citizens of holding communistic affiliations; the consequences of which leaving a tarnish upon the history of the United States.

The creation of HUAC was not simultaneous with the eruption of the Cold War, but rather it was birthed years before the conflict in which it became so correlated with. Committees to identify and fight communism had been continuously been created since the first Red Scare, such as the Overman Committee, the Fish Committee, and the Special Committee on Un-American Activities. The Overman and Fish committees were subcommittees (in 1918, and 1930, respectively) that delved into Communistic activities and organizations, while the Special Committee on Un-American Activities (from 1934-1937) focused on Nazi-affiliated organizations, as well as communism. World War II, as well as the geographic proximity of the Soviet Union to Germany, would establish a nervousness among the American people, becoming advantageous for the predecessor of these failed ad-hoc committees. The Dies Committee, created in 1938, would transform into HUAC as it has come to be known today. Named for its founder, Martin Dies Jr., Texas Democratic member of the House of Representatives, the committee would become the “trailblazer” and the most influential of the anti-communist government organizations and would produce the most successful techniques for exposing communists.[[1]](#footnote-0) Dies created the committee in 1938 while in correspondence with director of the newly founded FBI, John Edgar Hoover, with the purpose of identifying communistic activities both amongst government employees and the general public. The committee was not taken seriously until the red baiting began after the cease of World War II, which became the national focus after World War II. Historian and author Ellen Schrecker writes, “HUAC had not always been so influential. During the 1930s and early 1940s, the committee had a reputation for irresponsibility. Few members of Congress considered it a prestigious assignments and many of its mainly southern or rural members were ineffectual or worse.”[[2]](#footnote-1)

The resistance to fighting communism before and during World War II was undoubtedly strategic, for the Soviet Union led by Joseph Stalin was an important Allied Power without whom the outcome of the war may have been very different. At the beginning of the political year in 1945, however, that was all to change. Schrecker writes, “On the first day of the reconvening of Congress in January, 1945, a strange, unprecedented and tragic event occurred. On that day the first and only permanent investigating committee was authorized by the House of Representatives.” [[3]](#footnote-2) This standing committee was to change American history in the most extreme way possible, by altering the morality and values of which America was built upon, but not without the help of other governmental agencies, such as the FBI. Not only did the FBI aid in the investigations (as well as conducting numerous of their own), but perhaps more importantly, their affiliation with HUAC would prove the authenticity of the “threat” to the American public and bring it to the forefront of internal relations.

Hoover’s FBI had significant influence, both in the creation and sustenance of HUAC. On June 11th, 1938, Hoover wrote to Attorney General Homer Stille Cummings,

“In view of the fact that several Senatorial and Congressional Committees have been are being appointed at this time for the purpose of conducting investigations and inquiry into various matters, I anticipate that you will receive requests from members of Congress for the assignment of Special Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation to assist these committees in their fact-finding inquiries.”[[4]](#footnote-3)

Less than two weeks later on June 23rd, 1938, Representative Dies reached out to Hoover himself, writing,

“I am requesting you and the Attorney General to detail to our committee some investigators to assist us in our inquiry [the Dies Committee]. I am sure that you have some men that have had experience in connection with the investigation of the German-American Bund and also communistic activities.” [[5]](#footnote-4)

The integration of the Bureau was key in the success of red baiting during the Cold War, which would begin less than a decade later than these letters were written. With the conclusion of World War II and the loss of the threat of the German-American Bund, a promotional American Nazi organization during the 1930s, the FBI created a new goal. Schrecker writes, “In 1946, motivated by his own obsession with the Red menace as well as the need to find a major postwar mission for the FBI, Hoover ordered the bureau to mount an intensive public relations campaign to alert the American people to the internal threat of communism.”[[6]](#footnote-5) Hoover, before the ever-famous McCarthy, was key in shaping the image of communists in the eyes of the American public, a very important factor in justifying the persecution of this political group. In Hoover’s influential 1947 testimony before HUAC, he states, “The communist propaganda technique is designed to promote emotional response with the hope that the victim will be attracted by what he is told the communist way of life holds in store for him. The objective, of course, is to develop discontent and hasten the day when the communists can gather sufficient support and following to overthrow the American way of life.”[[7]](#footnote-6) The FBI was able to use its power and placement within the federal government to bring communism to the forefront of the Cold War, demonizing the ideology and those who followed it. The FBI aided HUAC in making anti-communism a nation wide goal, directly leading to the gross injustice that was served, for as Schrecker observes, “What transformed the communist threat into a national obsession was not its plausibility, but the involvement of the federal government.”[[8]](#footnote-7)

Just as HUAC could not have reached its supremacy without the FBI, legislation was just as important in aiding the wrong that would occur within the government and HUAC hearings of the McCarthy era. The two most important acts of the Cold War in relation to red baiting and human rights are that of the Smith Act, and later, the McCarran Internal Security Act. The Smith Act of 1940 criminalized the attempt to overthrow or advocate a violent overthrow of the American government, as well as requesting all non-citizens to register with the United States government.[[9]](#footnote-8) This act is blatantly unconstitutional, for advocacy is not a punishable crime under constitutional law. The United States gained independence by overthrowing what they saw as a tyrannical government, therefore the prohibition of doing so was understandably not included in the Declaration of Independence, or the Constitution. Instead, the writers of these documents included a system of checks and balances, demonstrated as the branches of government, but even that could not withstand the hysteria of the Red Scare. Schrecker writes, “The fear of subversion and communists appears to be so profound and even pathological among countless Americans that it submerges their beliefs in the right to a fair trial and the necessity of the separation of powers among the three branches of government.”[[10]](#footnote-9) The McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950 required communist organizations to register with the US Attorney General, as well as established the Subversive Activities Control Board to investigate those who were suspected to have relations to or be communist, or promote dictatorship in any way.[[11]](#footnote-10) This Act emerged alongside Senator Joe McCarthy, providing explanation as to how the fear the Senator elicited could penetrate the hearts and minds of not only the susceptible public, but government officials as well. President Harry S. Truman attempted to veto this calamitous Act, referring to it as the “greatest danger to freedom of speech, press, and assembly since the Alien and Sedition Laws of 1798,” and ironically regarded it as a step towards totalitarianism.[[12]](#footnote-11) Only a few years earlier the Truman administration had created an internal check program for federal employees, Executive Order 9835 given by President Truman himself, which had helped create the hysteria which allowed this future act to ratify.

Executive Order 9835 is better known as the Employees Loyalty Program of 1947. This program required that all government employees, from the high ranks of office to the working class Postal Service, both current and future alike, be investigated thoroughly in order to insure that they were not communist or communist affiliated. This was because, “…it is of vital importance that persons employed in the Federal service be of complete and unswerving loyalty to the United States,” as well as to dissuade any accusations that government employees could be of Red affiliation.[[13]](#footnote-12) By this point, it was, of course, illegal to be associated with communism as a government employee. Communist affiliation could be considered to be anything ranging from being a card-holding member of the Party itself, to be being friends with members, or even being employed by a communist or communist sympathizer. In fact, it was nearly necessary for American citizens to be completely anti-communist in order to save themselves from the wrath of the American government. The investigations were thorough, questioning academic experience, previous employers, and the references given upon applications. President Truman created this program to rally American support for his emerging Cold War policies, as well as the Democratic Party who had often been viewed as being soft on the threat of communism. Before its revoke in 1953 by President Eisenhower, the program had investigated over three million governmental employees, dismissing 308.[[14]](#footnote-13)

Senator McCarthy, who created enough of an impact to have the era named after him, was the last piece of the puzzle that was to assure the American public of HUAC’s legitimacy, at least for a little while. McCarthy would create an unparalleled frenzy amongst the American people that can be considered one of the greatest propaganda schemes America has ever encountered, paving the way for HUAC to prosecute communists. But McCarthy did not come up with these tactics on his own, as author and historian Robert Griffith notes, “The membership of the Dies Committee perfected all the gambits that McCarthy would later use.”[[15]](#footnote-14) McCarthy simply took these strategies and created his own new form of fear, McCarthyism, which is described as the “natural expression of America’s political culture and a logical though extreme product of its political machinery.”[[16]](#footnote-15) McCarthy accused numerous members of the government of having communist affiliations, creating a panic amongst American citizens. In his first notable speech at Wheeling, West Virginia on February 9th, 1950, the Senator states, “The reason why we find ourselves in a position of impotency is not because our only powerful potential enemy has sent men to invade our shores, but rather because of the traitorous actions of those who have been treated so well by this nation.”[[17]](#footnote-16) A few moments later, McCarthy would claim to know of an un-named individual within the government that was a Red-blooded communist, as would become a characteristic of these speeches. McCarthy was in full support of HUAC, and even created a subcommittee of the Senate that was similar to that of the House committee. HUAC and McCarthy were partners: for both of them created an environment for the other to be able to flourish in, referred to as the McCarthy era, though HUAC did far more damage and named more names than McCarthy ever would.

It was the combination of the support of the FBI, the Smith and McCarran Internal Security Acts, the policies of the Truman administration, and the antics of Senator McCarthy that allowed for HUAC to prosper and thrive amongst the midst of the public hysteria that led to the destruction of human rights. HUAC demonstrated its power through a series of hearings, lasting from 1947 through its abolishment in 1975. As Schrecker observes, “Perhaps no single weapon in the federal arsenal was as powerful in the government’s construction of the anti-communist consensus as the criminal justice system. By putting communists on trial, the Truman administration shaped the American public’s view of domestic communism.”[[18]](#footnote-17) These Congressional hearings would become known as the modern day witch trials. The process by which a hearing was conducted is as follows:

“First, a cooperative ex-communist or expert witness described the pattern of communist infiltration in the area of American life the committee was supposedly exploring and listed the alleged infiltrators by name. Then the committee interrogated those people one on one, invariably asking them the crucial question ‘Are you now or have you ever been a member of the communist Party?’ Witnesses who answered in the affirmative then had to name names. Although some witnesses produced the required names without assistance, the usual procedure was for the committee’s counsel or another member of the staff to read out a list of alleged communists and ask the witnesses to confirm whether these people had been members of the party. Because the committee already knew the names it was asking its witnesses to identify, it was clear that exposure, not information, was the goal.”[[19]](#footnote-18)

During these trials, there emerged two different types of witnesses – friendly and unfriendly. Friendly witnesses were those who came forth before HUAC and gave testimony willingly, usually ex-communist party members. But to testify meant to name names, which many willing witnesses did not feel comfortable with.[[20]](#footnote-19) Naming names was considered the signifier of the complete breaking with communism; therefore it was believed that all witness should be able to do so. Even more terrible was the experience of unfriendly witnesses, individuals who were subpoenaed to testify unwillingly. Many citizens were let go of their jobs if they were subpoenaed at all, even before their hearing date. The invoking of the right not to incriminate oneself led to many unfriendly witnesses to be referred to as Fifth Amendment communists, though that did not entirely save them from the scrutiny of a hearing. Schrecker writes, “Although the Supreme Court granted protection to witnesses under the Fifth Amendment, it did not allow witnesses who waived the Fifth to invoke it to avoid answering questions about other people.”[[21]](#footnote-20) Witnesses were required to implicate others, no matter if they were friendly or unfriendly. The First Amendment was just as lax in protection as the Fifth, thus among the last ones to call upon it were the Hollywood Ten, before it was ruled inadmissible by the Supreme Court in 1948.[[22]](#footnote-21)

The Hollywood Ten, composed of directors, screenwriters, and producers, (three of which were founders of the Screen Writers Guild which would later condemn them), were just foreshadowing of what was to occur into and during the McCarthy Era. Thirty years after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the emergence of the new Red, the Hollywood hearings began in HUAC. Historian Paul Kengor writes, “For one week in late October 1947, both ‘friendly’ and ‘unfriendly’ Hollywood witnesses, from actors to producers to writers, filled hearing rooms in the Capitol Building, where they engaged in riveting, at times blistering, exchange.”[[23]](#footnote-22) Present at this meeting were two future presidents of America, friendly witness Ronald Reagan, as well as HUAC member Richard Nixon. Also present were members of the newly informally formed Committee for the First Amendment Rights, a group of Hollywood’s finest liberals, led by Humphrey Bogart, with notable members such as Lauren Bacall, Judy Garland, John Huston, Burt Lancaster, and Gene Kelly, among nearly two dozen others.[[24]](#footnote-23) There was no doubt to actual communist affiliation amongst the Hollywood Ten, but the Committee for the First Amendment argued that the US government did not have the right to punish them for their beliefs under Constitutional law. This, however, did not stop HUAC from condemning these individuals of being un-American, resulting in the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) suspending or firing these members, and thus setting into effect the Hollywood Blacklist. The Waldorf Statement, released by the MPAA on December 3rd, 1947, states, “We will not knowingly employ a communist or a member of any party or group which advocated the overthrow of the Government of the United States by force or by illegal or unconstitutional methods,” and furthermore, “To this end we will invite the Hollywood talent guilds to work with us to eliminate any subversives, to protect the innocent, and to safeguard free speech and a free screen wherever threatened.”[[25]](#footnote-24) HUAC had successfully infiltrated Hollywood, one of the most influential elements of new American life, rallying public support for the anti-communist cause.

The hearings of the Hollywood elites were not the only influential hearings conducted by HUAC. Also described as having the utmost importance in winning over American opinion was that trial of Alger Hiss, suspected communist and espionage agent for the Soviet Union. Hiss was an American lawyer and government official, having attended the Yalta Conference of 1945 as assistant to the Secretary of State, also having been involved in the planning of the United Nations.[[26]](#footnote-25) In August of 1948, Hiss was named as a communist Party member by friendly witness and former communist Party member Whittaker Chambers, thus calling for action from HUAC. Historian Schrecker notes, “Hiss’s conviction also legitimized HUAC by showing how useful a congressional investigation could be in exposing communist subversion. HUAC’s most competent and energetic member, first-term California Representative Richard M. Nixon, took a central role in pressing the attack.”[[27]](#footnote-26) Nixon was appointed as head of a subcommittee of HUAC to determine the validity in Chambers’ story. Nixon interviewed both Chambers and Hiss, once even hearing them together, which eventually resulted in the downfall of Hiss. In Hiss’s HUAC testimony, he states:

“I am not and never have been a member of the communist Party. I do not and have not ever adhered to the tenets of the communist Party. I am not and never have been the member of any communist-front organization. I have never followed the communist Party line, directly or indirectly. To the best of my knowledge, none of my friends is a communist… To the best of my knowledge, I never heard of Whittaker Chambers until in 1947, when two representatives of the Federal Bureau of Investigation asked me if I knew him and various other people…”[[28]](#footnote-27)

The HUAC hearings led to Hiss being charged with two counts of perjury only, for the statute of limitations had run out on the espionage accusation. Hiss was accused of lying during his first and second HUAC hearings, and was found guilty during his second trial, the first resulting in a hung jury. The incarceration of Hiss affirmed what HUAC had been presenting to the American people all along, the menace of Reds on American soil. As historian Kengor states, this hearing was very important to the strength of HUAC, for she says, “The major trials of the period got enormous publicity and gave creditability to the notion that communists threatened the nation’s security. Prosecuting accused espionage agents like Alger Hiss reinforced the image of communists as Russian spies.”[[29]](#footnote-28)

Not long after Hiss was found guilty of perjuring himself while among HUAC, more opposition from Hollywood was to erupt and lash out against HUAC. Playwright Arthur Miller released his satirical work, *The Crucible*. Miller, known to have communist sympathies and probably to have even been a member himself, was suspected to have published the play to bring attention to the atrocities that HUAC was committing at the time. On January 28, 1953, shortly after the play’s release, journalist Harry Raymond of the *Daily Worker* reviewed, “It is impossible to view this play honestly without noting the awful parallel courses of two widely separated American persecutions: the Salem witch hunt and the current persecution of communists and other progressives.”[[30]](#footnote-29) This work called attention to Miller, resulting in a HUAC hearing for the playwright, causing national attention. The headline in the *New York Times* that day ran, “Arthur Miller Admits Helping communist-Front Groups in ‘40s’.”[[31]](#footnote-30) Miller was not charged, but did find himself on the Red Channels List. The Red Channels List contained 151 writers, directors, and performers that allegedly had communist affiliations, started in 1950 by three former FBI agents who received their information from “left-wing letterheads, clippings from the communist Party’s *Daily Worker*, and the publications of HUAC.”[[32]](#footnote-31) The affiliations with communism of the 151 on the list often proved to be loose at best, but causing strife in the careers and job availability for majority of those who were falsely (and accurately), accused. HUAC investigations and hearings helped fuel the creation and sustenance of yet another blacklist, deeming many liberals as un-American, if not communist.

Through all of its hearings and investigations that occurred at the beginning of the Cold War, HUAC was able to shape the image of a communist within American citizens’ minds, demonizing the party and its members in order to make their endeavors successful.[[33]](#footnote-32) This formation of the vile image of the communist Party and its members was vital in gaining public support, which is the only way committees like HUAC were able to succeed in the beginning of the Cold War. Schrecker observes, “During the early years of the Cold War, the actions of the federal government helped to forge and legitimize the anti-communist consensus that enabled most Americans to condone or participate the serious violations of civil liberties that characterized the McCarthy era.”[[34]](#footnote-33) The end of World War II was fundamental in the success of the mindset that was able to ensnare so many Americans, for the extreme sentiment of patriotism that flooded the country allowed for the threat of sabotage by foreign countries, especially that of another superpower such as the Soviet Union, to become plausible, and thus, frightening. This justification allowed HUAC to conduct its investigations and hearings without scrutiny from the majority of the American public, and even won the nation over as nationalistic. HUAC, as well as the other anti-communist extremists that filled the McCarthy Era, condemned all that was Soviet and thus intentionally transformed the image of communists, making the assertion that “…communist Party members were believed to be part of a secret conspiracy, fanatics who would automatically do whatever Stalin told them to do.”[[35]](#footnote-34)

As the Cold War trudged on, HUAC would lose its power with time. By the end of the 1950s, the committees scare tactics were becoming less frightening, and with the growing New Left and Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, there was no room or patience left for the political injustices that had been occurring so easily up until that point. On August 28, 1966, the *Boston Sunday Globe* ran an article titled, “The Road to Loyalty”, claiming, “The committee’s coercive practices arouse not greater loyalty and patriotism among the people, but less.”[[36]](#footnote-35) A few months later, the *Chicago Sun Times* ran a headline, “Reveals HUAC Witness Paid $1,000 By Congress”, in which the article claims that HUAC’s friendly witnesses were receiving cash incentives in the form of legality fees to testify.[[37]](#footnote-36) The continuous emergence of similar headlines and articles, as well as the wising of the American public, would lead to the diminishing of the power of HUAC, and its abolishment in 1975. But more important than its downfall was its materialization, a vivid display of how far paranoia and propaganda can drive a country like the United States in order to preserve a “democratic” and capitalistic nation.

So why did HUAC finally meet its end in 1975? Was it simply because the fear of communism was slowly dying, or were the tactics of fear mongering dying as well? Perhaps even more importantly, is hysteria prompted by the government still plausible in modern day society? With the emergence of the Internet and numerous sources of information, it seems as though the government would have a harder time creating such madness and getting away with the demolishment of human rights in 2011. But, one should never say never. Terrorism, the current fear and epidemic taking over the minds of the American public, seems to be the only slightly comparable concern that might instill enough fear in citizens that would allow the overlooking of the First and Fifth Amendments, as was done during the Cold War. The fear of the unknown threat will always persist in society, but the means in which that threat is examined and dealt with is of the utmost importance, as should be seen through the lens of history and HUAC.

HUAC was not able to succeed on its own. The simultaneous eruption of numerous imperative factors combined to allow the prosecution of communists and the termination of human rights for a significant period of time in American history, affecting a significant amount of American citizens. The hearings and investigations that took place under HUAC have proved to be detrimental to what America was built upon and supposedly still stands for, as was demonstrated by the numerous government officials persecuted and fired, as well as the Hollywood elites, and everyday citizens that suffered for merely having been being accused of having communist affiliations. As Schrecker states, “The shift in national priorities that accompanied the Cold War brought the nation’s political elites closer to HUAC’s anti-communist worldview.”[[38]](#footnote-37) This committee was essential in that shift of national priorities, helping create the largest period of hysteria within United States history. The Cold War allowed the United States to become what it was rallying against, a country that persecuted individuals based on their own personal beliefs. HUAC proved to be more threatening to America than communism ever was, and as Kengor so cleverly notices, “This congressional panel would be forever etched in liberal lore, and language, as ‘HUAC’ – an incorrectly reordered acronym which not so subtly claimed that the committee’s activities were ‘un-American’.”[[39]](#footnote-38)

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