

BLACKLISTING HOLLYWOOD

A history of the Hollywood Ten
and contemporary implications

Essay

by

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Towering high above Los Angeles, perched on Mount Lee, nine white letters compose one of the true archetypal icons of our time: the Hollywood Sign. In the course of its existence it has become more than a landmark – more than a mere indication of place or direction – it has become the solid manifestation of the American dream; the western vis-a-vis to the Statue of Liberty. The common man, upon entering California, might cast upon it all his hopes of the promise of a better future, the unspoken decree that the talented, committed, hard-working individual will find a chance to succeed. This very sign, however, in the post World War II era saw its values and principles betrayed in the name of patriotism and the fight against a common enemy. It was the time of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), it was the time of the Hollywood Ten, and it was to become the time of the McCarthy era.

On May 26, 1938, the United States House of Representatives authorized the formation of the Special House Committee on Un-American Activities, proposed in the resolution of Representative Martin Dies of Texas, to conduct investigations on:

(1) the extent, character, and objects of un-American propaganda activities in the United States, (2) the diffusion within the United States of subversive and un-American propaganda that is instigated from foreign countries or of a domestic origin and attacks the principle of the form of government as guaranteed by our Constitution, and (3) all other questions in relation thereto that would aid Congress in any necessary remedial legislation.¹

¹ Robert Vaughn, *Only Victims – A Study of Show Business Blacklisting* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), p. 15 and Robert K. Carr, *The House Committee on Un-American Activities* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1952), p. 14-15.

The obvious free-hand policy present therein, especially of the third point, was a dire foreboding of things to come, and even Dies himself had to acknowledge the inherent dangers of the wording, stating that “all depends on the way the committee is handled.”²

After private visits to Hollywood in May 1947, the public committee hearings into the Hollywood motion picture industry, headed by chairman J. Parnell Thomas, commenced on Monday, October 20 of the same year, with the hearings of the so-called “friendly witnesses”: those that had decided to cooperate with the committee by naming persons within the industry they “knew” to be communists or supporters of the Communist Party of America.³ Those included such renowned personalities as Jack L. Warner, Walter E. Disney, Ronald Reagan, and Gary Cooper.⁴ Out of their collected testimonies the committee compiled an extensive list of evidence against the nineteen unfriendly witnesses it had subpoenaed to be interviewed the week after. They furthermore established that there were indeed communist influences in Hollywood, coming mainly from writers, but that no propaganda had found its way into any motion pictures and had practically no chance to do so under the watchful eyes of the studio heads.

On October 27, 1947, the hearings of what was to become known as the Hollywood Ten began. Those were: John Howard Lawson, Dalton Trumbo, Albert Maltz, Alvah Bessie, Samuel Ornitz, Herbert Biberman, Ring Lardner Jr., Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, and Adrian Scott.⁵ Except for the latter two, all of them were writers. And they came prepared. In accordance with their legal counsel, the ten had agreed on a common and consistent course of action: to state firmly and repeatedly, when asked about affiliation with or membership of any group or political party, that such a question was in violation of their right of freedom to assemble peacefully as put forth under the First Amendment in the U.S. Bill of Rights.⁶ They came with pride in their hearts and with the inherent believe of success. As Charles Katz, one of their lawyers, put it: “We wanted to destroy the committee, and it was an objective that seemed realistic at that time.”⁷

2 Carr, p. 15.

3 Vaughn, p. 75-76

4 Ibid., p. 76

5 Nancy Lynn Schwartz, *The Hollywood Writers' Wars* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1982), p. 268.

6 Ibid., p. 269.

7 Ibid.

In the course of the week long hearings, the committee concentrated on getting answers to its two main questions from those subpoenaed: "Are you a member of the Screen Writers Guild?" and "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party of the United States?"⁸ This clearly conflicted with the witnesses' prior agreed line of action, but they remained steadfast and stubborn. In the course of the hearings, their critique of and antagonism to the committee grew in its rigorousness, as most interviewees were not allowed to read their prepared preliminary statements, and none was given the right to cross-examine any of their accusers.⁹ The so-called "unfriendly witnesses" thought themselves backed by the Association of Motion Picture Producers (AMPP), as it had issued a statement on October 19, 1947, saying, "Tell the boys not to worry. There'll never be a blacklist. We're not going to go totalitarian to please this committee."¹⁰ Each and every one of the Hollywood Ten refused to answer the two main questions of the committee. By the end of the week, a large portion of the press and the public opinion were in favour of the subpoenaed. As Nancy Lynn Schwartz writes:

It was commonly thought that the Hollywood Ten had been triumphant. They had given the committee a run for its money and exposed its fascist tactics so blatantly that it would be bad press for them to go any further.¹¹

But good fortune was not to last. Not one month later, on November 24, the Hollywood Ten were cited for contempt of Congress, and subsequently served prison terms. On that same afternoon, the AMPP dramatically reversed its declared position on the treatment of communist influences in the motion picture industry. In a statement that became known as the "Waldorf Declaration", the association proclaimed that its members "deplore the action of the ten Hollywood men", and that they "will not knowingly employ a Communist or a member of any party or group which advocates the overthrow of the government of the United States by force, or by any illegal or unconstitutional method."¹² Blacklisting had officially become the association's policy.

Consequently, the impact of HUAC's investigations were not limited to the Hollywood Ten. Hundreds of artists saw themselves faced with an industry seemingly more interested in the political

8 Ibid., p. 271.

9 "Congress and Hollywood", *New York Times*, 23 Oct. 1947, p. 24. and Joseph A. Loftus, "3 More Film Writers Face House Contempt Citations", *New York Times*, 29 Oct. 1947, p.1

10 Schwartz, p. 267.

11 Ibid., p. 277.

12 Ibid., p. 279.

beliefs of its members than their talent. A whole generation of left-wing writers had to come up with means of cloaking their works first by pseudonyms and later through “fronts” – actors or other writers posing for them and selling their works – to make a living. Walter Bernstein, one of the blacklisted writers, subsequently wrote the screenplay for the 1976 film *The Front*, starring Woody Allen as a cashier posing as such a living pseudonym for writers. Carl Foreman, another blacklisted writer and author of such acclaimed films as *High Noon* (1952) and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), noted that “the number of casualties was low in terms of people actually murdered by the committee, driven to suicide or death”, but that there was “no writer who didn't suffer so much trauma that it took each of them years to recover.”¹³

Since that fateful day of 11 September 2001, and US president George W. Bush's subsequent declaration of “war on terrorism”, voices have been raised in patriotic support of the president and his government's policy by outspokenly and sometimes blatantly calling for a new blacklist in the entertainment industry. Joseph Farah of WorldNetDaily.com states there is “a new breed of anti-Americanism deserving of punishment” and even provides a tentative list of several entertainment figures.¹⁴ And The New York Post, on 19 March 2003, published their own little blacklist for those who “prefer not to support the careers of stars who want to stop the liberation of Iraq from mass murderer Saddam Hussein and his rapist henchmen.”¹⁵ But those attacked and their supporters were quick to counter these accusations and arguments, as actor Sean Penn, high up on Farah's list, sued Hollywood producer Steve Bing for firing him from a film allegedly for the actor's anti-war views.¹⁶ The American Screen Actors Guild, on 3 March 2003, posted a statement on its website, saying that “even a hint of the blacklist must never again be tolerated in this nation.”¹⁷ And Laura Berman, columnist for The Detroit News, warns that:

The old Hollywood blacklist was a secret, a document composed of whispers, based on rumor and innuendo. The new one is blasted over the airwaves, not the least bit secret. But its intent – to silence debate by costing people their livelihoods – is just as insidious.¹⁸

13 Ibid., p. 288.

14 Joseph Farah, “Bring back Hollywood blacklist”, *WorldNetDaily*, http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=34415 (11 March 2004)

15 “Don't Aid These Saddam Lovers”, *New York Post*, 19 March 2003, p. 012.

16 Duncan Campbell, “Sean Penn sues over anti-war 'blacklist'”, *Guardian Unlimited*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,895182,00.html> (11 March 2004)

17 By Associated Press, “Screen Actors Guild warns against blacklisting”, *Detroit News*, <http://www.detnews.com/2003/entertainment/0303/05/d01-100138.htm> (11 March 2004)

18 Laura Berman, “Airwaves abuzz with Hollywood blacklist; no secrets this time”, *Detroit News*, <http://www.detnews.com/2003/metro/0305/15/c01-165292.htm> (11 March 2004)

Depriving anyone, individual or group, of their right to work solely on grounds of personal opinions and political views is fundamentally wrong. The US citizens, as Edward R. Murrow in his famous rebuttal to senator Joseph McCarthy in an episode of CBS's "See it Now" on 9 March 1954 truthfully commented, are not descended "from men who feared to write, to speak, to associate and to defend causes that were, for the moment, unpopular."¹⁹ But one has to keep in mind that the proposed "new" blacklist is not to be carried out by the industry under pressure of the government, but by the consumer – and that also is a fundamental right of any US citizen. Therefore, one might argue, there is no real issue of First Amendment at stake.

Whatever the case, caution is advised. As Walter Bernstein, today adjunct professor of screen writing at Columbia University, writes of the blacklist: "Can it happen again? the students invariably ask. Of course it can, I answer. Maybe not right away; you need a powerful external enemy and we don't have one yet."²⁰ Words published in the year 2000 – before the attack on the World Trade Center, and before the new "war on terror".

19 Edward R. Murrow, "A Report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy" (transcript), *See it Now*, <http://honors.umd.edu/HONR269J/archive/Murrow540309.html> (11 March 2004)

20 Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out – A memoir of the blacklist* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), p. xi.

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