It was seventy years ago – October 20, 1947 – that the House
Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) convened
its hearings in Washington, DC into Communist influence in
the movies. The date is to be noted, not celebrated, for it set in
motion a series of betrayals, compromises, and alliances that led
to the Hollywood Blacklist.

The hearings were controversial, even at the time. Convened by Chairman J. Parnell Thomas in a post-
World War Two frenzy that the Soviet Union, who had been a wartime ally, was set to occupy all of Europe, HUAC’s
stated purpose was to investigate whether Hollywood had been paving the way for Communist world domination.
They subpoenaed 19 writers, directors, and producers whom they suspected of sneaking Red propaganda onto the
screen and set the stage to expose their disloyalty by leading off the hearings with a score of “friendly” patriotic
witnesses who grandstanded against their creative opposites.

The Friendlies included star names such as Adolph Menjou, Robert Taylor, Gary Cooper, Ronald Reagan,
Lela Rogers (Ginger’s mother), Robert Montgomery, George Murphy, and Walt Disney who appeared October
20-24. When the hearings resumed for week two on Monday, October 27 it was with Unfriendlies John Howard
Lawson, Dalton Trumbo, Alvah Bessie, Albert Maltz, Ring Lardner, Jr., Lester Cole, Herbert Biberman, Samuel
Ornitz, Edward Dmytryk, and Adrian Scott, interspersed with accusers Roy Brewer, Robert Stripling, and Louis
Russell. It should not be surprising that the Friendlies were all well-known and Christian, and the Unfriendlies
were obscure and mostly Jewish, for this was another part of HUAC’s agenda.

The unfriendly witnesses did not walk alone at first. Supported in spirit and donation by
many of their peers who objected to governmental inquiry into political or professional affiliations –
not to mention the chilling effect of the clearly bigoted HUAC proceedings -- they headed to
Washington prepared to do battle with Congress.
Grandly calling themselves the Committee for the
First Amendment, the ad hoc support group was
formed by directors John Huston and William
Wyler, and included such stars as Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Danny Kaye, Marsha Hunt, and Richard Conte. What they saw when they sat in the Congressional hearing room appalled them.

Advised by their attorneys Bartley Crum and Robert Kenney, the 19 Unfriendlies had chosen to argue the First Amendment (freedom of speech and association) rather than the Fifth (self-incrimination) maintaining that HUAC had no right to, first, hold hearings without pending legislation, and, second, to ask them questions at all. It was a daring (and doomed) strategy. Not only did HUAC immediately validate itself simply by saying so, it saw through the Unfriendlies’ tactic of “responding” to questions rather than answering them. Amid charge, counter-charge, bluster, and posturing, the first ten witnesses were gavelled out of the hearings as the newsreels – and, more tragically, the Committee for the First Amendment – watched. By the time the Committee for the First Amendment got back to the Coast they had disavowed support of what were now being called the Hollywood Ten. Some, like Bogart, issued a statement that the trip had been “ill-advised.”

During the hearings – on October 27 and November 2 – there were two celebrity-heavy ABC radio network broadcasts called “Hollywood Fights Back” taking HUAC to task for invading the rights and the privacy of the subpoenaed witnesses. Appearing on bicoastal hookup were stars like Judy Garland, Gene Kelly, Myrna Loy, Charles Boyer, and fifty other major names attacking the Committee just when the Hollywood Ten were being thrown out of the hearing room. Although public pressure forced the cancelation of the hearings after October 30, the damage was done and the machine was set in motion. On November 24, the ten writers, directors, and a producer who had defied the Committee were cited for Contempt of Congress.¹

¹ After a series of appeals and a twist of fate that denied them review by the U.S. Supreme Court, the Ten were sentenced to a year...
The contempt indictments came down on the day that 48 studio moguls were meeting at New York’s Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. Convened by Eric Johnston, the head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (later to become today’s MPAA), the confab was supposed to decide how to act internally so as to keep the government from acting first. By the time the Waldorf Conference, as it came to be known, ended the next day, the moguls had found the solution: they created the Hollywood Blacklist.

There is a wealth of information about the hearings, the Hollywood Ten, the Blacklist, and the damage HUAC and its partisans did to both American film and American democracy. There is scant record, however, of how the resulting blacklist actually began. That’s what my writing partners Daniel M. Kimmel, Arnie Reisman, and I discovered when we decided to write The Waldorf Conference, our 1993 play in which we reconstruct what happened in that November 24-25, 1947 meeting. It was an unusual problem. Even though four dozen of the most powerful men (yes, they were all men) in production, distribution, and exhibition were present, and even though lawyers and government VIPs abetted them, no minutes were taken. Nobody even kept notes. No reporters were permitted until afterward, and only one person – Dore Schary, the then-head of RKO Radio Pictures – ever wrote or spoke about it, and then it was only in his later years. All that came out of the room was a two-page, double-spaced press release that was variously called “The Waldorf Manifesto,” “The Waldorf Peace Pact,” and “The Waldorf Statement.” But no one knew what led up to it.

Dan, Arnie, and I had to speculate on what took place over those two days. We started by quoting public statements about Americanism from such moguls as Louis B. Mayer (MGM), Harry Cohn (Columbia), Albert Warner (Warner Bros.), Spyros Skouras (Twentieth Century-Fox), Samuel Goldwyn, Dore Schary (RKO), William Goetz (Universal), and Barney Balaban (Paramount). We scoured memoirs, studio correspondence, and stockholders reports in addition to the HUAC testimony of those who appeared before the Committee. Winnowing the 48 down to a strategically chosen 12 for dramatic purposes, we merged character traits and heightened the drama.

Early on, we came to the surprising realization that Communism was the least of the moguls’ worries. We determined six, in increasing order of importance:

in federal prison, the only victims of the Blacklist who served jail time in addition to having their livelihoods taken. Future witnesses used the Fifth Amendment. It still got them blacklisted, but they didn’t have to serve jail time.
1. Extremist groups like the American Legion were threatening to picket films made by anyone they considered Red. The Projectionists Union, under their President, Red-baiter Roy Brewer, was also threatening not to show them;

2. Foreign countries (clearly acting on State Department orders) were refusing to import films made by suspected reds;

3. Wall Street, which held Hollywood's purse strings, wanted the moguls to make the problem go away;

4. During the war the studios had done so well that they signed many writers, directors, and actors to rich contracts. Now that television was beginning to cut into profits, the studios needed a way to break those lucrative contracts without getting sued. Blacklisting would do the trick;

5. The Justice Department was set to argue the anti-trust case U.S. v. Paramount et al to the U.S. Supreme Court to break apart Hollywood's vertically integrated monopoly on production, distribution, and exhibition. The moguls hoped to mollify the government by doing what Uncle Sam couldn't legally do himself: blacklist.

6. Finally there was the elephant in the room: anti-Semitism. Practically all of the moguls were Jewish. They were painfully aware that much of America equated Jews with Reds. Indeed, while these leading studio figures were meeting in New York, Congressman John Rankin (R-Mississippi) railed on the floor of Congress about “kikes” who “are attacking the Committee for doing its duty in trying to protect this country and save the American people from the horrible fate the Communists have meted out to the unfortunate Christian people of Europe.”

Notwithstanding those challenges, the moguls had one unanticipated event in their favor. Ordinarily – and with an anti-trust case staring them down – any time two or more competitors were in the same room, the Department of Justice would suspect collusion. Yet now, for two days, everybody who was anybody in Hollywood was getting a free ride to collude, fix prices, and coordinate policy (exactly what U.S. v. Paramount was all about) with implied government permission.
What surprised Dan, Arnie, and me was that the Blacklist seemed to be of minimal concern to most of the moguls who, we reasoned, regarded it as merely another business decision and gave little thought to the lives that would be shattered by their dictum. Although Balaban, Goldwyn, Goetz, Schary, and a few others had opposed the move, they were outnumbered. Apparently no one foresaw the effect it would have on the creative community and their bottom lines.

It has been argued that, once Hollywood turned to the Right (or at least silenced the Left) it would never again achieve the artistic merit, humanistic concern, or relevance that had made it so powerful. The same might be said of today when the international marketplace, production and marketing costs, and fear of intellectualism have neutered most big studio releases.

It’s easy, with hindsight, to second guess the era. It’s a widely quoted contention that, despite all the hearings (there was another set of them in 1951), nothing Communist was ever found to have reached the screen. Does that mean that there was one designated script censor at every studio whose job was to intercept anything Red, or that nothing Red ever put into scripts in the first place? Would writers earning as much as $2,500 a week really be trying to overthrow the government – or just get a fair shake, screen credit-wise, from their studio bosses? If Jack Warner was really afraid of the Writers Guild, why did he famously dismiss writers as “schmucks with Underwoods”?

What we do know is that lives were destroyed and careers cut short. An estimated 214 Hollywood people were directly affected², but that doesn’t include their families, friends, and others whose relationship were changed, sometimes terminally, by accusation. And that’s just in Hollywood; as the Red scare spread through America and was enlarged by Senator Joe McCarthy in the 1950s, it would become a national paranoia whose effects are still being felt today.

There are even some people who say that there never was a Blacklist, or that, if there was, it was deserved, and also, by the way, there is a Blacklist today against Conservatives. Not only is there no proof of the latter, but

---

² There were 155 named in the publication Red Channels in June of 1950; others were added anecdotally afterward.
–as with the brouhaha over Civil War statues – the fact remains that it was Conservatives who conspired to deny Liberals their Constitutional Rights, not the other way around.

Neither act, of course, is justified artistically or academically. The Blacklist era materials preserved in the Library Special Collections at UCLA exist without judgment. But they do bear witness to what Dalton Trumbo (whose papers are among the collections) called “the time of the toad.” My own ephemera collection bespeaks the era and the sense of utter hopelessness that affected those caught in the tsunami of fear – fear that was created, nurtured, and harvested by the same forces that want to control the hearts and minds of creative people and the public today.

Make no mistake; they are with us still. Smoother, better spoken, sometimes wrapped in “tradition” or religion instead of uber-patriotism, but they remain poised to control thought in the name of freedom and to curtail freedom in the name of safety. That's how it works.