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Review Essay: The House Un-American Activities Committee

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Bentley, Eric. *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*. New York: The Viking Press, 1971.

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The U.S. House of Representatives created the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1938 as a result of a fear of Communist infiltration of the American government. The purpose for its creation was to investigate and question individuals and organizations to determine if they were "un-American." The onus of this investigation was the fear among some American political leaders (as well as among a large number of American citizens) that Communism posed a "clear and present danger" to the American democratic political system and the American way of life. The committee believed that through its investigations and hearings it could confirm or deny the existence of subversive elements within American society dedicated to the violent overthrow of the American government and, in turn, propose governmental legislation to deal with this threat.

HUAC set many precedents during its existence. This is not to say that many of the innumerable committees created by the United States House of Representatives have not produced similar achievements. In fact, the successful and fluid operation of the numerous House committees is intrinsically linked with the daily operation of government in the United

States. Why, then, has so much literature been devoted to the history and operations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities? The simple answer is that the very existence of such a committee was highly controversial. The committee was born within the cauldron of disagreement and conflict - both inside and outside the halls of government. When a gathering of people owes its origins to conflict and subversive activities (both real and perceived), the average onlooker attaches an unusual amount of importance and intrigue to it. This interest in HUAC spawned a huge volume of literature to explain just what the Committee was and what it was supposed to do.

Numerous books cover the progress, actions, and history of HUAC. Four books in particular provide varying degrees of insight to the committee's accomplishments, controversies, and its legacy: Carl Beck's *Contempt of Congress: A Study of the Prosecutions Initiated by the Committee on Un-American Activities: 1945-1957*; Eric Bentley's *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*; William F. Buckley's *The Committee and Its Critics: A Calm Review of the House Committee on Un-American Activities*; and Walter Goodman's *The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities*. A look at these books and their focus on particular aspects of HUAC illustrate the many facets and antagonisms that the Committee encompassed. Before delving into various author's interpretations of what HUAC was and what its actual objectives were, the following charter by the U.S. House of Representatives clearly delineates the purpose behind the House Committee on Un-American Activities:

The Committee on Un-American Activities, as a whole or by subcommittee, is authorized to make from time to time investigations of (i) the extent, character, and objects of un-American propaganda activities in the United States, (ii) 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 (iii) all other questions in relation thereto that would aid Congress in any necessary remedial legislation.

The Committee on Un-American Activities shall report to the House... the results of any such investigation, together with such recommendations as it deems advisable. For the purpose of any such investigations, the Committee on Un-American Activities... is authorized to sit and act at such times and places within the United States... to hold such hearings, to require the attendance of such witnesses and the production of such books, papers, and documents, and to take such testimony, as it deems necessary. Subpoenas may be issued under the signature of the chairman of the committee or any subcommittee, or by any member designated by such chairman, or may be served by any persons designated by any such chairman or member.²

Walter Goodman's *The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities* is the seminal work on the thirty-year history of HUAC and its origins. Goodman provides a chronological look at HUAC from 1938 to 1967, the changing political climates throughout the period, and its rise and fall from the public spotlight. Of the four books, Goodman's history of the committee is the most comprehensive in scope. His book covers the major events of the Committee, the political infighting between certain members of the House and the members of the committee, the rise of the committee, and its fall from the public spotlight.

Although short on actual testimonial transcripts, the book covers almost every turn of events throughout HUAC's existence. It reads as more of a chronology than a critical examination of the controversial aspects which surrounded the committee. This is interesting, since Goodman states in his preface that the purpose of *The Committee* is to expose the weaknesses behind the creation of HUAC and to illuminate the reasons why the actions of HUAC are inherently dangerous to the safety of a liberal democracy. A

proclaimed liberal, Goodman cites the committee and its supporters as threatening the cherished political freedoms that liberal Americans have fought for and supported long before the threat of Communism raised its ugly head. Goodman does an excellent job of chronologically covering the major aspects of the Committee, but he never quite convinces the reader of his proposed thesis.

In *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*, Eric Bentley takes a somewhat different approach in covering the same period as Walter Goodman. Bentley's entire book is devoted to presenting the written transcripts of witnesses that appeared before the Committee from 1938-1968. Bentley is straightforward when he states in his preface that with hundreds of thousands of pages of witness testimonies, it would be absolutely impossible to include an excerpt of every single hearing and every witness ever interviewed by the Committee. Instead, Bentley presents a selective array of accounts that focus on HUAC's efforts to prove that Communist sympathizers had pervasively infiltrated the artistic community in America. His selections highlight the committees' attention to the motion picture industry and the performing arts; specifically, Hollywood, Broadway, and the New York Shakespeare Festival. Among the most notable witnesses that appeared before the committee were Bertolt Brecht, Gary Cooper, and even Ronald Reagan. (It is interesting to note that one of the members of the committee at the time of Ronald Reagan's testimony was none other than Richard M. Nixon).³

Except for some background notes and a few short introductions to some of the lesser-known witnesses, Bentley's entire book is almost exclusively the verbatim testimony of witnesses appearing before HUAC. The strength in Bentley's approach is that the selected testimonies allow the reader to see exactly the depth and pervasiveness of HUAC's investigations. The Committee member's interviews of witnesses leave almost no aspect of the individuals' life — both private and professional — untouched. The Committee members are sometimes cordial, but more often not, willing to abandon their professionalism and tact with abusive questions that berate and belittle a large number of the witnesses.

Bentley's treatment of HUAC, although unabashedly biased, is well structured and easy for the reader to follow. Although the book is limited to HUAC's investigations into the American arts, the book is an excellent source of actual witness testimony and provides insight into the functioning of a House committee in its daily events. In his conclusion, Bentley clearly illustrates that the most serious issue surrounding the Committee was its continued threat to freedom and liberal democracy.

Carl Beck's *Contempt of Congress* singles out one particular aspect of HUAC and how it relates to the principle of freedom of speech and a person's rights as guaranteed under the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution. The committee was notorious for the number of witnesses that it cited for contempt, more than any other committee in the history of the United States House of Representatives.⁴ Beck's work highlights the complexities of congressional authority to cite witnesses for contempt for failing to appear, testify, or provide documents after having been subpoenaed. In a neutral public atmosphere, the majority of the public would likely have tentatively accepted questioning individuals on their personal and professional beliefs. However, in the context of the heightened tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, these same testimonies took on a mystique far greater than their actual impact.

Testimony in a public forum was not new in American society. Deemed a socially acceptable form of airing grievances, it had existed for years by presenting the opinions and facts about certain perceived indecencies, and allowing the average American citizen to appear before government and let their feelings be known. But in the context of the Cold War and the perceived threat by a Soviet government that sponsored a worldwide Communist revolution, the public forum provided via HUAC was anything but a place to air grievances against the government.

Beck outlines the compelling history behind contempt cases initiated by the Committee. After a concise overview of the contempt process, Beck covers the committee's power to subpoena documents. HUAC generated interest in its numerous contempt cases because "freedom of speech" and the Fifth Amendment were so readily called into question.

The debate raged whether the Constitution of the United States provided for Congress (and its Committees) the power to overrule a witness's right to plead the Fifth Amendment. For years, courts had upheld that a witness, under the provisions set forth under the Fifth Amendment, was not compelled to answer questions that could tend to incriminate themselves. In an era when being labeled a Communist meant to become an instant outcast in society, it is no wonder so many witnesses appearing before HUAC "pleaded the fifth."

Contempt of Congress raises numerous interesting issues concerning HUAC's use of legal power to accomplish its mission of positively identifying Communists living secret lives within America's borders. Because of the debate over the power and legitimacy of the functions of the committee, spawned by the high number of contempt cases, HUAC published an eight-point program to further clarify its intentions:

1. To expose and ferret out the Communists and Communist sympathizers in the Federal Government.
2. To spotlight the spectacle of having outright Communists controlling and dominating some of the most vital unions in American labor.
3. To institute a counter educational program against the subversive propaganda which has been hurled at the American people.
4. Investigation of those groups and movements which are trying to dissipate our atomic knowledge for the benefit of a foreign power.
5. Investigation of Communist influences in Hollywood.
6. Investigation of Communist influences in education.
7. Organization of the research staff so as to furnish reference service to Members of Congress and to keep them currently informed on all subjects relating to subversive and un-American activities in the United States.

8. Continued accumulation of files and records to be placed at the disposal of the investigative units of the government and the armed services.⁵

Although the debate continued to rage over the issues of freedom of speech and the Fifth Amendment even after the committee identified to the American public exactly what it was investigating, Beck presents a clearly written and incisive look into some of the gray area in which HUAC operated.

William F. Buckley undertakes a multi-faceted look at the committee in *The Committee and Its Critics: A Calm Review of the House Committee on Un-American Activities*. The book is a compilation of articles written by various authors on topics as diverse as the Committee's procedures, subversion in the twentieth century, and HUAC legislation. Edited by Buckley, the book is an attempt to provide the most comprehensive review of HUAC and the many controversies surrounding it. The first two chapters of the book do an excellent job of providing the background behind the creation of the Committee. These chapters cover the rise of "leftist" political movements in the twentieth century and the investigative role that the U.S. Congress plays in America. The book then provides a short history of the Committee and a chronology of its actions from 1946-1960. These first few chapters set the stage for an in-depth look into the Committee's procedures, its legislation, and the campaign against HUAC.

The strongest aspect of *The Committee and Its Critics* is the way in which Buckley compiles the works of various authors which present differing views into the debate of the Committee. By discussing various topics such as the Alger Hiss case, San Francisco riots, and civil liberties, the book gives the reader a well-rounded view of the committee and the social, political, and emotional events affecting its deliberations.

This is not to say that the articles are not opinionated or do not betray the underlying political views of their authors. However, in presenting to the reader a host of topics with individual discussions as they relate to HUAC, Buckley provides the reader a greater opportunity to view not just one aspect, not just one author's opinion on a subject, but a host of

different issues from different angles. *The Committee and Its Critics* wins hands down as the one book which provides the first-time student with a concise, well-written, and purposeful book on the subject of HUAC.

The legacy of the House Un-American Activities Committee will not be lost in United States history. Its impact — both positive and negative — serves as a lesson to future generations of American politicians as well as American voters. Only a few decades have passed since the spotlight of HUAC's actions took center stage in the American public. Unfortunately, a vast majority of younger Americans are already blissfully unaware of what HUAC was, and the events which led to its creation.

Hopefully, if the federal government again infringes upon the liberties afforded by the Bill of Rights, enough of America's citizens will remember HUAC and the multitude of problems and controversies it created. There is no question that the issues raised by HUAC's existence will bedebated among students of American history and political science for years to come. The fundamental question that will probably never be fully answered is, "Was HUAC's existence and purpose justified under the umbrella of liberal democracy?" For those staunch anti-Communists of the period the answer will undoubtedly be a resounding "Yes!" For the equally stalwart defenders of American civil liberties the answer will be an unwavering "No!" The fact that HUAC operated squarely in the gray area between protection of the state and the liberty and protection of the individual is exactly why consensus will probably never be reached; however, it is certain that the legitimacy of HUAC will be debated for years to come.

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References:

1. Eric Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason*. (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 946.
2. Carl Beck, *Contempt of Congress*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), 13.
3. Bentley, 143.
4. Beck, 17.
5. Ibid, 42-43.