House Un-American Activities Committee

The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was formed to investigate communist activity in the United States during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. HUAC targeted the entertainment industry, resulting in the blacklisting of several actors, writers, directors, and producers. In addition, HUAC's activities sparked the establishment of multiple committees with the same agenda, most notably a Senate subcommittee chaired by Senator Joseph McCarthy. These anticommunist activities waned in the 1950s as a result of charges of abuse of power and a sharp decline in public support.

Tension between the Soviet Union and the United States increased after World War II, especially under the strong anticommunist stance of President Harry Truman's administration. Conservative members of Congress and some private watchdog groups launched a search for subversive activities in the United States, fearing the spread of communism. While the need to guard against espionage was legitimate, the excesses of the era led to many abuses. Congress had first formed the HUAC in 1938 to investigate New Deal programs. Beginning in 1947, however, the committee focused its anticommunist efforts on the entertainment industry, known for its liberalism. Many in the industry had become members of the Communist Party before the start of the Cold War.

HUAC was soon receiving national attention, especially when the Hollywood 10, a group of producers, screenwriters, and directors, refused to testify about their own activities and those of others. They cited the First Amendment of the Constitution in their defense, but federal courts upheld the inquisitorial nature of the hearings. The result was an unofficial "blacklist"—a list of people who studios would no longer hire. Actors Ronald Reagan—then president of the Screen Actors Guild—and John Wayne cooperated fully with HUAC. About the blacklist, Wayne said, "The only thing our side did that was anywhere near a blacklisting was just running a lot of people out of business." HUAC's blacklist destroyed the careers of many talented people in the entertainment industry.

Two politicians also gained prominence through their anticommunist efforts, riding the wave of public anticommunist sentiment. Richard Nixon, then an obscure congressman, accused Alger Hiss, a prominent liberal Democrat, of espionage in 1948 and won the 1950 senatorial election in California with the "red-baiting" tactics that unjustly tarred his opponent, Helen Gahagan Douglas, as a communist sympathizer. This fear of communism reached a state of paranoia in the early 1950s with the beginning of the Korean War, and the phrase "red scare" was revived. McCarthy gained nation-wide attention in 1950 with a speech he gave in West Virginia, in which he charged that the State Department had been infiltrated by communists. This accusation set the agenda for his senatorial career—the dogged hunt of communists as chair of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee. The term "McCarthyism" entered the English language to describe charging someone of being disloyal to the government without evidence, or unethical investigative techniques.

Six bills reported by HUAC became law, the most important being the Internal Security Act of 1950, which required that communist organizations register their members with the government, denied passports to Communists, and forbade them from working for the government or in the defense industry. The first two portions were overturned in the courts, but the rest became the McCarran Act.
A series of events in 1954 brought an end to many of the activities of HUAC and similar committees. President Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected, and McCarthy was charged with abuse of power after he began hunting for communists in the army. He was eventually censured by the Senate. HUAC’s activities also ended as abuses by the committee and others became known and as the United States’ participation in the Korean War ended.

Further Reading


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