**“A Modern Witch Hunt”**

The 1999 Academy Awards ceremonies were ushered in with all the usual fanfare, including speculation about who would win which award and which actor or actress would appear in the most outlandish outfit. However, one very serious issue was on the minds of many in the film industry, and that was whether or not the special Oscar that was to be awarded to director Elia Kazan was appropriate. No one in the industry disputed that Kazan, director of such films as *On the Waterfront* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, possessed enormous talent. Many believed that was enough to justify the award for lifetime achievement he was slated to receive. Others, though, were troubled that Hollywood was going to honor a man who had betrayed some of his own colleagues during the 1950s when, at the urging of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Elia Kazan had agreed to “name names.”

The House Committee on Un-American Activities (or HUAC) was established in 1937 with the primary purpose of investigating any subversive, un-American activities. The committee was not highly respected at first, and it lacked substantial power until the mid-1940s, when the Cold War caused the committee’s focus to narrow to an almost exclusive concern with the American Communist Party. Americans in general, and American politicians in particular, shared HUAC’s concerns about communism infiltrating the country, and the committee gained acceptance and consolidated its power. As a congressional investigating committee, HUAC was not subject to the due process requirements of the criminal system. The committee was free to denounce people as communists without producing proof, often costing the accused their jobs. By the mid-1950s, it was not uncommon for individuals to be fired merely because they received a subpoena from HUAC or one of the many similar committees that arose in HUAC’s wake.

In 1949, HUAC decided to use the Alien Registration Act against the American Communist Party. The party leaders were arrested and, after a nine-month trial, were convicted of violating the act. Over the next several years, dozens of similar arrests followed, and highly publicized spy cases of the time, involving such people as Alger Hiss and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, convinced many Americans that the country was awash in a communist conspiracy. During the early public hearings of the late 1940s and early 1950s, HUAC was careful to insure that many people they questioned had indeed been members of the American Communist Party. With assistance from the FBI and the “Red squads” of state and local law enforcement agencies, HUAC had little difficulty finding suitable witnesses. Once a witness had answered “yes” to the now famous query, “Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?” he or she was required to name names; that is, to give the committee other supposed subversives to interrogate. The justification for this requirement was that naming names was the only way a witness could prove for certain that he or she really had renounced communism.

In 1950, Joseph McCarthy, a Republican senator from Wisconsin, declared in a speech that he had a list of over two hundred people in the State Department who were members of the American Communist Party. McCarthy stepped into an environment that was ready for him. Having been appointed the chairman of the Government Committee on Operations of the Senate, McCarthy spent the next two years investigating government departments and questioning scores of people about their politics. Again, McCarthy made it clear that the only way for a person admitting any current or former ties to communism to escape serious consequences was to name others with communist affiliations.

At first, witnesses asserted that McCarthy’s and HUAC’s questioning violated the First Amendment right to free speech. The U.S. Supreme Court declined to rule on this issue, but the court did permit witnesses to assert their Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination. Unfortunately, this protection did not exempt witnesses from having to testify about, and perhaps incriminate, *other* people. Those subpoenaed often faced ostracism from employers and acquaintances, and those who were unwilling to name names found it extremely difficult to find an attorney willing to represent them. Even the “friendly witnesses” who were unwilling to see their careers destroyed for the sake of an organization they may have long since abandoned nevertheless found themselves in the uncomfortable position of being “informers.” The unfriendly witnesses faced unemployment for themselves and their spouses. They became accustomed to seeing former friends cross the street to avoid an encounter, and their children were often tormented by other children at school.

McCarthyism, the term now associated with the hysterical witch hunt for communists, was a power to be reckoned with in the early 1950s. McCarthy denounced Harry S. Truman as being soft on communism, and McCarthy’s campaign was instrumental in the presidential victory of Republican Dwight Eisenhower in 1952. After this, even politicians opposed to McCarthy’s tactics were reluctant to criticize him. McCarthy faced virtually no opposition when he succeeded in having over 30,000 books removed from library shelves because of their alleged ties to communists or communism.

Eventually, McCarthy’s zeal became too much even for his former supporters. When he announced, in 1953, that the Secretary of the Army was uncooperative with his committee’s attempts to discover communists in the military, Dwight Eisenhower instructed his vice president, Richard Nixon, to begin discrediting McCarthy. Nixon began referring in his speeches to the danger posed by those who engaged in “reckless talk” and used “questionable methods.” Journalists began to attack McCarthy, especially after the widely-viewed televised Army-McCarthy hearings gave the public a glimpse of McCarthy’s bullying tactics and clearly showed the extent of his malice. From that point on, McCarthy’s power diminished to virtually nothing, and in 1954, the senate passed a censure motion condemning his conduct by a vote of 67 – 22.

But how did all this come to affect the Hollywood establishment that was so divided in 1999 over the special honor awarded to Elia Kazan? From the first, one of HUAC’s primary contentions was that filmmakers were using their medium to promote subversive, communist ideology. In 1947, HUAC began a former investigation of the Hollywood Motion Picture Industry. After interviewing forty-one “friendly witnesses,” the committee summoned nineteen people for questioning. Playwright Bertolt Brecht, one of those summoned, gave evidence and then promptly left for his native Germany. Ten others, later known as the “Hollywood Ten,” refused to testify, invoking their First Amendment. Eight of the people summoned agreed to testify, and to name names; one of the eight was Elia Kazan. Before long, a “blacklist” of those who refused to name names was drawn up by the Hollywood film studios. Those on the list, more than three hundred and twenty people, were prevented from working in the film industry. Among those blacklisted were Leonard Bernstein, Charlie Chaplin, Arthur Miller, Dorothy Parker, Pete Seeger, Orson Welles, and Richard Wright.

In June of 1950, three former FBI agents and a right-wing television producer published a pamphlet entitled *Red Channels*, which listed one hundred and fifty-one people in the film industry, either writers, directors, or actors, who had supposedly inadvertently escaped blacklisting. All those listed were then blacklisted until they appeared before HUAC and convinced the members by naming names, that their radical past was behind them. By 1951, one of the original Hollywood Ten, Edward Dmytryk, was impelled by financial problems to appear before the committee and give them what they wanted. He even agreed that those within the industry had pressed him to express communist views in his films. Dmytyrk’s testimony was of course devastating to the other members of the Hollywood Ten, many of whom were involved in court cases trying to fight their blacklisting.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the blacklist, Hollywood apologized to the victims of the list and expressed a commitment to seeing that credit goes to blacklisted filmmakers who were forced to create using assumed identities in order to feed their families. Although a 1997 *Washington Post* editorial objected to the unqualified support for those who were blacklisted, saying that those who blindly supported the repressive Stalin regime should take some of the responsibility for their blacklisting, even the writer of this editorial agreed that blacklisting was completely inappropriate and that America is known for defending the rights of all people, even those who express unpatriotic views.

When Elia Kazan took the stage to receive his awards for lifetime achievement in the film industry, many actors, directors, and writers acknowledged him with a standing ovation. Others, however, remained seated, silently expressing their discomfort in honoring one who had chosen to cooperate with a committee that deprived hundreds of a chance to work in the industry. There is little doubt that all those in the auditorium would agree that the blacklist was a travesty and would express the hope that such a wide-scale and irrational hysteria will never be repeated.