

# "No American Is Safe"

## The Origins of McCarthyism

John Howard Lawson

As communism spread abroad, many Americans grew more concerned about communism at home. In 1947, the Committee on Un-American Activities in the House of Representatives (HUAC) investigated the movie industry, leading to the blacklisting of suspected communists. From 1950 to 1954, Senator Joseph McCarthy campaigned to expose all communist sympathizers in the U.S. government. The term "McCarthyism" arose to describe McCarthy's practice of making sensational accusations of subversion without sufficient evidence.

John Howard Lawson, a Hollywood screenwriter and member of the Communist Party of the United States, was investigated in 1947 by HUAC, which was chaired by Representative J. Parnell Thomas. Lawson was not allowed to read the following statement he had prepared to open his testimony, although other witnesses had made such opening remarks.

For a week, this committee has conducted an illegal and indecent trial of American citizens, whom the committee has selected to be publicly pilloried and smeared. I am not here to defend myself, or to answer the agglomeration of falsehoods that has been heaped upon me; I believe lawyers describe this material, rather mildly, as "hearsay evidence." To the American public, it has a shorter name: dirt. Rational people don't argue with dirt. I feel like a man who has had truckloads of filth heaped upon him; I am now asked to struggle to my feet and talk while more truckloads pour more filth around my head. . . .

I am not going to touch on the gross violation of the Constitution of the United States, and especially of its First and Fifth amendments, that is taking place here. The proof is so overwhelming that it needs no elaboration. The Un-American Activities Committee stands convicted in the court of public opinion.

I want to speak here as a writer and a citizen.

It is not surprising that writers and artists are selected for this indecent

smear. Writers, artists, scientists, educators are always the first victims of attack by those who hate democracy. The writer has a special responsibility to serve democracy, to further the free exchange of ideas. I am proud to be singled out for attack by men who are obviously—by their own admission on the record—out to stifle ideas and censor communication. . . .

. . . As a citizen I am not alone here. I am not only one of nineteen men who have been subpoenaed. I am forced to appear here as a representative of 130 million Americans because the illegal conduct of this committee has linked me with every citizen. If I can be destroyed, no American is safe. You can subpoena a farmer in a field, a lumberjack in the woods, a worker at a machine, a doctor in his office—you can deprive them of a livelihood, deprive them of their honor as Americans. . . .

[J. Parnell Thomas] is a petty politician, serving more powerful forces. Those forces are trying to introduce fascism in this country. They know that the only way to trick the American people into abandoning their rights and liberties is to manufacture an imaginary

danger, to frighten the people into accepting repressive laws which are supposedly for their protection. . . .

The struggle between thought-control and freedom of expression is the struggle between the people and a greedy unpatriotic minority which hates and fears the peo-

ple. . . . [T]he attack on freedom of communication is, and has always been, an attack on the American people.

The American people will know how to answer that attack. They will rally, as they have always rallied, to protect their birthright.

## "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been"

### Testifying Before HUAC

*Congressional Transcripts*

Reprinted here are excerpts from John Howard Lawson's testimony before HUAC. Besides Lawson, the other speakers are J. Parnell Thomas, the committee's chairman, and Robert E. Stripling, its chief investigator.

Mr. Stripling: Are you a member of the Screen Writers Guild?  
Mr. Lawson: The raising of any question here in regard to membership, political beliefs, or affiliation—

Mr. Stripling: Mr. Chairman—

Mr. Lawson: —is absolutely beyond the powers of this Committee. . . .

*(The chairman pounding gavel.)*

Mr. Lawson: It is an invasion of the right of association under the Bill of Rights of this country.

The chairman: Please be responsive to the question. . . . The chair will determine what is in the purview of this Committee.

Mr. Lawson: My rights as an American citizen are no less than the responsibilities of this committee of Congress. . . .

Mr. Stripling: Mr. Lawson, are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist party of the United States?

Mr. Lawson: In framing my answer to that question I must emphasize the points that I have raised before. The question of communism is in no way related to this inquiry, which is an attempt to get control of the screen and to invade the basic rights of American citizens in all fields. . . .

*(The chairman pounding gavel.) . . .*

Mr. Lawson: The Bill of Rights was established precisely to prevent the operation of any committee which could invade the basic rights of Americans. . . .

The chairman *(pounding gavel)*: We are going to get the answer to that question if we have to stay here for a week. Are you a member of the Communist party, or have you ever been a member of the Communist party? . . .

Mr. Lawson: I am framing my answer in the only way in which any American citizen can frame his answer to a question which absolutely invades his rights. . . . I have written Americanism for many years, and I shall continue to fight for the Bill of Rights, which you are trying to destroy. . . .

222

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