House Un-American Activities Committee

In 1938, the U.S. House of Representatives established the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). With communist and fascist regimes posing threats to the security of European countries, Congress decided to investigate the potential of danger in the United States. HUAC had the responsibility of investigating un-American propaganda and activities that might threaten national security. It focused mostly on communist and fascist organizations. Its guidelines, however, were vague enough that many people who simply disagreed with government policy found themselves under scrutiny by the committee.

Defining a purpose

Because HUAC was led by U.S. representative Martin Dies Jr. (1900–1972) of Texas, it was also called the Dies Committee. It was not the first committee of its kind to be established by Congress. Earlier committees did similar work in 1919, 1930, and 1934. HUAC’s broadly aimed and aggressive activities, however, made it controversial and memorable.

Sponsors of the motion to establish HUAC expected it to reduce the potential threat of foreign agents and subversive activities by communist and fascist interests. Under the leadership of Dies, however, the term “un-American” gained a broader definition, and many without communist or fascist ties were investigated. HUAC investigations became a means to suppress any dissent, often with the effect of undermining the freedoms of speech, press, and assembly. Liberals, intellectuals, artists, labor leaders, immigrants, Jews, and African Americans found themselves targets of HUAC investigations.

After World War II (1939–45) HUAC became a permanent committee. The global environment of the Cold War (1945–91) after World War II allowed the committee to be particularly aggressive and manipulative in its tactics. Fear of communists, foreigners, and independent thinkers made the American public tolerant of HUAC’s actions. As a result, many people were harassed, and some found their lives irrevocably changed as a result.
Hollywood and beyond

One of the most famous aspects of the HUAC investigations involved Hollywood. In 1947, the committee devoted nine days to questioning members of the movie industry. Producers, actors, directors, and writers were questioned. In all, forty-one witnesses were called. They included leading figures and famous actors like Walt Disney (1901–1966), Gary Cooper (1901–1961), and future U.S. president Ronald Reagan (1911–2004; served 1981–89).

Nineteen Hollywood witnesses were classified as unfriendly prior to appearing before the committee. Each witness faced the question of whether they or others they knew were ever involved with the Communist Party. Although HUAC was challenging their industry, Hollywood studios chose to support it publicly. As a result of the investigations, they fired artists with suspected or proven communist connections. These names were accumulated on an unofficial but highly damaging blacklist. Those who were blacklisted could not find work anywhere in the industry. More than three hundred people were blacklisted, and only a small number ever managed to recover their careers. (See Hollywood Blacklisting.)

Among those called from Hollywood, ten witnesses refused to testify. They were charged with contempt of Congress and sent to prison. With the support of the court system behind them, the committee was encouraged to act even more aggressively. By the 1950s, HUAC was investigating subversives in government, labor unions, the press, and religious organizations as well as Hollywood. Fearing the committee’s unchecked power, many witnesses falsely accused others. With little chance to establish their innocence, many people had their lives forever altered by a HUAC summons. With public suspicions aroused, people lost their jobs and their friends.

The Hollywood Ten

The HUAC investigations of members of Hollywood were viewed by many as a witch hunt. More than one hundred witnesses from the industry were called before HUAC during its existence. Eight screenwriters and two directors famously refused to answer the questions asked of them. Known as the Hollywood Ten, they depended on their Fifth Amendment right to be free from self-incrimination and their First Amendment right to freedom of speech and assembly.

In reaction, HUAC charged the Hollywood Ten with contempt of Congress. An investigative grand jury upheld the accusations and found the witnesses guilty as charged. The Hollywood Ten lost an appeal to an appellate court, and a conservative Supreme Court refused to hear the case. As a result, the Ten were forced to serve up to a year in a federal prison. These events initiated the studios’ practice of firing and blacklisting artists with suspected communist connections.

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Decline

HUAC began to decline in popularity throughout the 1950s. Similar investigations in the Senate under a committee led by U.S. senator Joseph McCarthy (1908–1957) of Wisconsin began to divert attention from HUAC activities. Growing liberalism in the late 1950s and 1960s encouraged public intolerance for such investigations. By the 1960s, HUAC was losing influence and was less active. HUAC was officially abolished in January 1975.

Sam Houston

Sam Houston was the first president of the Independent Republic of Texas, and he later served as governor of the state of Texas.

Houston was born on March 2, 1793, and had little, if any, formal schooling. His family moved from Virginia to Tennessee in 1806, and there Houston grew to adulthood. He served in the War of 1812 (1812–15) as a lieutenant in the U.S. Army, commanded by General Andrew Jackson (1767–1845). After the war, Houston returned to Tennessee, studied law, and became an attorney.

Joins the Cherokees

Houston was elected to the U.S. Congress in 1823. Four years later, he became governor of Tennessee. In 1829, he married Eliza H. Allen, but the marriage soon came to a sudden end. Divorce was highly uncommon at the time, and the public was scandalized. Houston never told anyone what had gone wrong, but considering himself a ruined man, he resigned the governorship. He moved to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River to start a new life among a band of Cherokees that he had known since childhood.

In Indian Territory, Houston took a Native American name, wore Indian dress, became a tribal citizen, and married a Cherokee woman. He lived among the Cherokees until 1832, when he left his Indian wife and migrated to Texas. At that time, Texas was a Mexican province in political turmoil because of the increasing number of Anglo-Americans moving into the area.