House Un-American Activities Committee Investigations

During the 1940s and 1950s, many individuals testified and went before the House Un-American Activities Committee. The next section will ask you to consider the activities of some Americans who testified before HUAC and/or were investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In other words, read the following testimonies of people who were interviewed by HUAC. As you read these documents, decide whether the person’s activities constitute subversion (going against the government) based off their responses. Or do they seem to be good old proud Americans…Read the documents and answer the questions under each testimonial.

Testimony #1 (October 23, 1947) - Ronald Reagan was the president of the Screen Actor’s Guild in 1947. He later became Governor of California (1966) and then President of the United States (1980). (We talked about Reagan before…with the war on drugs and mass incarceration. Fun fact: Yeah…he was once a liberal Democrat and governor of California. Before that he was a famed movie star. Then he got into politics, fast forward to governor of California, then he switched to the Republican party and became the 40th President of the United States).

STRIPLING: As a member of the board of directors, as president of the Screen Actors Guild, and as an active member, have you at any time observed or noted within the organization a clique of either communists or fascists who were attempting to exert influence or pressure on the guild?

REAGAN: …There has been a small group within the Screen Actors Guild which has consistently opposed the policy of the guild board and officers of the guild, as evidenced by the vote on various issues. That small clique referred to has been suspected of more or less following the tactics that we associate with the Communist Party.

STRIPLING: Would you refer to them as a disruptive influence within the guild?

REAGAN: I would say that at times they have attempted to be a disruptive influence.

STRIPLING: You have no knowledge yourself as to whether or not any of them are members of the Communist Party?

REAGAN: No, sir, I have no investigative force, or anything, and I do not know.

STRIPLING: Has it ever been reported to you that certain members of the guild were communists?

REAGAN: Yes, sir, I have heard different discussions and some of them tagged as communists.

STRIPLING: Would you say that this clique has attempted to dominate the guild?

REAGAN: Well, sir, by attempting to put their own particular views on various issues, I guess you would have to say that our side was attempting to dominate, too, because we were fighting just as hard to put over our views, and I think, we were proven correct by the figures—Mr. Murphy gave the figures—and those figures were always approximately the same, an average of 90 percent or better of the Screen Actors Guild voted in favor of those matters now guild policy.

Questions about Testimony 1:
1. Does Ronald Reagan testify that there are communists in the Screen Actors Guild?

2. Does the group to whom Reagan refers seem dangerous or subversive? How does he make them sound?

3. Why would the FBI be interested in possible communist activities in the entertainment industry? What does the entertainment industry have to do with national security? Think deep on this one…
Testimony #2 (June 12, 1956) - Paul Robeson was an African-American actor and singer. Angered by racism and discrimination in American society, Robeson developed leftist beliefs during the 1930s; he protested lynchings and urged African Americans to resist the draft during World War II. Because the government determined that the actor and his wife were members of the Communist Party, they were not able to use their passports between 1947 and 1958, when the Robesons moved to Europe. Robeson appeared before HUAC in 1956. His testimony is excerpted below:

MR. ARENS [quoting a speech made by Paul Robeson]: “If the American warmongers fancy that they could win America’s millions of Negroes for a war against those countries (i.e., the Soviet Union and the peoples’ democracies) then they ought to understand that this will never be the case. Why should the Negroes ever fight against the only nations of the world where racial discrimination is prohibited, and where the people can live freely? Never! I can assure you, they will never fight against either the Soviet Union or the peoples’ democracies.”

Did you make that statement?

MR. ROBESON: I do not remember that. But what is perfectly clear today is that nine hundred million other colored people have told you that they will not. Four hundred million in India, and millions everywhere, have told you, precisely, that the colored people are not going to die for anybody: they are going to die for their independence. We are dealing not with fifteen million colored people, we are dealing with hundreds of millions.

MR. ROBESON: In Russia I felt for the first time like a full human being. No color prejudice like in Mississippi, no color prejudice like in Washington. It was the first time I felt like a human being. Where I did not feel the pressure of color as I feel [it] in this Committee today.

MR. SCHERER: Why do you not stay in Russia?

MR. ROBESON: Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay here, and have a part of it just like you. And no Fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear? I am for peace with the Soviet Union, and I am for peace with China, and I am not for peace or friendship with the Fascist Franco [Spain], and I am not for peace with Fascist Nazi Germans. I am for peace with decent people.

MR. SCHERER: YOU are here because you are promoting the Communist cause.

MR. ROBESON: I am here because I am opposing the neo-Fascist cause which I see arising in these committees. You are like the Alien [and] Sedition Act, and Jefferson could be sitting here, and Frederick Douglass could be sitting here, and Eugene Debs could be here.

Questions about Testimony 2 (on the following page):

1. According to Mr. Scherer, why has Mr. Robeson been asked to testify in front of HUAC?

2. Mr. Robeson claims that he felt like “a full human being” when he went to Russia. What does he mean by this? EXPLAIN. Think deep. Besides the Cold War, what else was happening in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s?

3. When Mr. Scherer asks Robeson “Why do you not stay in Russia,”” what is Robeson’s response? What Americans or American images does Robeson mention? Do you think the response was effective? EXPLAIN
FBI FILES: DALTON TRUMBO
Between 1942 and 1958, the FBI investigated the Communist Party’s supposed infiltration of the motion picture industry. Ten individuals—later known as the “Hollywood Ten”—refused to answerHUAC’s questions regarding their affiliation with the Communist Party; they were convicted of contempt and blacklisted by Hollywood.
Dalton Trumbo, a screenwriter with leftist sympathies, was one of the “Hollywood Ten.” During World War II, he wrote the screenplay for films such as “Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo,” but he was blacklisted by Hollywood after he refused to testify beforeHUAC. Writing under a different name, Trumbo wrote the Oscar-winningoriginal stories and screenplays for films like “Roman Holiday” and “The Brave One.” The following is a scene from his investigation byHUAC. This is from the movieTrumbo, released in 2015. But the real interview is exactly the same…if you want to watch the real one justYouTube it. The only reason why I picked the scene from the movie is just because it’s more clear to understand. But again, if you really want to watch the real scene, just YouTube it ⊗ I promise they are both just as entertaining.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AstACoPo9w&t=4s&pbjreload=10

Watch the clip, and answer the questions below. HOPEFULLY THE LINK WORKS…if it does NOT work don’t panic and tell me it doesn’t work and that all hope is lost lol Let’s try to solution first… go to YouTube and in YouTube SEARCH → Trumbo Scene HUAC. It SHOULD be the one of the first ones that pops up. It is titled Trumbo (2015) – Hostility at HUAC Scene (2/10) Movie Clips as is 2:24 in length. If that doesn’t work and you absolutely can’t find it, let me know. I will then direct you to the original real interview.

Questions about Testimony:
1. What stood out to you about Dalton Trumbo’s interview?

2. Listen carefully to when they are escorting Mr. Trumbo out of the hearing room. He says “This is the beginning of an American concentration camp.” Think about it…why would he say this and what do you think he means by this?

3. BOOM: He was a member of the Communist Party…bet you weren’t expecting that lol When Dalton Trumbo testified beforeHUAC, he refused to answer questions about his Communist Party membership on the grounds that the First Amendment guaranteed his right to free speech. Looking back at the First Amendment, do you agree that the amendment protected his decision? EXPLAIN why or why not?

Wrap-Up Question: Evaluate the procedures of and effectiveness ofHUAC – Why didHUAC investigate these people? Do you thinkHUAC was effective at finding communists in the US? EXPLAIN.