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## Who's Un-American Now?

THE COMMITTEE. *The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities*. By Walter Goodman. Foreword by Richard H. Rovere. Illustrated. 564 pp. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$10.

By TELFORD TAYLOR

FOR a good many years, "The Committee" has been known by its initials—HUAC. But to those of a certain age it will always be "The Dies Committee," after its first chairman, the ebullient Martin Dies of Texas. Now in its 30th year, the Committee has flourished under Democratic and Republican majorities alike.

Walter Goodman, the author of two earlier books on advertising and business ethics, is the Committee's fifth biographer; its early and middle years were covered in studies by Father A. R. Ogden ("The Dies Committee," 1945) and Robert K. Carr ("The House Committee on Un-American Activities," 1952), and six years ago its merits and defects were vigorously explored in books by William F. Buckley (pro—"The Committee and Its Critics") and Frank Donner (con—"The Un-Americans"). Mr. Goodman's addition to this library is more comprehensive and, de-

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spite its bulk, more readable than any of its predecessors.

The Committee's life falls into three well-marked periods: the war and prewar time of Martin Dies, the postwar decade when public concern with political subversion reached its peak, and the years since about 1956, during which the Committee appears to have become a permanent but less prominent part of the political landscape. During the late forties and early fifties under the chairmanship of Congressmen J. Parnell Thomas of New Jersey, John S. Wood of Georgia, and Harold H.

Velde of Illinois, the Committee's hearings involving such figures as Elizabeth Bentley, Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers, and Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam, were almost constant front-page news. Since then H.U.A.C. has generally operated in the shadow of more exciting doings by other investigating committees, by which such names as Charles Van Doren and Bernard Goldfine have been inscribed in the footnotes of American history.

Although his work is not devoid of analysis and appraisal, the author's approach is essentially that of the historical journalist. The story of the Committee is presented as a rich and gaudy swatch of American history. "What a circus!" bellows Joe Curran, as he takes the witness chair. Martin Dies confuses labor leader John Reid with John Reed, who lies beneath the Kremlin wall. His colleague Joe Starnes of Alabama staggers Hollie Flanagan of the W.P.A. Theater Project by asking whether one Christopher Marlowe was a Communist. Other literary and historical howlers stud the pages.

These echoes of a time when Shirley Temple was really Shirley Temple and the Committee's chief-of-staff, J. B. Matthews, complained that she had, albeit unwittingly, served Communist interests by sending greetings to a French Communist journal, are undeniably entertaining. So many half-forgotten names and faces are brought to mind and life that a

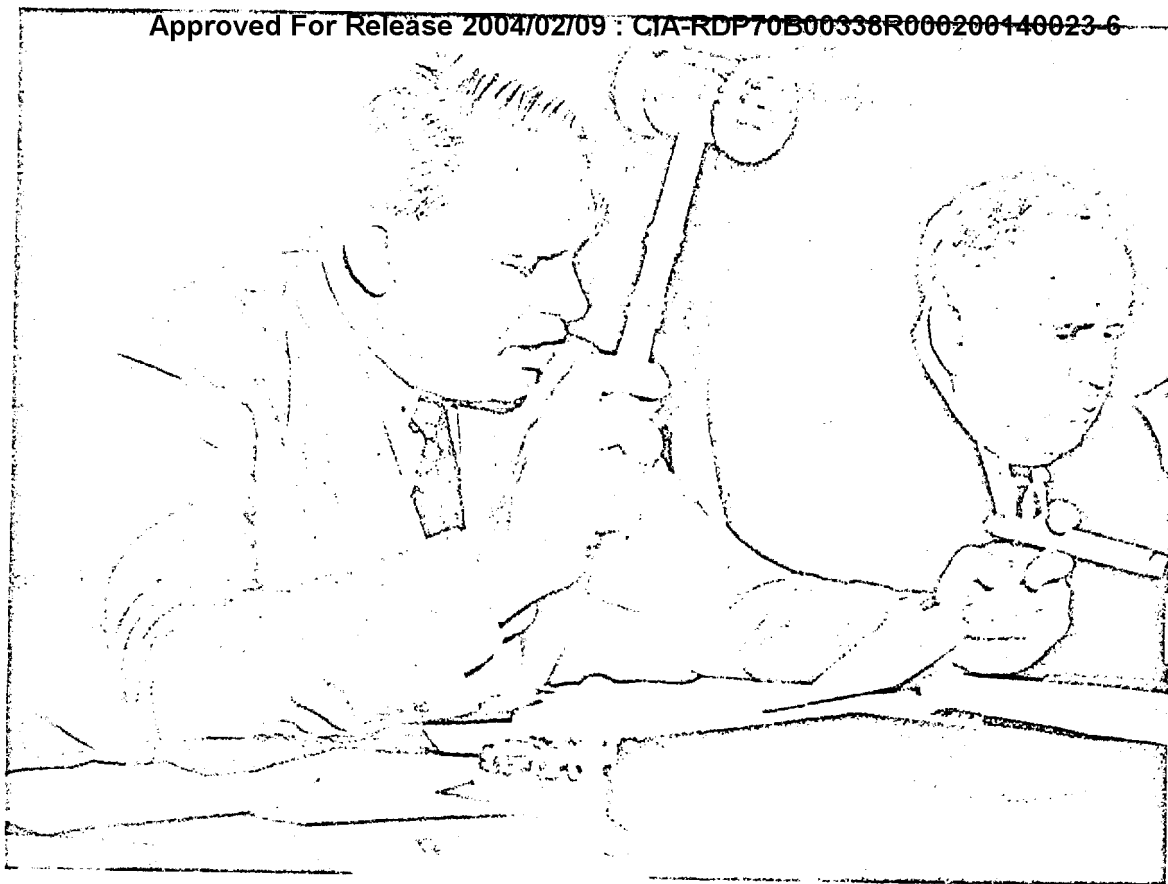
strange nostalgia bemuses the reader: *Oh! that Martin Dies and his zany crew,*

*What cra-a-azy things they used to do!*

But of course that is not the whole story. Touched with burlesque from time to time though it be, the Committee is much more than a show. It is the fruit of hundreds of thousands of dollars annually appropriated by the House of Representatives in order to amass voluminous dossiers; to question thousands of individuals about their beliefs and affiliations, usually left-wing and thought to be extreme; and to publish hearings and reports that require 25 pages as listed in a useful appendix to this book. In the light of 30 years' experience, surely one may justifiably echo Little Peterkin's question about the Battle of Blenheim. What good came of it?

Very little, according to the author. The Committee "has established a

record not of laws but of Fifth Amendment pleas and contempt citations and disrupted lives." To be sure, it has been good medicine for the liberals, exposing the intellectual lopsidedness that makes them alert to dangers from the right while blind to those from the left. The Committee has also helped "to keep us from smugness" and has served as "a stimulant to an apathetic constitution." But its career has had meaning only through its "casualties," that is "the people whose reputations and livelihoods have been blithely hazarded," and the "proudest exhibit of the Committee's 30 years is its spacious files filled with the names, associations, activities and public utterances of thousands of Americans."



Martin Dies, chairman of the first House Un-American Activities Committee, with Representative Noah Mason, August, 1939.

Mr. Goodman is hardly the first to render a negative verdict on the Committee and its works, and while the mainstream of criticism has come from liberals, other sources are not lacking. In 1953 the late Congressman Francis Walter, then a member and later chairman of the Committee, described the Committee's use of subpoenas, during hearings involving the deceased Harry Dexter White, as "the most incredible, insulting, un-American thing that I've encountered in my 21 years in Congress." The following year another member—Bernard Kearney, Republican and retired general—described the staff situation under Chairman Velde as "rotten" and "intolerable." When he became Chairman in 1955, Mr. Walter promptly proposed to abolish H.U.A.C. and turn its functions over to the Judiciary Committee.

But the House did not do so. Every year proposals to abolish the Committee are defeated by overwhelming votes, while generous financial support for its work is enthusiastically extended. Surely these votes do not accurately reflect the division of House opinion about the value of the Committee's work. But most of the members believe it unwise to incur the enmity of the Committee's supporters, and cast their votes as a sop to Cerberus.

In 1959 ex-President Truman, never one to mince words, called the Committee the "most un-American thing in the country today." Mr. Goodman strongly disagrees: "... unless one is prepared to blank out large and significant patches of our history, there is nothing un-American about the Un-American Activities Committee."

To a degree the issue is semantic. Despairing of finding a meaning of "un-American" sufficiently precise for legal purposes, Judge Henry W. Edgerton observed that: "In a literal sense whatever occurs in America is American." But of course that is not the sense in which the word is used in the title of the Committee, "the thrust of

which is that too many things in America are dangerous imports.

What things are those, and whose identification of them is to be trusted? Surely the problem is still with us today and sharper than ever. Commenting on the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., one organizational leader declared that "the concept of nonviolence died with him; it was a foreign ideology anyway—as foreign to this violent country as speaking Russian."

In responsible and representative hands, the Committee might have helped to illuminate those values that are essential to American democracy, and explore the cause and course of threatening trends. But, as Mr. Goodman's work abundantly demonstrates, too many of the Committee's leaders have been neither responsible nor representative, and have fallen far short of even minimal standards of political competence and integrity. In that sense, alas, Mr. Truman was right. ♦