

THIRD WORLD TRAVELER



Forward

by Victor Navasky

excerpted from the book

It Did Happen Here

Recollections of Political Repression in America

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Consider what presidential candidate Ronald Reagan said to Robert Scheer, crack reporter for the Los Angeles Times, in the spring of 1980: "There was no blacklist of Hollywood. The blacklist in Hollywood, if there was one, was provided by the communists."

I cite Reagan's comment because his Cold War obsession with communism allows him to deny the existence of an institution which he and everyone else in the industry and the political culture at the time knew to be a fact. Not only was there a Hollywood blacklist, but there was also a blacklist in the academic community, from elementary school on up to graduate school, in the trade union movement, the scientific community, and throughout the government. Conductors on the New York subway system were fired from their positions because of their politics.

The blacklist was a pervasive system, a part of the dark side of the American legacy that goes all the way back to the alien and sedition laws, reasserting itself with a vengeance during the Palmer raids, dominating the postwar decade under the misnomer of McCarthyism (since it started before McCarthy came on the scene in the early fifties), and is still with us, permeating the political culture of the eighties. Against this thematic background, in such striking contrast to the democratic promises of our Bill of Rights, that much of the moving testimony in It Did Happen Here must be read.

The repression and resistance recorded here go back to the early part of the century, as in the powerful memory of Jack Miller, the IWW organizer; through our own World War 11 internment camps, vividly created by Minoru Yasui; to the moving story of the more recent attack on political activist Margaret Herring McSurely. However, the so-called McCarthy era, the domestic Cold War, provides a particularly useful perspective on the Great Fear which has periodically informed and captured our culture down through the years. It started even as World War 11 ended. President Truman's executive order gave the FBI the power and duty to investigate the political backgrounds of every employee of the federal government. One can get a glimpse of the great red hunt from such victims as Arthur Drayton, dismissed after twenty-five years as a postal clerk. The House Un-American Activities Committee came into the headlines in the postwar years when it began hearings alleging subversion in the entertainment industry. The Hollywood Ten refused to answer the "Are you now or have you ever been" questions on grounds of conscience. Like playwright Arthur Miller later on, they were indicted and prosecuted for contempt of Congress. But unlike Arthur Miller, in the climate of their time Ring Lardner and the others of the Hollywood Ten spent up to ten months in prison.

The Cold War heated up: the Hiss case, the Smith Act prosecutions, the Rosenberg case. China had, in the phrase of the time, gone communist. The Russians had gotten the so-called secret of the atomic bomb and exploded one of their own. We were at war in Korea. In 1951, the Un-American Activities Committee recommenced its hearings on the day Alger Hiss went to prison, and people were called up to name names. Little un-American activities committees flourished throughout the country on state and local levels, not to mention the red squads of local police departments. Collectively, they contributed to a climate of fear and political hysteria unknown before or since.

In addition to violating people's rights and in every way doing the things that the civil libertarians of today accuse them of doing, there was something else going on. It turned out that when HUAC came to Hollywood, the committee already had all the names it pretended to be seeking. An undercover Los Angeles police agent had turned in many thousands of names he had accumulated. The LAPD shared those with the FBI, which, in turn, shared them with the congressional investigating committee.

So the whole search for names was not a search for names. It was a process by which those named were stigmatized and punished for their beliefs. But more than that, it was a way of requiring submission by those who named them. Larry Parks, who played Al Jolson in *The Jolson Story*, said to the committee, "Look, I'll tell you about myself. I was a member of the Communist Party. I joined because I thought it was the most liberal thing around. But don't make me crawl through the mud like an informer. What kind of heritage is that to leave my children?" The committee insisted on it, and he did so. It was a form of what I think of as a degradation ceremony.

Nor were individuals the only ones compromised. Officers of protective organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union turn out to have been cooperating behind the scenes with the agents of this Cold War repression. There were rumors of an arrangement between the ACLU and the Un-American Activities Committee. The ACLU general counsel, Morris Ernst, met privately with FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. The Americans for Democratic Action, organized to protect liberal humanist values, ended up spending much of its time attacking and disassociating itself from those to the left of it. Even though they simultaneously attacked the McCarthy phenomenon, by their other actions they strengthened the ability of those committees to do their work and legitimized them. The unstated message in "Hey, you've got the wrong guy" was that there is a right guy to get.

The reverberations of the domestic Cold War are still with us. The Foreign Service purge of dissenters from our China policy left no one around to dissent from our Vietnam policy. The ritualistic congressional investigations of the forties and fifties simultaneously stigmatized dissenters, wounded the left, and fueled the fantasy of an international communist monolith bent on world conquest, which

eventually led to the investment of billions of dollars in a nuclear arsenal with risks that boggle the minds even of those who specialize in thinking about the unthinkable. The ideological exclusion clauses of the 1950s' McCarran-Walter Immigration Act have resulted in the denial of visas to more than eleven thousand foreigners since 1980.

Eventually the investigating committees of the Cold War era so lost their ability to punish people through accusations and exposure that they were virtually laughed out of business. This was symbolized to me when Abbie Hoffman and others mocked the committee: They screamed at the committee members; they dressed as witches and swept up and down the aisles with brooms. With their outlandish costumes and behavior, they attacked the committee's legitimacy. The committees had sullied their reputations to such an extent that the two biggest-HUAC and SIC-first changed their names in the sixties and then were abolished in the seventies.

But when civil libertarians hailed the demise of HUAC they were celebrating a pyrrhic victory, for, in fact, the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover had already undertaken its most shameful undercover operation COINTELPRO. The bureau was visiting direct, violent, illegal punishment on its ideological enemies-where the congressional committees had done it indirectly and, as it were, nonviolently. The FBI sent the infamous note to Martin Luther King, Jr., suggesting that he consider suicide. It infiltrated organizations on the left, with agent provocateurs who may have been responsible for the most violent acts carried out in that period. Vietnam Veterans Against the War was, as Scott Camil reveals, especially preyed upon by government agents who sought to provoke the vets into violence.

Those activities were thought to be so illegitimate and so fundamentally un-American that even the FBI denied them at the time. We found out what the FBI was doing only through the Freedom of Information Act, the Senate Select Committee that investigated intelligence agencies, and some of the political cases brought by victims of COINTELPRO, like the Socialist Workers Party and Frank Wilkinson, who tells his story below. We still don't know its full dimensions. But now it appears we are well into a phase that solves the attempt to make legitimate that which was previously illegitimate, to do overground that which the FBI used to do only underground, to use the state not so much to stigmatize as to legitimize, to make respectable that which is shameful.

One of President Reagan's first acts on assuming office was to pardon the two former FBI officials who had been convicted of authorizing break-ins without warrants and probable cause. These convictions bore a symbolic importance because they stood for the principle that the intelligence agencies must obey the law and are bound by the Constitution. Yet the president chose to view these men as heroes who were acting on what he called in his pardon statement "high principle."

By his legislative initiatives and executive orders, Reagan has restricted the free flow of information that is vital to the uninhibited exchange of ideas in a democracy. The Freedom of Information Act was a ray of sunshine, although from the outset its implementation left much to be desired. The administration, attempting to roll back the FOIA, instructed its agencies to reverse the presumption that the people have the right to know.

The 1981 Agents Identification Act, called by Professor Phil Kurland of the University of Chicago Law School "the clearest violation of the First Amendment in our history," makes it a crime to reveal the identity of any intelligence agent, even if that identity is already a matter of public record.

The Export Administration Act has been interpreted by the Department of Commerce to permit governmental interference into unclassified university research by restricting the exchange of scientific information.

...e Foreign Agents Registration Act has been interpreted to require documentary films made by the

National Film Board of Canada, including the Academy Award-winning *If You Love This Planet*, to be preceded by a statement saying the films are "political propaganda." Efforts were even made by the Department of Justice to learn which groups and individuals asked to see the films.

The McCarran-Walter Act has been used to bar a wide range of individuals from our shores: Hortensia Allende, the widow of Salvadore Allende; the Reverend Ian Paisley and Owen Carron, spokesmen of radical Protestant and Catholic groups in Northern Ireland; and members of the Japanese peace movement, among many others.

It's a depressing list, and there's more: the executive order increasing the ease of classification of government documents; the institution of lie detector tests for government employees; the attempts of the president, the State Department, and others to smear the nuclear freeze movement. Potentially most ominous of all, the Reagan administration, by executive order, expanded law-enforcement authority to do political surveillance at home and unleashed the CIA for the first time to conduct operations on American soil.

I fear that in its next phase the repression may consist of scapegoating, of placing blame on those responsible for the progressive agenda of the sixties-affirmative action, gay rights, feminism, the antiwar movement-if the Reagan/Bush economic program fails, or if scandals like the Iran/Contra arms deal put the ability of the administration to govern in jeopardy, or if escalating debts and deficits hasten the decline of the United States as a world power. The danger, then, is that the search for scapegoats will take us farther down the road to a police state.

One of the lessons from the stories in this book is that to successfully resist repression we have to take the protective freedoms, most notably the First Amendment to the Constitution, seriously. Consider the man who, explaining why he named names as a HUAC witness in the fifties, said, "I'd be willing to jump off the cliff for something I believed in, but I had quit the Communist Party ten years earlier. I had a wife, two kids, and a mother to support. Why should I go to a concentration camp for something I didn't believe in?" What this man didn't understand is that the principle at stake wasn't the credo of the Communist Party. The principle was the First Amendment, the right of people not to be punished for dissenting beliefs. That is an important and fundamental element of a democratic society.

There are times when personal resistance becomes identical with public morality. If every single witness who had been called before the committee had refused to cooperate, the repressive fifties couldn't have happened the way they did. If the civil liberties organizations had stood true to their values, repression couldn't have happened the way it did. In Hollywood, if one major studio had been willing to break the blacklist and make films, people would have come to see them, and it couldn't have happened the way it did. If the talent guild, the directors' guild, the writers' guild, the screen actors' guild, if one of them had said, "If you blacklist one of our members, none of us will ever work for you," it couldn't have happened the way it did.

I hope it's not sentimentality to suggest that the examples of those who resisted and prevailed have not been lost on history. I'm thinking of people like Lillian Hellman, who told the committee she would talk about herself but not others "because I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions"; or Pete Seeger, who said he would sing his songs for the committee but would not tell them what political groups he sang for and invoked the First Amendment; or the trade union organizer Tom Quinn, who said he was not hiding behind the Constitution, he was standing before it, defending it; or the character actor Lionel Stander, who told the committee he was prepared to name names, to reveal a group of conspiratorial fanatics out to undermine everything the country stood for, and started to name the members of the committee that called him. I like to believe that by their example people like these, and the many others whose voices sing out in the pages that follow, taught us how to behave-and that makes it more difficult for it to happen again.