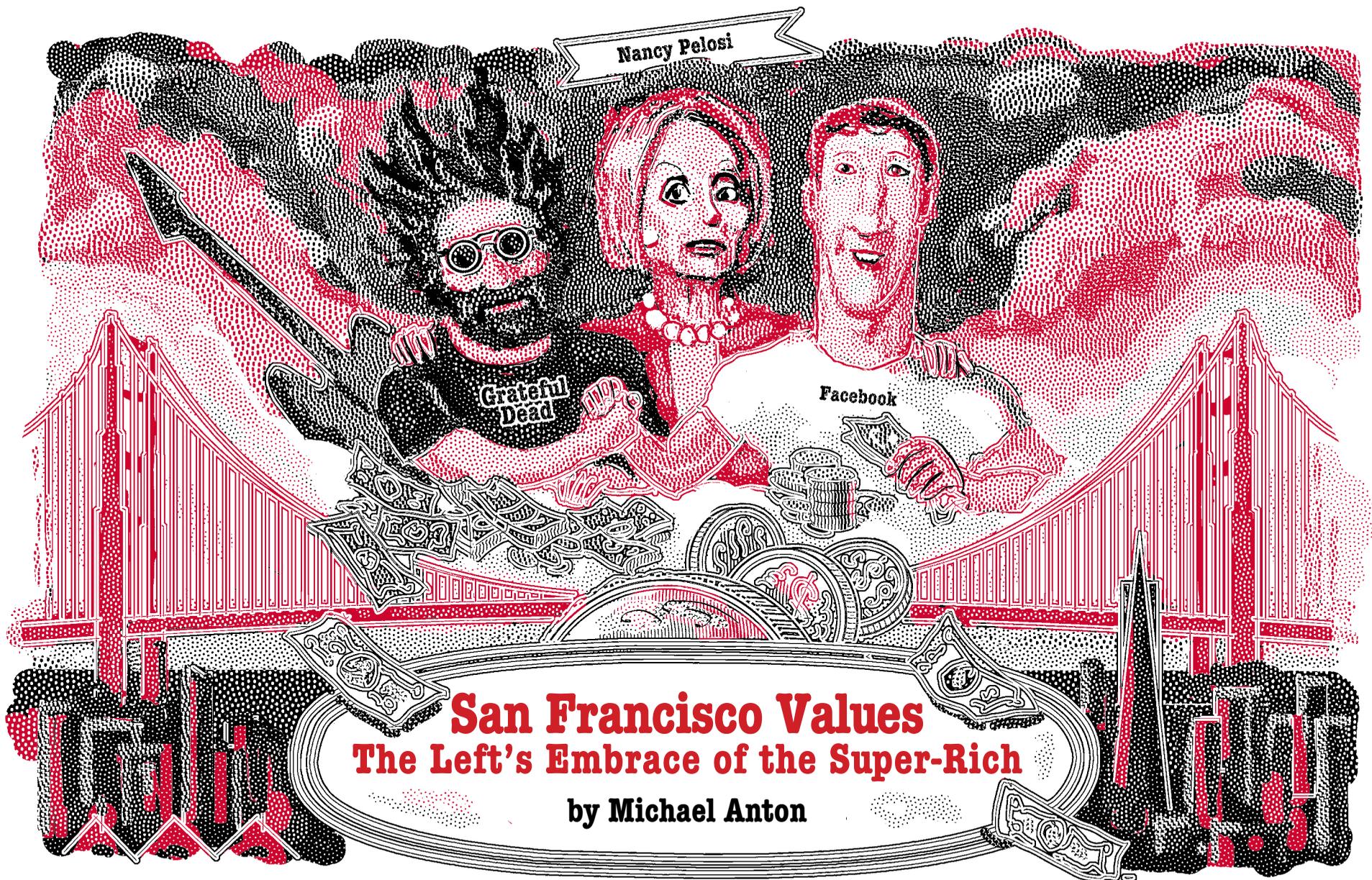


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Book Review by Lauren Weiner

## LIGHTS, CAMERA...TREASON?

*Hollywood Traitors: Blacklisted Screenwriters—Agents of Stalin, Allies of Hitler,*  
by Allan H. Ryskind. Regnery, 539 pages, \$29.99



"All we want is the truth as we see it."

**A**MONG THE IRONIES REVEALED IN Allan Ryskind's *Hollywood Traitors: Blacklisted Screenwriters—Agents of Stalin, Allies of Hitler* is that American movie studios didn't blacklist only defiant radicals in the 1940s and '50s. Witnesses who cooperated with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and told what they knew about Communists in Hollywood were blacklisted, too. Anti-Communists in the film industry, and even congressmen from the committee, had to exert pressure on the studios to get these ex-Communist "friendly" witnesses gainfully employed again.

A former reporter for the *Washington Times* and editor-at-large of *Human Events*, Ryskind offers in this important but flawed new history acute portraits of the "friendlies," the "unfriendlies," and the Hollywood anti-Communists, including his father, the accomplished playwright and scriptwriter Morrie

Ryskind. He gives us the backstory, too, tracing the evolution of American Communism in the 1930s, when various hard-Left and pro-Soviet groups that started in New York expanded to the West Coast.

Based on the testimony of ex-Communist Rena M. Vale, Ryskind writes that New York playwright John Howard Lawson, "the grand pooh-bah" of the Hollywood Reds, only went out to California in 1937 because the Communist Party ordered him there. In addition to writing the scripts for such movies as *Algiers* and *Action in the North Atlantic*, he became one of the Hollywood Ten, the original uncooperative HUAC witnesses who prompted the blacklist. Although Lawson, eight of his fellow scriptwriters, and one director claimed to be upholding artistic freedom and the First Amendment, they were really carrying water for a regime notorious for imprisoning and murdering artists and free-thinkers of any kind.

**S**TILL, IN DEPRESSION-ERA AMERICA, Marxism-Leninism drew people who were upset by the apparent failure of capitalism. The dedication of leaders and followers alike was relentless, whether in creating organizations of their own, like the People's Educational Center in Los Angeles, or in trying to dominate organizations they co-founded with liberals. Those who weren't Party members or fellow travelers were in the way. In 1937, with the newly formed Screen Writers Guild in turmoil, a frustrated liberal lawyer representing the Guild, Laurence Beilenson, said:

It was wrecking my life to stay up every night and listen to all this nonsense. John Howard Lawson was the leader of the communist group on the board. They would try to railroad the meetings.

Many liberals pursued labor rights alongside the radicals only to find that the latter's fa-



vored tactics—demonstrations and strikes—jeopardized the hard-won leverage against management that nascent unions like the Screen Writers Guild had gained.

In the lead-up to World War II, when the Communist Party line changed to accommodate the Soviet Union's shifting priorities, movie-industry radicals shifted with it. When Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler in 1939, for example, the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League instantly changed its name to the Hollywood League for Democratic Action. Its campaign against fascism, supposedly the centerpiece of the Left's politics, was suspended. Members now railed loudly against British imperialism, at a time when the Nazis were taking over country after country and only the British stood in the way. Party members and fellow travelers, advocating nonintervention, called the conflict between Britain and Germany a "phony war." When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, they started calling it "the people's war."

**T**HE LEAGUE'S LEADER WAS DONALD Ogden Stewart. A gifted screenwriter with a talent for light-hearted dialogue (*The Philadelphia Story*, *Life with Father*), he wanted to be a serious Communist. Like Party members the world over, Stewart had to learn obedience. When the Communists turned pacifist during the Hitler-Stalin Pact, it was a bitter pill for him to swallow. "But," he wrote in his memoir, "Russia was the only country of Marxism, and I didn't think I could abandon Stalin without surrendering my life raft." Later, when Stewart got a subpoena from HUAC, rather than respond to it he moved to "imperialist" Britain.

The committee, which held hearings in Washington and on the West Coast in the late 1940s, with a second series of hearings in the early 1950s, searched for signs of Communist propaganda in American films. Ryskind covers familiar Red-tinted World War II pictures—remember, it had become "the people's war"—including *The North Star* (written by Lillian Hellman), *Song of Russia* (Richard Collins), and *Mission to Moscow* (Howard Koch—not a Party member but, according to Ryskind, a close fellow traveler). Ryskind makes a plausible addition or two, like a little-known John Garfield-Maureen O'Hara movie called *The Fallen Sparrow*. Mostly he points to fleeting moments in movies made during the war, like the scene in *Casablanca* in which screenwriter Howard Koch slipped in a positive mention of the Loyalist cause in the Spanish Civil War—a cause that Stalin had co-opted, much to Spain's detriment.

It is tricky to weigh the propaganda value of a feature film, even one made in an era

when doctrinaire scriptwriters like Lawson, Koch, and Dalton Trumbo were trying to insert their doctrine into the scripts. As Ryskind concedes, commercial cinema is collaborative, with many hands involved in the work. In several of the instances he describes, the fiery revolutionary rhetoric of, say, a Trumbo script or novel falls by the wayside as a film or film adaptation proceeds. Ryskind hits the propaganda theme hard anyway, concluding that being labeled unemployable in the movie business—or in some cases being threatened with, or sent to, prison—was "rough justice" for the people he calls Hollywood traitors.

**I**F BY "ROUGH" WE MEAN INCONSISTENT, that might be apt. It is not enough to say that because these people were Stalinists—and Ryskind amply demonstrates that they were—they threatened U.S. national security. This is what the House committee and the entire Congress were grappling with at the time. In retrospect, they weren't right. Nor could one argue that either HUAC's proceedings or the blacklist—a ban on the hiring of Communists by a motion picture industry that never publicly specified the individuals to whom it applied—went off without a hitch, although Ryskind comes close to so arguing.

The Hollywood Ten were held in contempt of Congress for their non-responsive speechifying before HUAC and were later sentenced to a year in prison. Their case set a precedent that wasn't followed in at least one instance. This isn't in Ryskind's book, but Sidney Buchman, the producer and screenwriter who wrote *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* for Frank Capra, should have been held in contempt, too, but wasn't. When Buchman came before the panel in 1951, he admitted that he had been a Communist but refused to identify others in the Party when asked to. The liberal think tank Fund for the Republic issued a 1956 report on HUAC noting that onlookers were surprised he didn't face any legal consequences—until they realized that one congressman had left the hearing room for part of the testimony, leaving the committee "without a quorum and, consequently, unable to issue a contempt citation" to Buchman "for his refusal to give full testimony."

And the studios' blacklist could be quite messy. Some of the people called to testify later described trying to comply with the committee in the least damaging way they could, but these efforts sometimes backfired. Screenwriter Richard Collins, for example, set out to minimize the impact of his disclosures by naming people who were deceased; by naming people who, having already come before HUAC, were already stuck; and by naming people who had set aside Marxism-Leninism

long ago and, so, would not be of interest to the authorities or the public. That last assumption proved incorrect when Collins mentioned screenwriter Budd Schulberg, author of the novel *What Makes Sammy Run?* and an ex-Communist. Collins thought Schulberg's political switch meant that the surfacing of his name wouldn't make waves—but people either weren't aware he'd left the Communist movement or ignored the fact. The headlines blaring out news of Schulberg's Red associations left Collins chagrined and feeling he ought to have anticipated the sensationalism, given how well regarded a writer Schulberg was.

**S**UCH FOUL-UPS ARE NOT IN THE BOOK. Nor does Ryskind discuss secrecy, emphasizing as he does the brazenness of the film industry's Communists. But secrecy is a vital part of this story, because it coexisted with the brazenness. As non-Communists of various stripes (such as the producer Dore Schary and the "gray-listed" actress Marsha Hunt) were wont to say, one knew there were certain people who adhered to every zig and zag of the Party line, but none of these people ever identified themselves as Communists. That's why the congressmen, in order to pursue their investigation, sought out people who were known to have been in the clique because they had publicly left it. If the "exes" didn't identify the people currently in it, no one would, due to Party members' vow of silence. The Party itself created the dynamic of informers and informed-upon.

Communist Maurice Rapf (co-writer of such movies as Walt Disney's *Song of the South*) shed light on this subject in Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle's extensive 1997 oral history, *Tender Comrades*. Rapf, the son of a prominent MGM executive, said: "I made some terrible mistakes during this period, because the Party was secret, you know." The mistake to which he refers is lying. "It was ridiculous to deny membership, but I did." This wasn't admirable, but neither was the fact that FBI agents dogged Rapf's steps, and his wife's. The government's lengthy dossiers on Rapf and others like him were a colossal waste of time, if a treasure trove for historians. Ryskind has occasionally gleaned interesting tidbits from the FBI's files, but he doesn't ponder whether the bureau's counter-subversive energies might have been better devoted to catching actual "agents of Stalin"—Soviet spies stealing U.S. military and other vital information.

Such persecution, it bears mentioning, was neither widespread nor long-lasting. Rapf's stonewalling about his political allegiances, begun during the HUAC period, remained in effect right up to his interview for



*Tender Comrades* half a century later. Why, he was politely asked, have you kept honoring the Party's secrecy rule all this time? His answer was not that he feared punishment by the U.S. government but that he was unwilling to give "reactionaries" the satisfaction of confirming that they were right about him. In short, the government that Ryskind defends is worthy of that defense—not for doing a perfect job of handling the Communist controversy, but for muddling through a difficult period while maintaining the basic freedoms guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution. The private citizens whom Ryskind rightly celebrates—like labor leader Roy Brewer, actor Ronald Reagan, and screenwriter Emmet Lavery (of whom I was previously unaware)—did their part in defending American ideals and the rule of law even as they pushed Communists out of their respective labor and civic organizations.

**N**EVERTHELESS, CALLING THIS BOOK *Hollywood Traitors* is gratuitous. American Communists' views frequently went against, but sometimes dovetailed with, U.S. foreign and defense policies. That the Reds exchanged pacifism for pro-war zeal the instant Hitler invaded the socialist motherland in 1941 discredits them, no ques-

tion about it. The same goes for their next reversal, which came at the Cold War's onset in 1945. Russia had overcome the German invaders and no longer needed the Allies' help, so Communists turned against the Western democracies. They lobbied for "peace"—but only as a cover for strengthening the Warsaw Pact's forces and backing Third World revolutionaries aligned with Moscow. Yes, American Communists gave "aid and comfort to the enemy"—except for a four-year period when they gave aid and comfort to the Allied victory. What's more, Hollywood's intermittent traitors made patriotic movies that Americans look back on with pride, in a period that is rightly considered the golden age of American film.

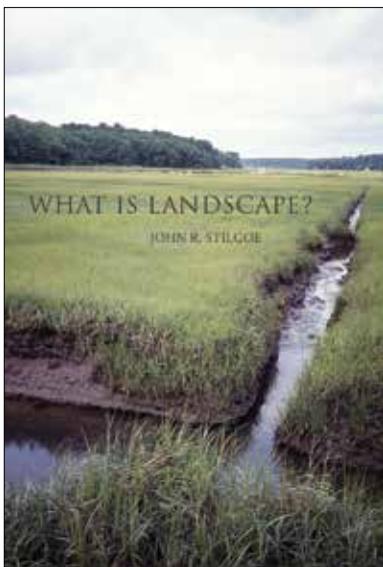
Compare these Popular Front intellectuals to indisputable traitors—American operatives for al-Qaeda, for example, six of whom have been killed overseas in U.S. military drone strikes. Neither Dashiell Hammett nor Maurice Rapf took up arms against the United States—in fact Hammett served in the U.S. Army in both world wars. Their love for the Soviet Union was wrong, but was it indistinguishable from hating the United States?

Apparently sensing the problem of lumping Tinseltown Reds together with home-grown jihadis, Ryskind catalogues a store of

anti-American statements from the former. Even these, though, need to be understood in context if we have to decide—as the book's title pushes us to—whether treason is involved here. Hammett, Rapf, Lawson, and the others constantly said that America was going fascist. They mistakenly thought they were helping to prevent that from happening. Hence what looks like destructiveness to me was saving America to them. They were coy. They were manipulative. They lacked intellectual independence—even the ones who were good writers, directors, actors, or producers. They participated in political life based on an unfounded sense of moral superiority. They were disloyal, too, putting another government ahead of the United States in their hearts. But theirs was a warped allegiance that fails to rise to the level of treason.

The hostility that outspoken anti-Communists faced in that era is a scandal—Allan Ryskind is right about that. And today it would be funny if it weren't so sad that anti-anti-Communism has lasted so much longer than the Soviet Union. But the other side's distortion of history—chronic and irksome as it is—doesn't justify exaggeration on one's own side.

*Lauren Weiner is the associate editor of the Library of Law and Liberty.*



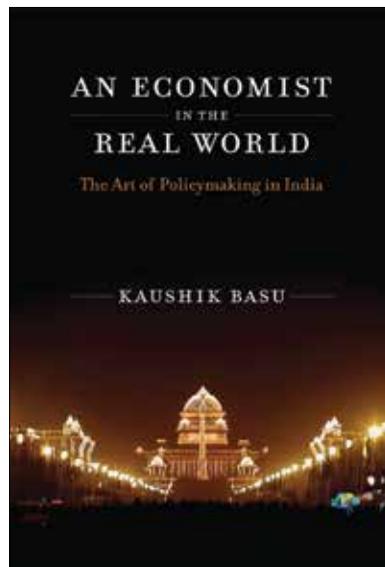
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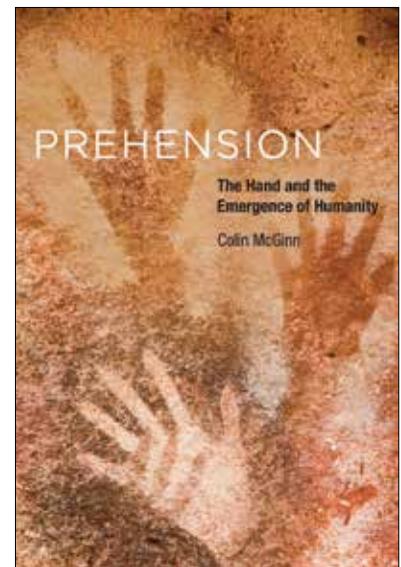
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