

# Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II

---

Volume 12

Article 7

---

2007

## Not the Hollywood Ten: Popular Film's Promotion of Anti-Communism in the 1950's

Maryann Lucini

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lucini, Maryann (2007) "Not the Hollywood Ten: Popular Film's Promotion of Anti-Communism in the 1950's," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 12 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol12/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rscroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rscroggin@scu.edu).

## Not the Hollywood Ten: Popular Film's Promotion of Anti-Communism in the 1950s

Maryann Lucini

---

In the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks and the Patriot Act, the public fears terrorist attacks by radical Islamists living in the United States. These fears can be kept alive in part by such Hollywood releases as *Collateral Damage* (2002) and *The Sum of All Fears* (2002), or mitigated by films such as *Munich* (2005), *Flight Plan* (2005), or *Babel* (2006). Looking into the past, it is possible to see the powerful effect films have on their audiences when fears of internal sabotage are heightened. People must be alert to the immense propagandistic power of Hollywood cinema and its potential to impact, for better and for worse, viewers already apprehensive about threats to their nation's security. The Cold War era was very similar to the world today, in that its great amounts of fear were fodder for popular media, particularly the film industry.

With the advent of the Korean War in 1950, generally considered to be a war by proxy between the United States and the Eastern Communist Block, the United States entered into an era of heightened fear and suspicion. Communism was cast as the enemy of freedom and democracy. In 1950, accusations were made by Joseph McCarthy that Communists were active in the US Government. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was created to investigate the presence of Communism in the United States. These steps helped extend public perceptions of

Communists from an external threat to possibly an internal one. Any American citizen was a possible communist spy bent on overthrowing the United States. Popular films came under intense scrutiny by HUAC: as Chairman Thomas stated in a press release on 20 October, 1947, "over 85 million people attend the movies each week...It is not unnatural—in fact it is very logical—that subversive and undemocratic forces should attempt to use the medium for the un-American purposes."<sup>1</sup> Historians have tended to accept with little questioning the strong emphasis on Hollywood's efforts to denounce McCarthyism. On 9 February 1950, Wisconsin's junior senator Joseph McCarthy announced, "I have here in my hand a list of 205 who were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who, nevertheless, are still working and shaping policy in the State Department."<sup>2</sup> While this list was never produced nor verified, the public believed it existed and thus it reinforced the possibility of communist spies within the American public. There is little research on the important role 1950s popular film played in fanning hysteria and supporting this Anti-Communist movement in the United States.

National memory has been selective on its history concerning the film industry of the 1950s, emphasizing only those who struggled against an oppressive

---

<sup>1</sup> Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940's* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 311.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph McCarthy, Speech for Women's Republican Club dinner meeting in Wheeling, West Virginia, 9 Feb. 1950, in John E. Haynes, *Red Scare or Red Menace?: American Communism and Anticommunism in the Cold War Era* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996) 64.



blacklist. Hollywood loves its heroes; strong men and women who fight against injustice. It has been easy to ignore those who did not fit this view.<sup>3</sup> This highly lopsided view, however, is false. In truth, movies from many genres of popular film facilitated the growing Anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s.

Cyndy Hendershot's *Anti-Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America* (2003), is one of the few books written about the very real, mutually supportive relationship between Anti-Communism and popular culture.<sup>4</sup> Hendershot examines a wide variety of media, including novels, film, and television. However, she has a tendency to examine some of the more obscure films of the 1950s while ignoring some of the more widely viewed examples. Victor Navasky's *Naming Names* (2003), compellingly reveals the tense and conflicted atmosphere in Hollywood during the Cold War and the continuing conflict between Anti-Communist and Communist movements.<sup>5</sup> He falls into the popular trap, however, of tending to glorify the more rebellious figures attacked by HUAC to the exclusion of the very strong and prevalent Anti-Communist movement in the movie industry. When he

---

<sup>3</sup>Excellent examples of works glorifying the Hollywood 10 include: Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *Radical Hollywood: The Untold Story Behind America's Favorite Movies* (New York: The New Press, 2002), and Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940's* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

<sup>4</sup>Cyndy Hendershot, *Anti Communism and Popular Culture in Mid-Century America*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2003).

<sup>5</sup>Victor Navasky, *Naming Names*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003).

does acknowledge this movement, he strives to vilify its individual participants.

For this paper, the term "popular film" will not necessarily refer to critically successful films, but rather to films that were meant for widespread consumption by the average moviegoer -- thus excluding most independent films and low budget films shown only to limited audiences. Selection relies on whether the *New York Times*, the "newspaper of record" for the United States, published a feature review on the movie with a front-page notice, virtually guaranteeing a wide distribution.

Several dramatic films helped to heighten, not reasonable Anti-Communism consciousness, but paranoia in the United States. The openly anti-communist *My Son John* was released in 1952 with well-calculated timing.<sup>6</sup> After two years, the Korean War was still in full swing. In 1951 HUAC launched a public investigation into suspected communist infiltration of Hollywood. Whittaker Chamber's book *Witness* had just been released, reviving the drama of the Alger Hiss investigation; in which Hiss, a member of the US State Department, was found to be spying for the Soviets. The book's release prompted California Senator Richard Nixon to declare that once people became certain that Communism was the correct solution to the nation's troubles, nothing would stand in the way of the widespread implementation of Communism: "men become Communists out of the best of motives and ... accept the pernicious doctrine of the

---

<sup>6</sup>Leo McCarey, dir., *My Son John* (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 1952).



end justifying the means."<sup>7</sup> Hysteria had already taken hold. The American public believed that Communist spies were everywhere and that there was no reasoning with them. Communism had to be stopped.

In *My Son John*, Lucille Jefferson fears that her son, John, has become a communist spy against the United States. He has been consorting with a girl suspected of having Communist ties. In the end, Mrs. Jefferson informs the FBI of her son's ties, ultimately resulting in John's death. This film embraced many common fears. The biggest was the idea that Communist spies were lurking among American citizens. *My Son John* drew strongly on the idea of self-sacrifice to destroy communism. When Mrs. Jefferson turns her own son into the authorities, she destroys her son's life to preserve the United States against people the Anti-Communist *Hollywood Life* called "the rats, who have helped the commie cause, in an attempt to sell America down the river."<sup>8</sup> The effects of films with Anti-Communist plots or subplots on audiences was noted by *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther, who called the plot of one such film, "so strongly dedicated to the anti-communist purge that it seethes with the sort of emotionalism and illogic that is char-

---

<sup>7</sup>Richard M. Nixon, "Plea for and Anti Communist Faith," *Saturday Review of Literature* (24 May 1952) in Eric Bentley, ed., *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities 1938-1968* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002), 570.

<sup>8</sup>"Jimmy Tarantino, Dore Schary and Dashiell Hammet Communist Connections," *Hollywood Life*, 13 July 1951, in *Ibid.*

acteristic of so much these days.”<sup>9</sup> He protested any film that would “heroize the image of the ranting, song-singing patriot who distrusts and ridicules intellectuals as dangerous perverters of youth.”<sup>10</sup> While some critics feared such messages could add “heat and wind” to the hysteria, they nevertheless hoped that the blind fervor evidenced in movies would “startle some people into making a new and sober estimate of things.”<sup>11</sup>

Westerns are a genre that typically display and support stereotypic American values. *High Noon*, also released in 1952, is no exception to this rule.<sup>12</sup> The lead character, Marshall Will Kane (played by Gary Cooper) exhibits key American traits of independence and personal strength. Although his townspeople have fled, intimidated by the threat of violence from Frank Miller and his gang, Kane stays to defend both his pride and his town in spite of the great odds against his own survival. The film suggests what would happen if no one would stand against the threats to America: one of the characters states before the showdown, “Kane will be a dead man in half an hour and nobody's gonna do anything about it. And when he dies, this town dies too. I can feel it.”<sup>13</sup> When no

---

<sup>9</sup> “The Screen in Review: Helen Hays Returns of Films in ‘My Son John,’ feature at the Capitol Theater,” *New York Times*, 9 April 1952, 27. *ProQuest Historical Papers*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Fred Zinnemann, dir., *High Noon* (Hollywood: Republic Pictures, 1952).

<sup>13</sup> “Memorable Quotes from *High Noon*,” *Internet Movie Databases*, <<<http://imdb.com/title/tt0044706/quotes>>> (26 Feb. 2006).



one will fight against the rising enemy, there is no hope left.

What makes *High Noon* such an interesting example of an Anti-Communist film is that it demonstrates that not all such films promoted the same beliefs. Still adhering to strong Anti-Communist ideals, this film can simultaneously be seen as a protest against the oppressive McCarthyism in Hollywood. Generally, Anti-Communism and McCarthyism are viewed as basically the same thing, but here there is a definite separation. *High Noon* was lauded by a *New York Times* reviewer as an example of "moral courage in the face of bullying threats ... a close relation to the world today, where people are being terrorized by bullies and surrendering their freedoms out of senselessness and fear," an idea that could be applied both towards Anti-Communism and Anti-McCarthyism.<sup>14</sup> It was a movie about the times. While it can be interpreted as a strong show of American patriotism and Anti-Communist sentiment, it also reflected the growing unrest in Hollywood under constant pressure to produce propaganda. Members of Hollywood's Anti-Communist camp found this film appalling; John Wayne declared it, "the most un-American thing I've ever seen in my whole life," but President Eisenhower called *High Noon* one of his favorite films and often showed it to guests at the White House.<sup>15</sup> The movie treads the thin line

---

<sup>14</sup>Bosley Crowther, "A Western Legend: 'High Noon' a Major Film in a Popular Genre," *New York Times*, 3 Aug. 1952, xi, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Doherty, "Western Drama, Cold-War Allegory," *Chronicle of Higher Education* vol. 49, no. 3, (13 Nov. 2002): B15-17, *Academic Search Elite* [internet database], and *City of Nets*, 398.



between criticizing HUAC while still supporting the ultimate aim sought by HUAC, to confirm and squelch Communism in America.

The conflicts of *High Noon* were closely paralleled by Gary Cooper's own life, as well as his screen character's. In 1947 he testified before HUAC that, "some very sound and real fine pictures, more of them, should be made on selling what is really Americanism. A great many good pictures have been made ... but I think there is great room for reselling people the idea of what we have got in this country."<sup>16</sup> Despite Cooper's endorsement of film as political propaganda, he was not a willing participant in the HUAC hearings, having to be subpoenaed in order to appear. America appeared to support his decision to support both the Anti-Communists and the Anti-McCarthyists with his role as Will Kane. He remained popular, winning an Academy Award for Best Actor in 1953. John Wayne accepted on Cooper's behalf.<sup>17</sup>

Not only were Anti-Communist films being produced for adults, but some were being produced specifically tailored to children, indoctrinating them to virulent Anti-Communism at a young age. *Invaders from Mars* (1953) was touted as a children's film, "designed to meet the demands of today's space-struck youngsters."<sup>18</sup> Science fiction movies, frequently targeted to children, commonly played off Anti-Communist hysteria with none of the ambivalence of Gary

---

<sup>16</sup>*Thirty Years of Treason*, 152.

<sup>17</sup>"Awards for Gary Cooper," *Internet Movie Database*, <<http://imdb.com/name/nm0000011/awards>> (24 February 2006).

<sup>18</sup>"Here Come Those Flying Saucers Again," *New York Times*, 30 May 1953, 7 *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

Cooper or *High Noon*. The idea of a technologically advanced alien power with a vastly different culture taking over the United States was an often-used analogy to a Communist takeover. By deliberately replacing Communism, Russia, HUAC, and other current issues with alien colonizers, outer space, and flying saucers, the films focus on the emotional aspects of Anti-Communist hysteria.<sup>19</sup> *Invaders* was set in the perfect American town, one with white picket fences and smiling neighbors living happily in a suburb that could have been shot on the set of *Leave it to Beaver*.<sup>20</sup> The young hero, David, lives in an ideal nuclear family: smiling mother, proud and involved father, and the curious and smart boy who is always accompanied by his trusty dog.

Several of the key elements of the Anti-Communist movement are clearly demonstrated within the film. The most important was the way in which the aliens invaded. Unlike an "honorable" takeover, the aliens take over the minds of good Americans through implants that control the victim's brain, so that the other townsfolk have no way to determine who has been enslaved and who is still free. The film's characters lose their freedom and their individuality when their minds are taken over and they become a part of the collective aliens -- an idea very similar to perceptions of Communist recruitment in the United States. Family ties dissolve. Previously a loving father, Mr. MacLean attempts to rule the household through fear instead of love and even hits David repeatedly. The

---

<sup>19</sup> *Anti Communism and Popular Culture*, 53.

<sup>20</sup> William C. Menzies, dir., *Invaders from Mars*, (Hollywood: 20th Century Fox, 1953).



film follows the principle that American Communists were misguided individuals who had been overtaken by party dogma. A man who joined the Communists lost his individuality and was, as Nixon believed in 1952, "willing to do anything, engage in espionage, run the risk of disgrace for himself and his family, in order to impose the Communist Tyranny upon us and all the free people of the world."<sup>21</sup> In both the case of alien enslavement and American Communists, there is a possibility of salvation. The United States military rescues the enslaved townsfolk and the little boy, but only because of the boy's willingness to inform on the enslavement (communist involvement) of his parents. This same theme that patriotism should trump even family ties is also evident in *My Son John*.

The inability to tell who has been overtaken by the aliens is a key factor in Anti-Communist films. How does one identify a Communist spy? HUAC used a number of different methods to answer this crucial question. One of the most popular, and infamous, methods of discovering Communists in the United States was forcing known or suspected Communists to name in public testimony others they knew or believed to be involved in Communist-related activities. Known as the process of "naming names," such hearings were highly controversial. As well as ineffectual, as no one was convicted as Communism as a result of the HUAC hearings. However, Larry Parks -- a well-known actor -- stated during a Committee hearing in 1952, that being publicly called before HUAC, "has a certain inference, a certain innuendo that you are not loyal to

---

<sup>21</sup>Richard M. Nixon, "Plea for and Anti Communist Faith," in *Thirty Years of Treason*, 570.

this country.” For figures in Hollywood dependent upon the favorable view of the American public, being “named,” the result of the process encouraged by films like *My Son John* and *Invaders*, destroyed careers.<sup>22</sup>

By 1953 the nation was well into the Cold War. Atomic bomb shelters were built, service announcements described what to do in case of nuclear attack, and children carried out atomic bomb drills in school. Hiroshima and Nagasaki had already demonstrated the immediate affects and the horrifying lingering aftereffects of the nuclear bomb, and there was a constant fear that Soviet technology would surpass that of the United States. This fear is reflected in the ineffectuality of the response to alien infiltration in *Invaders from Mars*; people are rapidly enslaved and undermine the efforts of the military to save the town.

The crime genre was not immune to Anti-Communist sentiment, as can be seen in *A Bullet for Joey* (1955).<sup>23</sup> A fairly simple movie, the plot follows detective Raoul Leduc’s battle against a Communist crime organization which has kidnapped a top nuclear scientist. Leduc’s investigation reveals how Joey Victor, a gangster, was recruited to help the communists. Although he is American, Victor is so involved with monetary concerns that he does not appreciate the harm he is doing to his country. In the end, Leduc manages to convince Victor to help against the Communists, asking, “Why don’t you do something decent

---

<sup>22</sup> Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason*, 319.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis Allen, dir., *A Bullet for Joey* (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 1952).



for a change?"<sup>24</sup> Heroically, Victor changes heart, shoots the Communist leader, and frees the nuclear scientist. Unfortunately, Victor gets shot by the Communists and dies. However, all of his sins from his life of organized crime are wiped away with this act of martyrdom.

In the same way that many Hollywood criminals became Middle-Eastern after the attacks of 11 September 2001, the producers of *A Bullet for Joey* made a conscious decision to give the crime organization communist leanings to play on stereotypes. According to John Cogley after his investigation into Communist and Anti-Communist themes in Hollywood films, "spy thrillers ... added nothing to public understanding of communism, but instead merely utilized the Communist threat as a convenient and timely element in the usual spy-formula movie."<sup>25</sup> Such crime films with many Anti-Communist themes, were harmful to the more logical (as opposed to hysteria-driven) Anti-Communist movement. Instead of presenting a logical reason for the fear, they perpetuated a paranoiac fear of a stereotypical Communist image and simply exploited and perpetuated the already present fear.<sup>26</sup>

The action movie *Jet Pilot* (1957) also holds a very strong Anti-Communist sentiment.<sup>27</sup> The protagonist, Jim Shannon (played by John Wayne) discovers Anna (played by Janet Leigh), a woman apparently deserting

---

<sup>24</sup>Bosley Crowther, "Screen: But at the End..." *New York Times*, 16 Apr. 1955, 12, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>25</sup> John Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting: Movies*, (New York: Fund for the Republic, 1956) 215.

<sup>26</sup> *Anti Communism and Popular Culture*, 26.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph von Sternberg, dir., *Jet Pilot* (Hollywood: R.K.O. Pictures, 1957).

the Soviet Air Force. As in all good action movies, this film revolved around the chase/fight scenes and the romancing by the male lead. The United States military instructs Shannon to watch Anna. He watches very well, eventually marrying her. After they are married, the pair returns to Russia where Shannon tries to convince Anna of the advantages of capitalism and the United States. In the end, Anna is persuaded and helps work against the Soviet Union.

The aerial fight between USSR and the United States allowed RKO Studios to demonstrate the then state-of-the-art aerial special effects, rather than specifically to promote Anti-Communism. However, the personnel involved in the movie were active in the Anti-Communist movement. John Wayne corresponded directly with J. Edgar Hoover and assisted HUAC with its investigations into Hollywood. In 1950, Wayne wrote to the Chairman of the Crusade for Freedom (a strongly Anti-Communist organization), "The Motion Picture Alliance for nearly seven years has recognized this danger [Communism in Hollywood] and has tried to wake our fellow workers to awareness of the threat."<sup>28</sup> People, he urged, must fight the "tight group of Communist conspirators in our midst, treasonably obeying the dictates of a foreign tyranny."<sup>29</sup> *Jet Pilot* introduces the idea of "converting" Communists to Capitalism. Anna's rejection of Communism in favor of Capitalism and the United States reinforces the message that a Communist lifestyle is

---

<sup>28</sup> John Wayne and Walter Wanger, "Closing Ranks," *Hollywood Reporter*, 9 September 1950, in *Thirty Years of Treason*, 292.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



no competition for a Capitalist one. The underlying message is that it is the duty of the United States to free those who are under Communist rule.

*Jet Pilot* cautions against the seductive qualities of Communism. The hero Jim Shannon is initially fooled by Anna. Before her conversion, she worked as a double agent, feeding information to the United States under orders from the Soviets. She is beautiful and seductive, and uses these qualities to gain Shannon's trust and confidence. Communist women were thought to be sexually liberal and to use seduction to lure men to Communism, a theme commonly used in action movies.<sup>30</sup> So while Communists can be saved, the film cautions Loyal Americans to be ever watchful. This was reflected in Wayne's personal views, for while he equated Communism with treason, he also held that people could change their views: "We want patriotism and justice. We hate no one. We hope those who have changed their view will cooperate [with HUAC investigations]... so that they can come back to the fellowship of loyal Americans."<sup>31</sup> He was dedicated to making films that showed the American public the dangers of Communism.<sup>32</sup>

*Jet Pilot* was not created to be a controversial film. The movie producers played on the fears of the Ameri-

---

<sup>30</sup> *Anti Communism and Popular Culture*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> "Loyal Actors Call for Film Industry Purge of All Subversives," *Los Angeles Evening Herald & Express*, 23 Mar. 1951, in *Thirty Years of Treason*, 299.

<sup>32</sup> *Report on Blacklisting*, 230. Wayne went on to star in *The Green Beret*, a film favorably depicting US involvement in Vietnam as an important battle in the war against Communism. It was the only feature film about the conflict to be made while the war was being waged.

can public, fears of the Cold War and Communism, to draw interest to their film. It followed a predictable formula: the hero wins the girl and saves the country while preserving the pride and values of the United States. Far from being critically acclaimed, one representative review called it, "the film that Howard Hughes produced with the idea of making another 'Hell's Angels.' It is a dud."<sup>33</sup> Its very existence, however, reveals an important point. As late as 1957, Hollywood was still exploiting Anti-Communist themes, even though McCarthy had been publicly discredited on 2 December 1954 after his censure by the United States Senate. Senator William Benton declared the censure, "a good progress towards cleansing the air of the blighting effects of McCarthyism," but it was an act which obviously did not kill all Anti-Communism sentiments.<sup>34</sup>

Hollywood can craft films that are rational, thoughtful pieces, that offer a balanced perspective, but it can also birth one-sided films that spread the flames of hysteria by playing on widespread, unthinking fears and suspicions. In the 1950s, Hollywood produced films that spread powerful Anti-Communist sentiments, fueling fears rather than seizing the opportunity to calm and educate. History can repeat itself, but it does not have to. In the aftermath of the 9/11/01 attacks, paranoiac fears of terrorists and terrorism threaten to replace reasonable fears and concerns. This paranoia is reflected in Hollywood films

---

<sup>33</sup> "Screen: 'Jet Pilot' Lands," *New York Times*, 5 Oct. 1957, 8, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>34</sup> "Excerpts from Transcripts of Eleventh and Final Day of Senate's Debate on McCarthy," *New York Times*, 3 Dec. 1954, 12 *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*.



as movies are released depicting a disproportionate number of villains (not only terrorists) as middle-eastern, thus causing middle-eastern characters to become practically a shorthand for "bad guy". Present day audiences need to be aware of the power of propagandistic films of all kinds in this new era of fears and evaluate the merits and message of each film with a critical eye.