

Spectatorship and the view of communist subversion in *Guilty by Suspicion*

Melvyn STOKES
University College London

Guilty by Suspicion (1990) is an attempt by the film industry to examine one of the most questionable aspects of its own past: the inquiries into communist subversion in Hollywood launched by the House Un-American Activities Committee, and the subsequent blacklisting of large numbers of people who had formerly worked in the industry. The film begins with the grilling of screenwriter Larry Nolan (Chris Cooper) by the committee. That same evening, David Merrill (Robert De Niro), a film director, returns from France where he has been doing the groundwork for a film. In his absence, he has been named as someone who had formerly attended Communist party meetings. The head of Twentieth Century-Fox, Darryl F. Zanuck (Ben Piazza), insists that he has to appear before the committee and clear himself before he can resume work on his film. When it is explained to Merrill by the lawyer (Sam Wanamaker) Zanuck sends him to that he will have to "name names," he refuses. The rest of the film is dominated by the choice between living up to his conscience or working at the job he adores. Merrill is barred from the studio lot, has directing jobs slip from his grasp, finds it hard to hold the most menial job even after moving to New York, but — when he does finally agree to testify — changes his mind and defies the committee. The film also examines the effects of the investigations on his family and an array of friends, including screenwriters Larry Nolan, who names his own wife Dorothy (Patricia Wettig), and Bunny Baxter (George Wendt), who, after first considering naming Merrill, follows him in refusing to testify during the film's final sequence.

When first released, the film was attacked by many critics, especially those with knowledge of the issues involved. Michael Eaton, who wrote the Anglo-American film *Fellow Traveller* (1989), argued that the film "operates from the assumption, doubtless justified, that nobody in its audience will know

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anything about the politics of the period it depicts." He also pointed out that the film ended just as the real story began: we are not told what happens to Merrill and his family after his refusal to name names. A credit after the film's final scene tells us that, in common with many others who were blacklisted, he no longer worked in the film industry, but we do not learn how he and his family did survive in material terms. Director Irwin Winkler's desire to have the movie finish on an inappropriately upbeat note, Eaton concluded, meant "its collapse before the conventions of a life-affirming story." Larry Ceplair, co-author of *The Inquisition in Hollywood*, argued that the film took liberties with historical fact, provided no real sense of context, had weak, undeveloped characters, and gave little sense of the true soul-searching which happened to those affected by the investigations. The reviewer in *Cahiers du Cinéma* was particularly scathing: *Guilty by Suspicion* (*La Liste Noire*), s/he declared, "ne nous révèle rien que ne nous ne sachions déjà sur la question. Pire, il romance et banalise cette vague de folie droitière (...) des années 50." The film did not have the originality of *The Front*, Martin Ritt's 1976 film on the same theme, and consequently — s/he predicted — "ne laissera pas de traces dans l'histoire du cinéma." The most favourable review I could find, by Jean-Pierre Coursodon in *Positif*, still included the judgement that "le vrai film sur l'inquisition à Hollywood (...) reste à faire."¹

The most serious critique of the film, however, was politically-inspired. On 31 March 1991, the *New York Times* published an article by Victor S. Navasky, whose 1980 book on the inquisition, *Naming Names*, attacked the morality of those who had informed on their friends. Navasky recounted that the idea of doing a film on the blacklist had first been proposed by Bertrand Tavernier to Irwin Winkler, as well as to Abraham Polonsky, who had once worked for the Communist party and had himself been blacklisted for many years. Polonsky wrote the first screenplay for the project: a second version, signed both by Winkler and Polonsky, changed only details, but one of these appeared crucial to Navasky. In the original script written by Polonsky, Merrill confessed to HUAC that he had been a member of the communist party for two or three weeks in 1939, but had left out of distaste for the Hitler-Stalin pact. The Winkler/Polonsky version cut this scene out and Merrill now appeared as a liberal idealist who had unsuspectingly attended a few Communist Front meetings (from the last of which he had been ejected for arguing too much) and subsequent anti-nuclear rallies. Navasky attacked Winkler's film (the final film was made by Winkler on his own without assistance from Tavernier or

1 Michael Eaton, "Look on the bright side", *Sight and Sound*, VII, n° 2 (June 1991) 7; Larry Ceplair, "Guilty By Suspicion", *Cineaste*, XVIII, n°3 (1991) 47; "La Liste noire (Guilty By Suspicion)", *Cahiers du cinéma*, n°445 (juin 1991) 64; Jean-Pierre Coursodon, "L'ère du soupçon : La Liste noire", *Positif*, n° 364 (juin 1991) 54.

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Polonsky), for changing the record of what happened. Those who suffered primarily from the blacklist were not liberals but communists, and it was communists who had led opposition to the committee in the run-up to the 1951 hearings. *Guilty by Suspicion* consequently distorted history by not having the central figure as a communist and not giving sufficient emphasis to the communist presence in Hollywood. It was thus, Navasky suggested, "an appropriate metaphor not only for just how far Hollywood has come, after all these years, but also how far it and the political culture at large still have to go."²

So far as history is concerned, Navasky was perfectly correct. There is only one unabashed, committed communist in the entire film. Merrill attends a 3 a.m. meeting of directors, called to discuss how to deal with the committee investigations. One director, Joe Lesser, arrives late with suitcases. Lesser, played in a cameo role by Martin Scorsese, has spent two days avoiding a committee subpoena, and has now decided (as did Joseph Losey, on whom the character is almost certainly based) that European exile is preferable to blacklisting and likely imprisonment.³ When others try to persuade him to stay, Lesser is frank about his convictions: "I was a communist twenty years ago. I'm a communist now." Not only is Merrill not a communist: he goes almost too far in the opposite direction. He seems to have no obvious political affiliations, apart from a broad liberal idealism. His loyalty to his country, until the investigations, has hardly been questioned: he is a war hero, decorated for service behind enemy lines. In choosing to make his principal character an apolitical innocent who is also an American patriot, Winkler put personal loyalties rather than political loyalties at the core of his approach to the era. His film examines morality, not ideology.

Surveys of the American cinema-going public show a predominantly youthful age-profile: a 1984 analysis demonstrated that fifty-four percent of those going to movies were now under twenty-five, and eighty-five percent under forty.⁴ Very few of those who went to see *Guilty by Suspicion* when it was released, therefore, could have had any adult memories of the HUAC hearings of 1951 and 1952. The distance between the world then and the world today was underlined by the events of 1989. Historical distancing was accompanied by ideological: communist regimes collapsed throughout eastern Europe and an arthritic communist leadership clung to power in China only by massacring pro-democracy protestors in Tiananmen square. To

² Victor S. Navasky, "Has *Guilty by Suspicion* Missed the Point?", *New York Times*, 31 March 1991, 9, 16.

³ The cinematic identification of Lesser with Losey is increased by the fact that the film on which "Lesser" is supposedly working (of which a short extract is shown) is Losey's *The Boy with Green Hair*, originally released in January 1949 and usually regarded as an anti-blacklist film.

⁴ Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, 328-29.

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see communism as a threat — or as a faith which once appealed to thousands of Americans — had become quite literally incredible. Making any film about the inquisition of the early 1950s had to overcome this incredulity — an enterprise, it should be conceded, difficult enough as it is without the additional burden of choosing, in the face of contemporary events and at least a half-century of American cultural conditioning, to have as hero and chief protagonist a committed American communist.

Navasky's argument that the film should have concentrated on communists also links up with a more traditional view of spectatorship. The dominant view of the spectator in film theory until the early 1970s emphasised the way in which he (it was usually he at this stage) was passively positioned and his response predetermined by the filmic text. By the mid-1970s, however, under the growing influence of psychoanalytic ideas (particularly those associated with Jacques Lacan) and early feminist film criticism (the work of Claire Johnston, Molly Haskell, Marjorie Rosen, Laura Mulvey and other pioneers), interest in spectatorship as a more dynamic phenomenon was on the increase.⁵ Theorists of film, such as Christian Metz and Stephen Heath, and a number of literary critics, symbolised by Tzvetan Todorov, argued that "the relationship between text and reader, film and spectator" was "an active process of shared conventions."⁶ Films had narrative codes which were intended to make them more accessible to the spectator, but the latter was now the main agency when it came to evaluating and understanding what was shown on the screen.

The impact of poststructuralist theory since the mid-1970s has altered still further the balance between text and spectator — in effect, utterly reversing the earlier position. The authority of the text has been followed by the (highly provisional) authority of the spectator. The application of poststructuralist ideas to film can produce a model along roughly these lines: any individual film is a text and, as such, has been shaped or constituted by other texts and discursive formations, some, though not all of them, films... The spectator is also part of a wider culture involving many other texts and discursive patterns which affect the way s/he views the film. The film's sequences take on new readings suggested by this broader cultural context. The spectator, in consequence, constitutes the filmic text, which now becomes a new text. If the

5 For an excellent account of changing views of spectatorship, see Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, London: Routledge, 1993.

6 Patricia Mellencamp, "Spectacle and Spectator: Looking Through the American Musical Comedy," in Ron Burnett, ed., *Explorations in Film Theory: Selected Essays from Ciné-Tracts*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, 3. Metz argued that the spectator was the last link in a chain of many mirrors. "All-perceiving" through his identification with both his own look and the camera, his presence was absolutely essential, providing as it did "the instance ... which constitutes the cinema signifier." Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Celia Britton et al., London: Macmillan, 1982, 45, 48-51.

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poststructuralist view is carried to its logical conclusion, of course, any analysis of film becomes impossible as a result of endless semiosis or what Derrida terms "nonmasterable dissemination": the constant flow of new textual relationships as each reader and every reading constitute new texts.⁷

To go as far as this would make it almost impossible to analyze films. Yet how is it possible for us to escape the tyranny of endlessly proliferating textuality? A spectator can only constitute texts in the light of his/her own presence in the world of culture and discourse. For any effective constitution of meaning, there must be parallels between both the culture and discourse which find expression in the film and those which govern and regulate the way in which it is received. This essay is constructed around the idea of "symbolic" spectatorship advanced by Rick Altman in his book on the American musical. Basically, Altman maintains, the process of recognising a text as representational needs a "specific investment" on the part of the spectator, who must blend together "phenomena generated by the filmic text" with his or her "perceptions of the world (or memories of other texts)." To recognize the image as representational obliges the spectator to place himself or herself in the image, taking it on board as part of his or her own experience. According to Altman, this process of representational recognition can be termed "symbolic" because, by doing it, the spectator "unconsciously reaffirms a commitment to certain ways of perceiving which have been learned from...society."⁸ This symbolic recognition is greatly facilitated when what is seen on the screen can be linked to struggles and divides familiar to the spectator as part of his/her own life. In the remaining pages of this essay, I want to show how *Guilty by Suspicion* effectively reduces ideological and historical distancing from the witchhunts of the early 1950s by relating the spectator to a number of oppositions and conflicts which are endemic to American society and culture.

To use the word "witchhunt" in relation to the scene in which Larry Nolan, having "named names" to HUAC, is discovered burning books in his garden is highly appropriate. The fire is, in Peircean terminology, a symbol — one, moreover, which to many Americans familiar with history from courses taken in school or college would probably suggest the burning of witches in medieval Europe. It is also likely that many viewers would connect the scene, through history classes or documentary footage they had seen, with book-burnings by the Nazi regime. A number will also have been able to link it with Ray Bradbury's novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, which had book-burning at its core and was itself inspired by the HUAC repression. Almost certainly,

7 Derrida, Jacques, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 248.

8 Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, 335-36.

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this scene was created by Polonsky. During his years of blacklisted exile, Polonsky had supported himself by moving to New York (as does David Merrill in the film, though less successfully) and writing for film and television under a variety of pseudonyms. One series he worked for was CBS's *You Are There*: he had written an episode called "The Vindication of Savonarola," broadcast on 13 December 1953, which dealt with the burning of books in Florence in the 1490s.⁹

In many ways, the point of the scene is to increase spectatorial identification with Merrill and Bunny Baxter, both of whom are still innocent of the implications of the Committee's investigation and cannot understand the passion aroused in Larry's wife, Dorothy, by Larry's informing. The threat to free speech is emphasised still further by Dorothy throwing Larry's typewriter, an icon representing free expression, out of the window and smashing it. The insanity of the whole process is underlined by the fact that most of the books burned are both innocuous and literary classics: *Catcher in the Rye*, *Tom Sawyer*, and *Alice in Wonderland*. From the spectator's point of view, the scene well illustrates the contradiction between freedom of speech as a right and the social and cultural factors existing to prevent its exercise.

Two of the film's most important sequences show the western Merrill is asked to direct and from which he is fired once his presence becomes known. These two sequences are in many ways the most complex part of the film. It would be possible to see them as providing more credibility for the film's "present" by creating a *mise en abyme* for the spectator. Yet another approach would be to compare the styles of directing and camera movement in Merrill's fictional film and Winkler's real one. It seems, however, that the crucial issue posed by these sequences is their self-reflexive association with *High Noon*. There are many complexities here. While the film Merrill is shooting at first sight looks like an imitation *High Noon*, closer examination shows that it actually appears to be *High Noon*. The marshall may not look like Gary Cooper, but he dresses like him, is named like him (Gerry Cooper), and the threatening crook in both "films" is Frank Miller. The scene of the marshall throwing his badge away (which John Wayne hated in *High Noon*) is common to both.

If the relationship between *Guilty by Suspicion* and *High Noon* is as close as it appears, then the search for a cultural antagonism in the sequences is related to the character of *High Noon* itself. One existing view — reinforced by the fact that the film was written by Carl Foreman just before he was blacklisted and fled to England — perceives the film as the story of a man alone, abandoned by friends and (briefly) by his new wife. As such, it was a story that made metaphorical reference to the

⁹ Brian Neve, *Film and Politics in America: a Social Tradition*, London, 1992, 203. Walter Bernstein, later screenwriter of *The Front* (1976), also worked for *You Are There*. Polonsky, Neve recalls, later characterized the series as "probably the only place where any guerilla warfare was conducted against McCarthy in a public medium."

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HUAC hearings and their effects. However, it could also be read, as Brian Neve has suggested, from the opposite end of the political spectrum, as a defence of the use of violence and force by those in authority when confronting evil and of the correctness — exemplified by Gary Cooper who, like the imitation "Gerry," had named names — of standing up to communists.¹⁰ Yet a particularly convincing reading of *High Noon* by Don Graham sees it in the context of a rather different genre: the revolt against the village in American literature. From the 1880s, Edward Howe, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson were exploring — in Graham's words — "the price of individualism in a tightly conformist and often destructively hypocritical society." The integrity and courage of Marshall Will Kane (Gary Cooper) are in complete contrast to the pusillanimity and cynicism of the townsfolk who decline to become involved.¹¹ It is, I believe, in this conflict between individual conscience and community pressures that the main cultural opposition of these sequences is to be found.

Another cultural opposition discernible in the film is that between home and work. This, by necessity, relates to the experience of almost all the film's spectators. In one of the opening sequences, Ruth (Annette Bening), Merrill's ex-wife, suggests that he is "married" to the studio. As a result of pressure from this "marriage" and Merrill's workoholic lifestyle, his real marriage has collapsed. With the start of the HUAC investigation, however, Merrill's marriage to the studio (i.e. work) begins to fail, while (though he is divorced) his real marriage begins to recover. Merrill's relationship with his son, Paulie (Luke Edwards), also recovers. Crucially, the sequence in which — over Ruth's protest — he puts aside the script of the western he is working on to help Paulie with his homework shows his movement away from work and towards home (now, incidentally, paid for by Ruth). The sequences with Merrill's ex-wife and son not only aid the spectator's identification with the film's characters, they also contrast strongly the calm of the home with the maelstrom of anti-communist politics, helping make the latter far more credible.

In the film, two sequences are linked to *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. In one, Zanuck is watching rushes of Marilyn Monroe singing "Bye, Bye, Birdie" to Tommy Noonan; in the other, while not visible on screen, she is heard singing the theme song of the film. This might have seemed one way of making the 1951 and 1952 hearings seem more "real" by adding "period" detail; in fact, the shooting of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* did not start until

10 Neve, *Film and Politics*, 185; Ian Hamilton, *Writers in Hollywood, 1915-1951*, London: Heinemann, 1990, 285, 287.

11 Don Graham, "High Noon (1952)," in William T. Pilkington and Don Graham, eds., *Western Movies*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979, 54-56.

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December 1953.¹² While not chronologically accurate, these scenes are self-reflexive. Yet, since they are essentially non-diegetic and do not apparently advance the narrative of the film, it is not easy to see why Winkler opted to include references in his film to a second genre (the musical) which, like the western, has its own inner values and thematic conventions. The point seems to be that the two sequences contrast a number of cultural resonances with the dialogue of first Merrill and Zanuck, later Merrill and Bunny Baxter. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in many respects followed the "Gold Diggers" pattern from the 1930s, in which women were identified by their beauty and men seen largely as sources of cash.¹³ To the many Americans familiar with the "Gold Diggers" pattern from reruns on T.V., it would contrast strongly with — and thus underline more clearly — the material realities facing David and Ruth Merrill as a result of the HUAC inquisition. When the film opens, Merrill is both rich and successful. His ex-wife does not work and he supports the whole family. Having refused to name names, he finds it impossible to gain employment. With Merrill jobless and poor, a complete role-reversal occurs: Ruth, returning to teaching, becomes the family's sole source of income.

The issue raised by the penultimate sequence of the film, when Merrill faces and then defies the Committee, is probably the most important of all: to what extent can so-called defenders of liberty use highly dubious methods in order to achieve their ends? To most Americans of the 1990s, congressional investigations in the recent past — including the Watergate hearings of the early 1970s and the inquiry into the payment of arms to Iran for hostages in the late 1980s — had been concerned with governmental malfeasance or political corruption. The HUAC depicted in *Guilty by Suspicion* is not like this: it is investigating private citizens, rather than government agents, for the danger they allegedly pose to public welfare. It admits hearsay evidence, for example the accusation that the party welcoming Merrill home from France had been a "communist" meeting; uses guilt by association, as when Ruth Merrill is accused of communist sympathies; and adopts viciously defamatory tactics — including insulting Dorothy Nolan after her death — to the point that Merrill abandons his measured defence (agreeing to answer all questions about himself but declining to respond to ones about others) in order to attack the committee for its lack of any feelings of shame or human decency.¹⁴

¹² Donald Spoto, *Marilyn Monroe: The Biography*, London: Arrow, 1994, 241-42, 255.

¹³ Altman, *American Film Musical*, 25.

¹⁴ Of the three witnesses shown testifying before the committee, Larry Nolan co-operates while Merrill and Bunny Baxter do not. Their fictional responses, however, are closely derived from real-life responses to the committee. Nolan uses phrases first said by Larry Parks in 1951; Bunny Baxter does what nearly all witnesses who defied the committee between 1951 and 1953 did by pleading the Fifth Amendment. Merrill follows

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In many respects, *Guilty By Suspicion* works better than two other recent examinations of the moral dilemmas of the McCarthyite era: Martin Ritt's *The Front* (1976) and Philip Saville's *Fellow Traveller* (1989). It implicates the film industry directly in the inquisition, unlike the other two films, the first of which deals with the travails of a man who allows his name to be used by blacklisted writers in order to carry on working, the second with the problems facing a writer of the time who has fled to London. It does not, however, deal with those who egged on the inquisition from within the film industry itself.¹⁵ The only character to appear under his own name is Zanuck, who is treated with surprising sympathy for a man who actually caved in to studio pressure to sack Ring Lardner, Jr. (a personal favourite, like Merrill) and later Abraham Polonsky.¹⁶

Although other characters in the film are given fictional names, they appear to be based on real people. Felix A. Graff is apparently modelled on clearance lawyer Martin Gang, who specialised in preparing "friendly" witnesses for the committee.¹⁷ Dorothy Nolan is presumably inspired by Dorothy Comingore, who — far from committing suicide — appeared in front of the committee with a shaven head as a sign of protest.¹⁸ There are a number of "in" references and self-referential touches that only

Emmett Lavery, president of the Screen Writers' Guild, in denying he is a communist. His first response — like that of Lillian Hellman in a famous letter to the committee — is to agree to answer questions on his own politics, but to refuse to inform on others. When committee members make allegations concerning his wife and the now-deceased Dorothy Nolan, he accuses them of lacking any "decency" — echoing the famous charge levelled by Joseph Welch, the army counsel, against Joseph McCarthy during their climactic confrontation at the Army v. McCarthy hearings of 1954. See Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names*, New York: Viking Press, 1980, viii-ix; Neve, *Film and Politics*, 171; Hamilton, *Writers in Hollywood*, 288, 297; David M. Oshinsky, *A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy*, New York: Free Press, 1983, 463.

15 See Neve, *Film and Politics*, 108 and Marc Eliot, *Walt Disney: Hollywood's Dark Prince*, London: Deutsch, 1994, *passim* on the anti-communism of Jack Warner and Disney.

16 One reason for this generous treatment may have been that Zanuck tried to carry on employing Polonsky in secret even after his subpoena arrived. Neve, "Has 'Guilty by Suspicion' Missed the Point?", 16.

17 See Navasky, *Naming Names*, 98-108. The casting of Sam Wanamaker, once *Film and Politics*, 202; Hamilton, *Writers in Hollywood*, 295; Navasky, blacklisted, as Graff is one of the film's particular ironies.

18 Coursodon notes that the scene in which she shaves her head was in Polonsky's original screenplay, but was removed for the final version of the film. "L'ère du soupçon," 54.

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experts on Hollywood during these years would understand. The success of Merrill as director, and the life-style he surrenders by sticking to principle, is suggested by "his" house on Mulholland Drive and the panoramic views of Hollywood which it enjoys.¹⁹ At one point, Zanuck cannot see Merrill since he must attend a screening of Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata* (Kazan himself "named names" to the committee soon after *Zapata* came out). "Joe Lesser" probably derives his name, if not character, from Sol Lesser, a wealthy producer of Tarzan films who played a major part in driving director Cy Enfield (who resembles Merrill in a number of ways) into European exile.²⁰

But these things are irrelevant to most of the film's spectators. *Guilty by Suspicion*, from their point of view, is a fictional examination of problems which an earlier generation had undergone. There was no prospect, as Navasky would have preferred, of persuading spectators to sympathise with American communists. But what the film does is to provide some insight into the experience of the many Americans who championed the New Deal, supported the Republican cause in Spain, and tried to help Stalin's Russia during the Second World War. All these affiliations created great suspicion in the new climate of the Cold War.²¹ Merrill is the perfect representative of this generation. His plight, and that of his family, is underlined for the spectator not by a succession of references to historical events²² but by metaphor and in relation to social and cultural conflicts. This makes it easier for contemporary spectators to see the difficulties Merrill faces as symbolic of the ambiguities and tensions they confront in their own lives, thereby making the film itself more comprehensible.

19 The house itself, in reality, had once been occupied by Frank Sinatra. Navasky, "Has *Guilty by Suspicion* Missed the Point?", 16.

20 Neve, *Film and Politics*, 193, 179-80.

21 Larry Nolan, Bunny Baxter and David Merrill all argue, in protest at changing patterns of ideological discourse, that a desire to "help people" has been their primary motivation.

22 While the Rosenberg spy case and the Korean War rate brief mentions, there is otherwise little allusion to real events and people. There is no reference to the first hearings of 1947 into the film industry, the "Hollywood Ten," the Hiss case, the "loss" of China, the Soviet atomic bomb, Richard Nixon or Joseph McCarthy.