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A Quiet Death, Three Decades Late

As promptly as could be reasonably expected, but more than three decades late, the House of Representatives has administered euthanasia to the Internal Security Committee, known in its halcyon days as the Un-American Activities Committee.

In the Kremlin hard-eyed men must weep for those vanished allies who helped give anti-communism a bad name. No day when Rep. Martin Dies (D-Tex.) and Rep. J. Parnell Thomas (R-N.J.) jousted in public with international Bolshevism was considered a total loss by people anxious to discredit popular sovereignty.

As late as 1967 Chairman Edwin Willis (D-La.), in a kind of committee "Areopagitica," explained that he did not oppose "honest and responsible dissent from American policy by patriotic Americans" as long as that dissent would enhance the public's "appreciation of the basic correctness of the policy our government is pursuing." But by 1967 the lads no longer had fire in their bellies.

It had been different 20 years earlier, when an assistant to the Secretary of the Navy begged a congressional investigator: "If you see J. Edgar Hoover, tell him I'm a good American." Those were the days when Aware, Inc., "the anti-Communist organization in entertainment, communications and the fine arts," feted the committee with an event billed as "Cocktails Against Communism."

Having thus restored their tissues, committee members could listen to their favorite witness, Harvey Matusow, who once made 14 telephone calls to the New York Yankees, using 14 different voices, and persuaded the Yankees to keep Yogi Berra from appearing on television with a leftwing actor.

Because the committee was in the entertainment business, it was obsessed with its private sector competitors. Its greatest publicity bonanza was an investigation of Hollywood, which Rep. John Rankin (D-Miss.) thought was a nest of Jews and, hence, an outpost of the Comintern. Rankin warned that "loathsome paintings" by leftists had "got into the home of Charles Chaplin, the perverted subject of Great Britain who has become noto-



rius for his forcible seduction of white girls."

Gerald L. K. Smith gave the committee ambiguous news about Hollywood: "I am convinced that Frank Sinatra is not a naive dupe." And witness Gary Cooper disemboweled communism: "From what I hear, I don't like it because it isn't on the level."

The committee owed much of its prominence to its critics' hysteria. But columnist Murray Kempton knew how to burn the committee with the dry ice of his contempt. When the committee descended on New York to expunge subversion from the Metropolitan Music School, Kempton wrote:

"The director and registrar . . . took the Fifth . . . A clarinetist testified that he had been a Communist and

left, naming in the process 10 musicians who had been Communists with him. One was a violinist, another a bass player. The rest were all woodwinds; the brass section appears free of treason."

The committee's style of Socratic questioning had a distinctive tang: "Would you say that Stalin is the Genghis Khan of the 20th century?" "Would you say that (the New Deal) was more Fascist or more Communist?" But the committee was ludicrous without being funny.

True, the committee frequently was well matched with the Communists and other totalitarians and zanies it tormented. But tormenting is not a constitutionally enumerated power of Congress. And like most bullies, the committee was happiest when attend-

ing to (in Kempton's words) "the degradation of unimportant little people."

The committee's greatest triumph was in reducing its critics to claiming that the committee itself was "un-American." Not true. Walter Goodman, whose splendid history, "The Committee," is both hilarious and melancholy, uses H. L. Mencken's words to point the moral:

"The United States . . . is incomparably the greatest show on earth. It . . . lays chief stress upon the kind (of clowning) which delights me unceasingly—for example, the ribald combats of demagogues, the exquisitely ingenious operations of the master rogues, the pursuit of witches and heretics, the desperate struggles of inferior men to claw their way into Heaven."