

SAG President Ronald W. Reagan

Testimony to House Un-American Activities Committee

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In 1947, Ronald Reagan was an actor and president of the Screen Actors Guild. His active involvement in politics was just beginning, as his beliefs began shifting from liberal to conservative. Throughout out the 1940s he was active in anti-communist movements, which led him into the political arena.

In this testimony, Reagan comments on the activity of communists in the Screen Actors Guild.

Testimony of Ronald Reagan before HUAC

October 23, 1947

CHAIRMAN J. PARNELL THOMAS: The record will show that Mr. McDowell, Mr. Vail, Mr. Nixon, and Mr. Thomas are present. A subcommittee is sitting. Staff members present: Mr. Robert E. Stripling, chief investigator; Messrs. Louis J. Russell, H.A. Smith, and Robert B. Gaston, investigators; and Mr. Benjamin Mandel, director of research.

STRIPLING: When and where were you born, Mr. Reagan?

RONALD REAGAN: Tampico, Illinois, February 6, 1911.

STRIPLING: What is your present occupation?

REAGAN: Motion picture actor.

STRIPLING: How long have you been engaged in that profession?

REAGAN: Since June 1937, with a brief interlude of 3 1/2 years -- that at the time didn't seem very brief.

STRIPLING: What period was that?

REAGAN: That was during the late war.

STRIPLING: What branch of service were you in?

REAGAN: Well, sir, I had been for several years in the Reserve as an officer in the United States Cavalry, but I was assigned to the Air Corps.

STRIPLING: That is kind of typical of the Army, isn't it?

REAGAN: Yes, sir. The first thing the Air Corps did was loan me to the Signal Corps.

MCDOWELL: You didn't wear spurs?

REAGAN: I did for a little while.

CHAIRMAN: I think this has little to do with the facts we are seeking. Proceed.

STRIPLING: Mr. Reagan, are you a member of any guild?

REAGAN: Yes, sir, the Screen Actors Guild.

STRIPLING: How long have you been a member?

REAGAN: Since June 1937.

STRIPLING: Are you the president of the guild at the present time?

REAGAN: Yes, sir.

STRIPLING: When were you elected?

REAGAN: That was several months ago. I was elected to replace Mr. (Robert) Montgomery when he resigned.

STRIPLING: When does your term expire?

REAGAN: The elections come up next month.

STRIPLING: Have you ever held any other position in the Screen Actors Guild?

REAGAN: Yes, sir. Just prior to the war I was a member of the board of directors, and just after the war, prior to my being elected president, I was a member of the board of directors.

STRIPLING: As a member of the board of directors, as president of the Screen Actors Guild, and as an active member, have you at any time observed or noted within the organization a clique of either communists or fascists who were attempting to exert influence or pressure on the guild?

REAGAN: Well, sir, my testimony must be very similar to that of Mr. (George) Murphy and Mr. (Robert) Montgomery. There has been a small group within the Screen Actors Guild which has consistently opposed the policy of the guild board and officers of the guild, as evidenced by the vote on various issues. That small clique referred to has been suspected of more or less following the tactics that we associate with the Communist Party.

STRIPLING: Would you refer to them as a disruptive influence within the guild?

REAGAN: I would say that at times they have attempted to be a disruptive influence.

STRIPLING: You have no knowledge yourself as to whether or not any of them are members of the Communist Party?

REAGAN: No, sir, I have no investigative force, or anything, and I do not know.

STRIPLING: Has it ever been reported to you that certain members of the guild were communists?

REAGAN: Yes, sir, I have heard different discussions and some of them tagged as communists.

STRIPLING: Would you say that this clique has attempted to dominate the guild?

REAGAN: Well, sir, by attempting to put their own particular views on various issues, I guess you would have to say that our side was attempting to dominate, too, because we were fighting just as hard to put over our views, and I think, we were proven correct by the figures -- Mr. Murphy gave the figures -- and those figures were always approximately the same, an average of 90 percent or better of the Screen Actors Guild voted in favor of those matters now guild policy.

STRIPLING: Mr. Reagan, there has been testimony to the effect here that numerous communist-front organizations have been set up in Hollywood. Have you ever been solicited to join any of those organizations or any organization which you considered to be a communist-front organization?

REAGAN: Well, sir, I have received literature from an organization called the Committee for a Far-Eastern Democratic Policy. I don't know whether it is communist or not. I only know that I didn't like their views and as a result I didn't want to have anything to do with them.

STRIPLING: Were you ever solicited to sponsor the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee?

REAGAN: No, sir, I was never solicited to do that, but I found myself misled into being a sponsor on another occasion for a function that was held under the auspices of the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee.

STRIPLING: Did you knowingly give your name as a sponsor?

REAGAN: Not knowingly. Could I explain what that occasion was?

STRIPLING: Yes sir.

REAGAN: I was called several weeks ago. There happened to be a financial drive on to raise money to build a badly needed hospital called the All Nations Hospital. I think the purpose of the building is so obvious by the title that it has the support of most of the people of Los Angeles. Certainly of most of the doctors. Some time ago I was called to the telephone. A woman introduced herself by name. I didn't make any particular note of her name, and I couldn't give it now. She told me that there would be a recital held at which Paul Robeson would sing, and she said that all the money for the tickets would go to the hospital, and asked if she could use my name as one of the sponsors. I hesitated for a moment, because I don't think that Mr. Robeson's and my political views coincide at all; and then I thought I was being a little stupid because, I thought, here is an occasion where Mr. Robeson is perhaps appearing as an artist, and certainly the object, raising money, is above any political consideration: it is a hospital supported by everyone. I have contributed money myself. So I felt a little bit as if I had been stuffy for a minute, and I said, "Certainly, you can use my name." I left town for a couple of weeks and, when I returned, I was handed a newspaper story that said that this recital was held at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles under the auspices of the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee. The principal speaker was Emil Lustig, Robert Burman took up a collection, and the remnants of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade were paraded on the platform. I did not, in the newspaper story, see one word about the hospital. I called the newspaper and said I am not accustomed to writing to editors but would like to explain my position, and he laughed and said, "You needn't bother, you are about the 50th person who had also been listed as sponsors of that affair."

STRIPLING: Would you say from your observation that that is typical of the tactics of the communists, to solicit and use the names of prominent people to either raise money or gain support?

REAGAN: I think it is in keeping with their tactics, yes sir.

STRIPLING: Do you think there is anything democratic about those tactics?

REAGAN: I do not, sir.

STRIPLING: As president of the Screen Actors Guild, you are familiar with the jurisdictional strike which has been going on in Hollywood for some time?

REAGAN: Yes, sir.

STRIPLING: Have you ever had any conference with any of the labor officials regarding this strike?

REAGAN: Yes, sir.

STRIPLING: Do you know whether the communists have participated in any way with this strike?

REAGAN: Sir, the first time that this word "communist" was ever injected into any of the meetings concerning the strike was at a meeting in Chicago with Mr. William Hutchinson, president of the carpenters' union, who were on strike at the time. He asked the Screen Actors Guild to submit terms to Mr. (Richard) Walsh, and he told us to tell Mr. Walsh that, if he would give in on these terms, he in turn would break run this Sorrell and the other commies out -- I am quoting him -- and break it up. I might add that Mr. Walsh and Mr. Sorrell were running the strike for Mr. Hutchinson in Hollywood.

STRIPLING: Mr. Reagan, what is your feeling about what steps should be taken to rid the motion picture industry of any communist influences?

REAGAN: Well, sir, 99 percent of us are pretty well aware of what is going on, and I think, within the bounds of our democratic rights and never once stepping over the rights given us by democracy, we have done a pretty good job in our business of keeping those people's activities curtailed. After all, we must recognize them at present as a political party. On that basis we have exposed their lies when we came across them, we have opposed their propaganda, and I can certainly testify that in the case of the Screen Actors Guild we have been eminently successful in preventing them from, with their usual tactics, trying to run a majority of an organization with a well organized minority.

In opposing those people, the best thing to do is make democracy work. In the Screen Actors Guild we make it work by insuring everyone a vote and by keeping everyone informed. I believe that, as Thomas Jefferson put it, if all the American people know all of the facts they will never make a mistake. Whether the party should be outlawed, that is a matter for the government to decide. As a citizen, I would hesitate to see any political party outlawed on the basis of its political ideology. However, if it is proven that an organization is an agent of foreign power, or in any way not a legitimate political party -- and I think the government is capable of proving that -- then that is another matter. I happen to be very proud of the industry in which I work; I happen to be very proud of the way in which we conducted the fight. I do not believe the communists have ever at any time been able to use the motion picture screen as a sounding board for their philosophy or ideology.

CHAIRMAN: There is one thing that you said that interested me very much. That was the quotation from Jefferson. That is why this committee was created by the House of Representatives: to acquaint the American people with the facts. Once the American people are acquainted with the facts there is no question but what the American people will do the kind of job that they want done: that is, to make America just as pure as we can possibly make it. We want to thank you very much for coming here today.

REAGAN: Sir, I detest, I abhor their philosophy, but I detest more than that their tactics, which are those of the fifth column, and are dishonest, but at the same time I never as a citizen want to see our country become urged, by either fear or resentment of this group, that we ever compromise with any of our democratic principles through that fear or resentment. I still think that democracy can do it.