

## TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY PROJECT

### *Lesson Title - Hollywood v. HUAC*

*From Jarrod Clifton*

Grade – 11 - Academic Level 2 (Out of 4 - AP, 1, 2, 3)

Length of class period – 48 Minutes

Inquiry – How did influential people respond to the threats of McCarthyism?  
Why were some witnesses "friendly" and some "un-friendly"?  
How did Ronald Reagan transition from a Hollywood star to a political icon?

Objectives - Students should understand the difficulties facing those interrogated by the HUAC  
Students should recognize the importance of rising personalities in response to the threat of Anti-Communism.

Materials - Resources to follow in lesson.

Activities – Activities will take place as a homework exposure for students to the coordinated sources and class activities in organizer completion and discussion of topic.

1. Students will read the biography and testimony of HUAC witnesses.
2. Students will complete a graphic organizer looking at the testimony and life of the witnesses.
  - a. Students will work in groups of two in dealing with each pair of testimonies. The pair will work independently to fill out their half of the graphic organizer on their personality and then work together to finish the second half of the worksheet.
  - b. Once each half is completed, they will work together on the two questions at the end of the organizer.
3. Students will discuss the impact of a “friendly” and “un-friendly” witness during the HUAC investigations.

How will you assess what student learned during this lesson?

Students will be assessed on the completion and quality of responses in their graphic organizers and their participation in class discussion on the outcome of the HUAC investigations.

Connecticut Framework Performance Standards –

Standard 1.1

- o 2. Trace the evolution of citizen’s rights
- o 3. Trace the changing role of U.S. participation in world affairs
- o 6. Compare and contrast various American beliefs, values, and political ideologies
- o 7. Analyze the influence of nationalism on American society
- o 9. Analyze the significance of the growing heterogeneity of American society
- o 12. Evaluate the role and impact significant individuals have had on American society

Standard 1.2

- o 14. Describe how major events in U.S. history have affected Connecticut citizens (Paul Robeson made his home in Enfield, CT)

Standard 1.9

- o 43. Give examples of how individuals or groups have worked to expand or limit citizen's rights in the United States and other nations
- o 44. Analyze the tension between the need for national security and protecting individual rights

Standard 2.1

- o 1. Find relevant and accurate information from a variety of sources to answer a history/social studies question

Standard 2.2

- o 3. Cite evidence from a source to determine an author's purpose and intended audience

Standard 3.1

- o 1. Use evidence to develop an interpretation of a historical event

# Paul Robeson

Many African-American witnesses subpoenaed to testify at the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) hearings in the 1950s were asked to denounce Paul Robeson (1888–1976) in order to obtain future employment. Robeson, an All-American football player and recipient of a Phi Beta Kappa key at Rutgers, received a law degree at Columbia. He became an internationally acclaimed concert performer and actor as well as a persuasive political speaker. In 1949, Robeson was the subject of controversy after newspapers reports of public statements that African Americans would not fight in “an imperialist war.” In 1950, his passport was revoked. Several years later, Robeson refused to sign an affidavit stating that he was not a Communist and initiated an unsuccessful lawsuit.

Mr. ARENS: Are you now a member of the Communist Party?

Mr. ROBESON: Would you like to come to the ballot box when I vote and take out the ballot and see?

Mr. ARENS: Mr. Chairman, I respectfully suggest that the witness be ordered and directed to answer that question.

THE CHAIRMAN: You are directed to answer the question.

(The witness consulted with his counsel.)

Mr. ROBESON: I stand upon the Fifth Amendment of the American Constitution.

Mr. ARENS: Do you mean you invoke the Fifth Amendment?

Mr. ROBESON: I invoke the Fifth Amendment.

Mr. ARENS: Do you honestly apprehend that if you told this Committee truthfully—

Mr. ROBESON: I have no desire to consider anything. I invoke the Fifth Amendment, and it is none of your business what I would like to do, and I invoke the Fifth Amendment. And forget it.

THE CHAIRMAN: You are directed to answer that question.

MR, ROBESON: I invoke the Fifth Amendment, and so I am answering it, am I not?

---

THE CHAIRMAN: Proceed. . . .

Mr. ROBESON: Could I say that the reason that I am here today, you know, from the mouth of the State Department itself, is: I should not be allowed to travel because I have struggled for years for the independence of the colonial peoples of Africa. For many years I have so labored and I can say modestly that my name is very much honored all over Africa, in my struggles for their independence. That is the kind of independence like Sukarno got in Indonesia. Unless we are double-talking, then these efforts in the interest of Africa would be in the same context. The other reason that I am here today, again from the State Department and from the court record of the court of appeals, is that when I am abroad I speak out against the injustices against the Negro people of this land. I sent a message to the Bandung Conference and so forth. That is why I am here. This is the basis, and I am not being tried for whether I am a Communist, I am being tried for fighting for the rights of my people, who are still second-class citizens in this United States of America. My mother was born in your state, Mr. Walter, and my mother was a Quaker, and my ancestors in the time of Washington baked bread for George Washington's troops when they crossed the Delaware, and my own

father was a slave. I stand here struggling for the rights of my people to be full citizens in this country. And they are not. They are not in Mississippi. And they are not in Montgomery, Alabama. And they are not in Washington. They are nowhere, and that is why I am here today. You want to shut up every Negro who has the courage to stand up and fight for the rights of his people, for the rights of workers, and I have been on many a picket line for the steelworkers too. And that is why I am here today. . . .

---

Mr. ARENS: Now I would invite your attention, if you please, to the Daily Worker of June 29, 1949, with reference to a get-together with you and Ben Davis. Do you know Ben Davis?

Mr. ROBESON: One of my dearest friends, one of the finest Americans you can imagine, born of a fine family, who went to Amherst and was a great man.

THE CHAIRMAN: The answer is yes?

Mr. ROBESON: Nothing could make me prouder than to know him.

THE CHAIRMAN: That answers the question.

Mr. ARENS: Did I understand you to laud his patriotism?

Mr. ROBESON: I say that he is as patriotic an American as there can be, and you gentlemen belong with the Alien and Sedition Acts, and you are the non-patriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.

THE CHAIRMAN: Just a minute, the hearing is now adjourned.

Mr. ROBESON: I should think it would be.

THE CHAIRMAN: I have endured all of this that I can.

Mr. ROBESON: Can I read my statement?

THE CHAIRMAN: No, you cannot read it. The meeting is adjourned.

Mr. ROBESON: I think it should be, and you should adjourn this forever, that is what I would say. . . .

# Ronald Reagan

Ronald Reagan is, arguably, the most successful actor in history, having catapulted from a career as a Warner Bros. contract player and later television star into the governorship of California. He was elected president of the Screen Actors Guild in 1947 and served five years during the most tumultuous times to ever hit Hollywood. A committed anti-communist, Reagan not only fought more-militantly activist movie industry unions that he and others felt had been infiltrated by communists, but had to deal with the investigation into Hollywood's politics launched by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947, an inquisition that lasted through the 1950s.

Mr. 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?

Mr. 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. REAGAN: Well, sir, by attempting to put their own particular views on various issues, I guess in regard to that 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, in which we sincerely believed, 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.

Mr. 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?

Mr. 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.

---

Mr. 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.

So that fundamentally I would say in opposing those people that the best thing to do is to 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, I agree with the gentlemen that preceded me that that is a matter for the Government to decide. As a citizen I would hesitate, or not like, to see any political party outlawed on the basis of its political ideology. We have spent 170 years in this country on the basis that democracy is strong enough to stand up and fight against the inroads of any ideology. However, if it is proven that an organization is an agent of a power, a foreign power, or in any way not a legitimate political party, and I think the Government is capable of proving that, if the proof is there, 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. . . .

The CHAIRMAN: There is one thing that you said that interested me very much. That was the quotation from Jefferson. That is just 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 a job, the kind of a 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.

Mr. REAGAN: Sir, if I might, in regard to that, say that what I was trying to express, and didn't do very well, was also this other fear. 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.

# Walter E. Disney

Walt Disney's involvement in HUAC, hearings set up in 1947 to investigate charges that Hollywood was infiltrated by Communists, has its direct roots in 1941 when cartoonists working at the Disney studios and organized by the Screen Cartoonists Guild went on strike for better wages and working conditions. Disney went on to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947 regarding his break with studio executive Herbert Sorrell who took the rights to characters and animators from Disney's studio to his new competition.

Mr. SMITH: Have you ever made any pictures in your studio that contained propaganda and that were propaganda films?

Mr. DISNEY: Well, during the war we did. We made quite a few—working with different Government agencies. We did one for the Treasury on taxes and I did four anti-Hitler films. And I did one on my own for Air Power.

Mr. SMITH: From those pictures that you made have you any opinion as to whether or not the films can be used effectively to disseminate propaganda?

Mr. DISNEY: Yes, I think they proved that.

---

Mr. SMITH: Do you have any people in your studio at the present time that you believe are Communist or Fascist employed there?

Mr. DISNEY: No; at the present time I feel that everybody in my studio is 100 percent American.

Mr. SMITH: Have you had at any time, in your opinion, in the past, have you at any time in the past had any Communists employed at your studio?

Mr. DISNEY: Yes; in the past I had some people that I definitely feel were Communists.

Mr. SMITH: As a matter of fact, Mr. Disney, you experienced a strike at your studio, did you not?

Mr. DISNEY: Yes.

Mr. SMITH: And is it your opinion that that strike was instituted by members of the Communist Party to serve their purposes?

Mr. DISNEY: Well, it proved itself so with time, and I definitely feel it was a Communist group trying to take over my artists and they did take them over.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you say they did take them over?

Mr. DISNEY: They did take them over.

Mr. SMITH: Will you explain that to the committee, please?

Mr. DISNEY: It came to my attention when a delegation of my boys, my artists, came to me and told me that Mr. Herbert Sorrell—

Mr. SMITH: Is that Herbert K. Sorrell?

Mr. DISNEY: Herbert K. Sorrell, was trying to take them over. I explained to them that it was none of my concern, that I had been cautioned to not even talk with any of my boys on labor. They said it was not a matter of labor, it was just a matter of them not wanting to go with Sorrell, and they had heard that I was going to sign with Sorrell, and they said that they wanted an election to prove that Sorrell didn't have the majority, and I said that I had a right to demand an election. So when Sorrell came I demanded an election.

Sorrell wanted me to sign on a bunch of cards that he had there that he claimed were the majority, but the other side had claimed the same thing. I told Mr. Sorrell that there is only one way for me to go and that was an election and that is what the law had set up, the National Labor Relations Board was for that purpose. He laughed at me and he said that he would use the Labor Board as it suited his purposes and that he had been sucker enough to go for that Labor Board ballot and he had lost some election—I can't remember the name of the place—by one vote. He said it took him 2 years to get it back. He said he would strike, that that was his weapon. He said, "I have all of the tools of the trade sharpened," that I couldn't stand the ridicule or the smear of a strike. I told him that it was a matter of principle with me, that I couldn't go on working with my boys feeling that I had sold them down the river to him on his say-so, and he laughed at me and told me I was naive and foolish. He said, you can't stand this strike, I will smear you, and I will make a dust bowl out of your plant.

---

Mr. SMITH: Do you recall having had any conversations with Mr. Sorrell relative to communism?

Mr. DISNEY: Yes, I do.

Mr. SMITH: Will you relate that conversation?

Mr. DISNEY: Well, I didn't pull my punches on how I felt. He evidently heard that I had called them all a bunch of Communists—and I believe they are. At the meeting he leaned over and he said, "You think I am a Communist, don't you," and I told him that all I knew was what I heard and what I had seen, and he laughed and said, "Well, I used their money to finance my strike of 1937," and he said that he had gotten the money through the personal check of some actor, but he didn't name the actor. I didn't go into it any further. I just listened.

Mr. SMITH: Can you name any other individuals that were active at the time of the strike that you believe in your opinion are Communists?

Mr. DISNEY: Well, I feel that there is one artist in my plant, that came in there, he came in about 1938, and he sort of stayed in the background, he wasn't too active, but he was the real brains of this, and I believe he is a Communist. His name is David Hilberman.

Mr. SMITH: How is it spelled?

Mr. DISNEY: H-i-l-b-e-r-m-a-n, I believe. I looked into his record and I found that, No. 1, that he had no religion and, No. 2, that he had considerable time at the Moscow Art Theater studying art direction, or something.

# John Howard Lawson

Playwright and screenwriter John Howard Lawson, the president and organizing force of the Screen Writers' Guild and acknowledged leader of the Communist Party in Hollywood in the late 1930s, became the first "unfriendly" witness subpoenaed to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) on October 27, 1947. This followed a week-long session during which numerous studio heads, stars, and others spoke at length about purported Communist activity in the industry.

Mr. LAWSON. You have spent 1 week vilifying me before the American public—

The CHAIRMAN. Just a minute—

Mr. LAWSON. And you refuse to allow me to make a statement on my rights as an American citizen.

The CHAIRMAN. I refuse you to make the statement, because of the first sentence in your statement. That statement is not pertinent to the inquiry.

Mr. LAWSON. The rights of American citizens are important in this room here, and I intend to stand up for those rights, Congressman Thomas.

---

Mr. LAWSON. I am not on trial here, Mr. Chairman. This committee is on trial here before the American people. Let us get that straight.

The CHAIRMAN. We don't want you to be on trial.

Mr. STRIPLING. Mr. Lawson, how long have you been a member of the Screen Writers Guild?

Mr. LAWSON. Since it was founded in its present form, in 1933.

Mr. STRIPLING. Have you ever held any office in the guild?

Mr. LAWSON. The question of whether I have held office is also a question which is beyond the purview of this Committee.

(The chairman pounding gavel.)

Mr. LAWSON. It is an invasion of the right of association under the Bill of Rights of this country.

The CHAIRMAN. Please be responsive to the question.

Mr. LAWSON. It is also a matter—

(The chairman pounding gavel.)

Mr. LAWSON. Of public record—

The CHAIRMAN. You asked to be heard. Through your attorney, you asked to be heard, and we want you to be heard. And if you don't care to be heard, then we will excuse you and we will put the record in without your answers.

Mr. LAWSON. I wish to frame my own answers to your questions, Mr. Chairman, and I intend to do so.

....

Mr. LAWSON. It is absolutely beyond the power of this committee to inquire into my association in any organization.

The CHAIRMAN. Mr. Lawson, you will have to stop or you will leave the witness stand. And you will leave the witness stand because you are in contempt. That is why you will leave the witness stand. And if you are just trying to force me to put you in contempt, you won't have to try much harder. You know what has happened to a lot of people that have been in contempt of this committee this year, don't you?

Mr. LAWSON. I am glad you have made it perfectly clear that you are going to threaten and intimidate the witnesses, Mr. Chairman.

(The chairman pounding gavel.)

Mr. LAWSON. I am an American and I am not at all easy to intimidate, and don't think I am.

(The chairman pounding gavel.)

....

The CHAIRMAN (pounding gavel). Mr. Lawson, just quiet down again.

Mr. Lawson, the most pertinent question that we can ask is whether or not you have ever been a member of the Communist Party. Now, do you care to answer that question?

Mr. LAWSON. You are using the old technique, which was used in Hitler Germany in order to create a scare here—

The CHAIRMAN (pounding gavel). Oh—

Mr. LAWSON. In order to create an entirely false atmosphere in which this hearing is conducted—

(The chairman pounding gavel.)

...

The CHAIRMAN (pounding gavel). Excuse the witness—

Mr. LAWSON. As they do from what I have written.

The CHAIRMAN (pounding gavel). Stand away from the stand—

Mr. LAWSON. I have written Americanism for many years, and I shall continue to fight for the Bill of Rights, which you are trying to destroy.

The CHAIRMAN. Officers, take this man away from the stand—

[Applause and boos.]

The CHAIRMAN (pounding gavel). There will be no demonstrations. No demonstrations, for or against. Everyone will please be seated. .

# Results of “Friendly” v. “Un-Friendly” witnesses

Where are they after 1947...

## Paul Robeson

During the 1940s, Robeson continued to perform and to speak out against racism, in support of labor, and for peace. He was a champion of working people and organized labor. He spoke and performed at strike rallies, conferences, and labor festivals worldwide. As a passionate believer in international cooperation, Robeson protested the growing Cold War and worked tirelessly for friendship and respect between the U.S. and the USSR.

In 1945, he headed an organization that challenged President Truman to support an anti-lynching law. In the late 1940s, when dissent was scarcely tolerated in the U.S., Robeson openly questioned why African Americans should fight in the army of a government that tolerated racism. Because of his outspokenness, he was accused by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) of being a Communist.

Robeson saw this as an attack on the democratic rights of everyone who worked for international friendship and for equality. The accusation nearly ended his career. Eighty of his concerts were canceled, and in 1949 two interracial outdoor concerts in Peekskill, N.Y. were attacked by racist mobs while state police stood by. Robeson responded, "I'm going to sing wherever the people want me to sing...and I won't be frightened by crosses burning in Peekskill or anywhere else." In 1950, the U.S. revoked Robeson's passport, leading to an eight-year battle to resecure it and to travel again.

## Ronald Reagan

From 1947 to 1952 Reagan served as president of the union of movie actors, the Screen Actors Guild. He fought against communist infiltration in the guild, crossing picket lines to break the sometimes violent strikes. He testified as a friendly witness before the House Un-American Activities Committee and cooperated in the blacklisting of actors, directors, and writers suspected of leftist sympathies.

Reagan was elected as Governor of California in 1967, Reagan won the election by nearly one million votes. During his two terms as governor (1967–75), Reagan erased a substantial budget deficit inherited from the Brown administration (through the largest tax increase in the history of any state to that time) and instituted reforms in the state's welfare programs.

In 1980 Reagan ran for President against incumbent, Jimmy Carter. Reagan won the election and became the face of the new conservative United States. Reagan ran again in 1984 winning the Presidency for a second term. Reagan's anti-communism, combined with his fondness for harsh anti-Soviet speech-making, was one of many factors that contributed to a worsening of relations with the Soviet Union in the first years of his presidency. At his first press conference as president, Reagan daringly questioned the authority of the Soviet government; two years later, in a memorable speech in Florida, he denounced the Soviet Union as “an evil empire” and “the focus of evil in the modern world.”

# Results of “Friendly” v. “Un-Friendly” witnesses

Where are they after 1947...

## Walter E. Disney

Because of World War II 94 percent of the Disney facilities were engaged in special government work, including the production of training and propaganda films for the armed services, as well as health films which are still shown through-out the world by the U.S. State Department.

Disney testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), where he branded Herbert Sorrell, David Hilberman and William Pomerance, former animators and labor union organizers, as Communist agitators. All three men denied the allegations. Sorrell testified before the HUAC in 1946 and there was insufficient evidence to link him to the Communist Party. Additionally, Disney accused the Screen Actors Guild of being a Communist front, and charged that the 1941 strike was part of an organized Communist effort to gain influence in Hollywood.

Walt Disney went on to create an empire in Walt Disney Productions. Winning the most Academy awards (26) than any other person, this still stands today. Disney's two theme parks and billion-dollar company are his legacy to the United States.

## John Howard Lawson

Lawson was an Academy Award nominated screenwriter that joined the American Communist Party in 1934. Throughout the 30s and during the War, Lawson produced films that promoted the Soviet-USA alliance including *Counter-Attack* of 1945. Lawson was instrumental in several other movies that were nominated for Academy Awards including Humphrey Bogart's *Sahara*.

After the War, Lawson was named by a “friendly” witness as a member of the Communist Party and appeared before HUAC. Lawson was convicted of contempt of Congress, fined \$1,000 and sentenced to one year in prison.

Following his imprisonment Lawson was blacklisted by Hollywood and could not return to his previous career. Lawson left the country for Mexico and produced films that were highly Marxist and Communist influenced. After his blacklist, Lawson taught at Stanford and Loyola Marymount Universities and continued to speak for the working class of the U.S. He accused Hollywood of ignoring the cause of the working class and creating an unrealistic view of American society. Lawson's comments earned him further discrimination and he never returned to American movie-making.

# Exploring the Witnesses and Testimonies of the HUAC

1. After reading the questions and responses in your transcript, are your witnesses “friendly” or “unfriendly?”

Witness A	Witness B

2. What two specific responses of your witness prove that they are “friendly” or “un-friendly” as listed above?

Witness A	Witness B

3. Why does each witness choose to respond in the fashion that they have shown?

Witness A	Witness B

4. Why did the HUAC member interviewing your witness pursue their line of questioning?

Witness A	Witness B

5. After reading the “Where are they now...” section, what is the outcome and future for a “friendly” witness?

6. What is the outcome and future of an “un-friendly” witness?