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HIGH NOON

THE HOLLYWOOD
BLACKLIST
AND THE MAKING OF
AN AMERICAN
CLASSIC



"When Frankel writes about the making of a movie, he is writing about the making of a country." —STEPHEN HARRIGAN

INTRODUCTION

A character is defined by the kinds of challenges he cannot walk away from.

ARTHUR MILLER

It is one of Hollywood's most iconic images: one man walking down a deserted Western street toward a showdown with four armed killers. For more than sixty years, *High Noon*, starring Gary Cooper, has embedded itself in our culture and our national memory. Its title itself has become legendary, connoting a moment of truth when a good man must confront evil. It has been beloved by presidents, ordinary moviegoers, and even political movements—most notably in 1989 when Solidarity used the image as its main campaign poster in Poland's first democratic election—as a symbol of courage and determination in the face of overwhelming odds.

Shot in thirty-two days on a shoestring budget, with its famous star working for a fraction of his normal wage, *High Noon* was something of an afterthought for those who made it, a rush job to fulfill the tail end of an old contract. Yet it vaulted almost immediately to critical acclaim and box-office success. Its taut narrative, powerful performances, evocative theme song, and climactic shootout made it an instant classic. It won four Academy Awards, including best actor for Cooper. Even today it is considered one of the most enduringly popular films of Hollywood's golden age, on a short list with *Gone With the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Casablanca*, *Citizen Kane*, *Singin' in the Rain*, and a handful of others.

Each generation has read into the film its own politics and values. Yet what has largely been forgotten is that *High Noon*'s original creator set out with a very specific meaning in mind. In the brief moment of good

feeling that followed the Allied victory over Germany and Japan in World War Two, screenwriter Carl Foreman wanted to make a Western about a gang of violent criminals and the lawman who brings them to justice. Inspired by the promise of the newly formed United Nations, it was to be Foreman's parable about the need for international law and order to defeat aggression and defend democracy.

But by the time Foreman sat down to write a draft a few years later, the sunny optimism was gone, replaced by a new age of anxiety. The spirit of international cooperation had given way to a Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, a brutal conflict on the Korean peninsula, and a nuclear arms race that would last nearly half a century. At home, the progressive coalition that had ruled the United States for more than a decade under President Franklin Roosevelt was unraveling under his successor, Harry Truman. It was challenged by conservatives who had resisted the growth of the federal government in the New Deal era and who now joined forces with embittered working-class populists who felt excluded from their share of prosperity, and self-styled Americanists who believed that outsiders had taken control of the nation's civil institutions and culture and were plotting to subvert its security and values. Together they forged a classic backlash movement, as angry and self-righteous as the Tea Party crusaders of the modern era. Usurpers—liberals, Jews, and Communists in those days; gays, Muslims, and undocumented immigrants today—had stolen their country, and the self-appointed guardians of American values were determined to claw it back.

For many Americans, Communism posed an existential threat even more alarming than that posed by Islamic extremists in the modern era. Communists, after all, could be anyone—neighbors, relatives, close friends. They looked and sounded exactly like us, yet they were agents of a ruthless foreign power whose declared goal was to destroy the American way of life. They were the enemy within—the “masters of deceit,” in J. Edgar Hoover's chilling characterization.

“What is a Communist?” asked Karl Baarslag, staff member of the National Americanism Commission of the American Legion in 1948. “A Communist is a completely transformed, unrecognizable, and dedicated man. While he may retain the physical characteristics of the rest of us as far as natural functions are concerned, his mental and psychic processes might as well be from another planet. A Communist . . . is completely emancipated from all moral inhibitions and is therefore above law, ethics, or morality.”

It was not just the far right that spoke of Communists as if they were brainwashed zombies. J. Howard McGrath, attorney general under President Truman, said each Communist Party member “carries in himself the germ of death for our society.” Adlai Stevenson called Communism worse “than cancer, tuberculosis, and heart disease combined.”

Although exaggerated, these fears were not groundless. The Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin was one of history’s most brutal dictatorships, responsible for killing or imprisoning millions. The American Communist Party was a secret political organization that faithfully honored directives from Moscow as if they were commandments, and many members defended the regime even after its crimes were exposed and documented. But most American Communists saw themselves as responding to the inequities and deprivation of the Great Depression by working to create a fairer and more egalitarian society through peaceful means, not violent revolution.

Still, when faced with what they perceive to be an existential threat to their security, Western democracies have often responded by repressing human rights with alarming energy and self-righteous rhetoric, and the early 1950s was no exception. A powerful coalition of investigative agencies, legislative panels, citizens’ groups, private corporations, and influential journalists banded together to expose and root out the evils of Communism, its true believers, and fellow travelers.

In truth, Hollywood was a mere sideshow in the larger struggle. No atomic secrets were sold or stolen in Beverly Hills. No acts of sabotage or espionage were alleged to have taken place. No large amounts of people or money were involved. But the symbolic power of Hollywood, its extraordinary high profile, and its abiding role in our national culture and fantasies made it an irresistible battleground. The very features that drew the leaders of the American Communist Party to set up shop in Hollywood in the 1930s attracted its antagonists a decade later to come hunt them down.

The House Committee on Un-American Activities was at the vanguard of this crusade. Created a decade earlier, HUAC first held public hearings into alleged Communist infiltration of the motion picture industry in 1947. The sessions had ended in stalemate: eleven current or former Communist Party members had been called to the stand, ten of whom cited the First Amendment in refusing to answer questions about their political affiliations and were charged with contempt of Congress. Civil libertarians condemned the committee’s methods and actions; even Hollywood’s studio heads briefly resisted

congressional repression, but ultimately purged the Hollywood Ten from their ranks. Four years later, when the committee returned for a second set of hearings, it faced no meaningful opposition as it issued salmon-pink subpoenas to dozens of actors, screenwriters, and other film workers.

One of those called to testify was Carl Foreman, who had come to Hollywood in 1938 from his native Chicago in the midst of the Depression and began a long apprenticeship as a screenwriter. The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he and his wife, Estelle, soon joined the Communist Party, which they believed was the organization most dedicated to fighting racism and poverty at home and Fascism abroad. Like that of many other members, their faith in the party eroded over time and they left it permanently soon after World War Two ended.

Foreman had been a low-ranking and struggling writer during the first round of hearings in 1947—"a very unimportant little fellow," as he himself put it—and he had been overlooked by the committee, which had focused on more prominent prey. But by 1951 he had been nominated twice for an Academy Award for best screenwriting and soon would be tapped for a third time. He and Estelle and their four-year-old daughter had recently moved into a large cottage in fashionable Brentwood with a swimming pool in the backyard and a touch of Hollywood glamor in its past: the woman they had bought it from had herself purchased it from Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth, who had lived there during the early days of their ill-fated marriage.

And so he was not surprised when a pink slip of paper arrived at his office at Motion Picture Center Studios in Hollywood early on the afternoon of June 13, 1951. "BY THE AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA," it solemnly began, and went on in its convoluted way to command him to appear before the Committee on Un-American Activities, "or subcommittee thereof," on Thursday, September 6, at ten A.M., "then and there to testify touching matters of inquiry committed to said Committee; and he is not to depart without leave of said Committee."

It was an invitation to an inquisition. Witnesses who were willing to cooperate underwent a ritual of humiliation and purification. They were required to confess to and renounce their membership in the Communist Party and praise the committee for its devotion in combating the scourge. And finally, to prove the sincerity of their conversion, they had

to name the names of other participants in the Red plot to destroy America. The committee already knew almost all the names—its own investigators had membership lists supplied by Hoover’s Federal Bureau of Investigation and had collected secret testimony. No matter. The naming of names was considered a defining part of the process.

The alternative was to invoke the Fifth Amendment against self-incrimination and refuse to answer questions. This meant appearing like a criminal who had something to hide and would ensure that you would lose your job within hours or days, because the major Hollywood studios had all adopted a policy of blacklisting anyone who refused to cooperate. Few would acquit themselves well. Not the committee, which far exceeded the constitutional limits of its powers and acted as judge, jury, and executioner; nor the studios, which caved out of fear of losing profits and prestige; nor political liberals, who were trapped between a bullying committee and its dogmatic Communist targets and wound up enabling the blacklist purge; nor journalists, some of whom cheered on the committee from the sidelines and almost all of whom failed to hold a critical spotlight to the process of repression.

For Carl Foreman it all came down to this: either sell out his friends or lose the job and the career he had worked so hard to achieve. As he pondered what to do, he began to rethink his screenplay for *High Noon* and turn it into an allegory about the Red Scare and the blacklist. The marshal was now Carl himself, the gunmen coming to kill him were the members of HUAC, and the hypocritical and cowardly citizens of Hadleyville were the denizens of Hollywood who stood by passively or betrayed him as the forces of repression bore down.

“As I was writing the screenplay, it became insane, because life was mirroring art and art was mirroring life,” he would recall. “There was no difference. It was all happening at the same time. I became that guy. I became the Gary Cooper character.”

ON A GLOBAL STAGE, the Cold War was an epic clash of empires and opposing ideologies. But in Hollywood the struggle played out in far more intimate terms. People lost their jobs, business partnerships unraveled, friendships were destroyed, and families turned against each other. And the bitterest conflicts often were not between political enemies but among former allies and friends.

At the time he began writing *High Noon*, Carl Foreman was part of a small but agile independent film production company led by Stanley

Kramer, a colleague and close friend. Together they had made three critically successful and socially relevant films in a row, two of which had also been substantial box office hits. The Stanley Kramer Company was, in our modern vernacular, a nimble and creative start-up that was making movies better, faster, and more cheaply than the older, more bloated, slower-moving traditional studios. It attracted talented filmmakers like director Fred Zinnemann and music composer Dimitri Tiomkin and was gaining popular attention and respect. Some of Hollywood's most gifted young actors took pay cuts to work with the company—including Kirk Douglas, Marlon Brando, Teresa Wright, José Ferrer, and an as-yet unknown actress named Grace Kelly.

High Noon was supposed to be a Western, that most quintessentially American of genres. But Carl Foreman was the son and Stanley Kramer the grandson of Russian Jews, and Fred Zinnemann was a Jewish émigré from Vienna whose parents had both perished in the Holocaust. None of them had ever made a Western before, and together with a talented cast and crew they created a most unusual one. It was a gritty, low-budget, black-and-white drama with no beautiful vistas, no cattle drives or stampedes, no gun violence until its final showdown, a morally corrupt community, a frightened, vulnerable hero, and a political message that quietly defied the reactionary spirit of the times. The great cowboy star John Wayne hated it—an arch-conservative, he smelled out the left-wing politics lurking in its soul—while some distinguished critics said it wasn't a Western at all but a modern social drama artificially grafted onto an Old West setting. Still, whatever its provenance, *High Noon* succeeded in becoming, in the words of critic Leonard Maltin, “a morality play that just happened to be universal.”

Its unexpected success led to bitter disputes among its makers over who was ultimately responsible for its brilliance. While *High Noon*'s creators have all passed away, the conflicts have continued to this day among their families and supporters. A documentary film in 2002 made by a devoted friend of Carl Foreman alleged that Carl had been denied his proper credit as producer of the picture and betrayed by Stanley Kramer. These allegations were heatedly contested by Kramer's widow. She and her family used the centennial of Kramer's birth in 2013 to reassert their claim that he was the creative genius behind the film. Several myths have arisen over the years, most notably the claim that *High Noon* was a botched project that was rescued at the last minute by skillful editing. There are widely conflicting claims over who deserves credit for the powerful storytelling, the stark visual beauty, the

suspenseful use of real time, the evocative music, and the superb acting. All of those conflicts were rubbed more raw by the toxic politics of the blacklist era.

This book tells the story of the making of a classic movie against the backdrop of a tumultuous era of American history whose meaning and lessons remain unresolved. No one was put up against a wall and shot during the blacklist. Yet it was a time of paranoia and persecution, and there are many echoes of its public anxieties, ritual humiliations, and moral corruption in our own troubled era. I can't pretend to answer all of the questions still surrounding the blacklist. But I have had the advantage of access to HUAC's investigative files and executive session transcripts that have only been made public in recent years. At the same time, I have been able to uncover previously unpublished interviews with Carl Foreman, Stanley Kramer, and others involved in the making of *High Noon* that have enabled me to present a more authoritative account of who was most responsible for the creation of this American classic. And despite the reservations of some distinguished critics, this book makes the case that *High Noon* is indeed one of the greatest American movies and the most significant triumph of its legendary star.

Ultimately this book is about a small group of highly talented people who came together to achieve compelling creative work and what happened when they came up against the machinery of political repression. It asks the question that history demands of each of us: if we were confronted with the same terrible choice that these people faced—in this case, between betraying our principles or losing our livelihoods—what would we do?

THROUGHOUT ITS COLORFUL FIRST century, Hollywood has been characterized as many things: a dream factory, a state of mind, a place of crass commerce, grandiose calculations, and broken hopes. It is surely all of these, but it's also a destination; most of the people who end up there have come from somewhere else. This was true for Carl Foreman, Stanley Kramer, Fred Zinnemann, and most of the gifted craftsmen responsible for creating *High Noon*, and it was also true for Gary Cooper, who arrived there in November 1924 at the age of twenty-three from his hometown of Helena, Montana, a small state capital some 1,250 miles away.

He could not have presented more of a contrast to Foreman and

Kramer, the men who would hire him to star in *High Noon* twenty-seven years later. They were fast-talking urban intellectuals from the Jewish ghettos of Chicago and New York, whereas he was a tall, elegant, and reticent Anglo-Saxon Protestant from the rural West. They were politically radical or liberal, while he was a conservative Republican and staunch anti-Communist. They were self-styled iconoclasts who were contemptuous of the slowly decaying studio system, while he was well-established cinematic aristocracy and the ultimate product of that system. They were young, enthusiastic, and on their way up, while he was fifty years old and burdened with increasingly poor health, self-doubt, a troubled marriage, and a career that was beginning to fade after two decades as one of Hollywood's biggest stars.

But Cooper offered them something that for all their robust talent they couldn't accomplish on their own. He didn't just look and sound like an authentic Man of the West, he actually *was* one. It was, after all, the land where he had been born and bred, and where he first acquired his own set of myths and dreams; and it is a fitting place to begin the story of the making of *High Noon*.