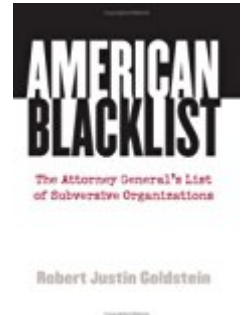


**Robert Justin Goldstein.** *American Blacklist: The Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008. xix + 361 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1604-6.



**Reviewed by** William Thomas

**Published on** H-Law (August, 2010)

**Commissioned by** Michael J. Pfeifer (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York)

In *American Blacklist*, Robert Justin Goldstein, professor emeritus of history at Oakland University, tells the story of the Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations, or AGLOSO. The list, the Justice Department's compilation of organizations it thought dangerous to the United States, traced its origins back to the early 1940s, not long before Pearl Harbor, when America was awash in fears of foreign subversives, or in the parlance of the time, "fifth-columnists." In 1940, for example, Congress passed the Smith Act, which made it illegal, even in peacetime, to call for toppling the government and which criminalized membership in any group that embraced such a goal. Franklin D. Roosevelt's attorney general, Francis Biddle, had created the first Attorney General's List in 1941 as part of a larger effort to screen potentially disloyal individuals from government service, and to this end the list was provided to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). A second list was drafted starting in 1942. It appears to be the case, judging from Goldstein's account, that the names of many of the organiza-

tions on these early lists were not released to the public. However, a new incarnation of the list that was drafted in 1947 played a much more significant role in shaping public discourse, as the names of the organizations in this new list were released publicly. We tend to think of government transparency as a worthy goal, but making the contents of this list public had a corrosive effect on civil liberties. Countless Americans who had joined various reform or protest groups in the 1930s and 1940s that would later be listed by the attorney general's office now found that it was much easier to be tarred as disloyal.

While some of the organizations in the post-war list were right wing, the majority were left wing and ranged in size from large to miniscule. One tiny group listed, the Elsinore Progressive League (EPL), from the town of Elsinore, in Southern California, was, as Goldstein relates, rather innocuous: "The entire 110-page EPL FBI file, provided in response to a 2005 Freedom of Information Act request and seemingly complete save the redaction of names of FBI informants, reveals so

little that even vaguely suggests ‘subversion’ that the FBI placed its investigation on ‘inactive’ status six weeks before the DOJ [Department of Justice] proposed to designate the EPL. According to a 1953 FBI summary, the EPL was organized in 1947 ‘as a social group for negroes and to contribute to the civic development of the community’ and included ‘numerous white members’ and ‘some’ members who ‘are known CP [Communist Party] members.’ Most of the file relates to entirely routine activities, with the only other ‘subversive’ information reported (which triggered FBI director [J. Edgar] Hoover’s October 15, 1953, directive for a ‘thorough investigation’ of the group) consisting of allegations that two EPL officers were or had been CP members, that Communists sometimes attended EPL functions, and that the organization occasionally rented its hall to allegedly Communist organizations and functions (including a wedding of two CP members). The file contains no allegations that the EPL ever passed ‘party line’ resolutions or otherwise supported CP policy” (p. 100).

The Attorney General’s List made it much easier for government bodies at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as for private anti-Communist groups, to persuasively depict those Americans who had participated in progressive or radical organizations as disloyal. Indeed, over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, large numbers of Americans had joined organizations that would later wind up on the postwar Attorney General’s List. As of 1947, for example, nearly two hundred thousand Americans were members of the International Workers Order (IWO), a left-wing insurance society that also offered cultural programs to its members. Once designated as subversive, the IWO quickly withered. Many Americans found that their past participation in a group officially designated as subversive threatened their reputations and livelihoods.

The list provided a neat rhetorical weapon that enabled anti-Communist organizations to

portray radical or progressive politics as a threat to internal security. For example, in 1961 a panel of the California state senate, in depicting the little town of Elsinore as being under siege by radicalism, cited the EPL’s inclusion in the Attorney General’s List: “The infiltration and agitation at Elsinore had its inception in 1946 with the formation of the Elsinore Progressive League, a Negro organization with a few white members, conceived and operated by the Communist Party. Its secretary was Mrs. R. L. Burks, and during the period of its active operation from 1946 to 1955, it exerted a considerable influence in the community and the adjacent vicinity and constituted a nucleus for the spreading of the infection. The Elsinore Progressive League was designated by the Attorney General of the United States as a Communist-dominated organization on October 20 1955, and on November 1 of that year.”[1]

Goldstein’s work helps us better understand the history of protest and reform movements that were to the left of the Democratic Party. Such organizations had long sought to provide a better life for workers or to protect the rights of unpopular groups—but the post-World War II Red Scare shattered many of these groups and discouraged Americans from taking even the mildest of ideological risks. A case in point that Goldstein mentions in passing—when, on July 4, 1951, John Patrick Hunter, a reporter for the *Capital Times* of Madison, Wisconsin, wandered about that city, soliciting signatures for a document that was composed of passages from the Bill of Rights and from the Declaration of Independence, he was turned down 111 times and was able to obtain only one signature, that of a sales representative for an insurance firm. One person told Hunter, “You can’t get me to sign that—I’m trying to get loyalty clearance for a government job.”[2] As Goldstein writes, “above all, what makes studying AGLOSO important is that, at least in my view, it played a central role in molding an entire cohort of Americans (known as the ‘silent generation’ on college campuses) who feared to join organizations, sign

petitions, or otherwise express their views, especially because organizations might be designated for AGLOSO at any time” (p. iv).

Such skittishness helps explain, for example, the dearth of protest against American intervention in the Korean War. Certainly, the war became unpopular with the public, but there was little in the way of antiwar mobilization on campuses—probably in part because most students realized that any such group that formed could easily have been placed on the Attorney General’s List, with toxic consequences for their future employment prospects. More than a decade later, the massive student protests that erupted on campuses during the Vietnam War were interpreted as an unprecedented and epochal shift—for the first time, it appeared, young Americans were joining radical or pacifist organizations. In reality, however, these movements were merely reawakening after a period of government-enforced hibernation, as by the mid-1960s, the Attorney General’s List had lost its power to intimidate the young.

Goldstein tells the story of the demise of the list, which he ties to the tapering off of the Red Scare in the late 1950s and the 1960s. Thanks to the end of the Korean War in 1953, the improvement in relations with the Soviet Union, and the readily apparent near-total collapse of the Communist Party in the United States, Americans were less concerned about the threat posed by subversion and grew more concerned about the excesses of red hunters. After Democrats won control of the Senate and House in the 1954 elections, congressional committees held hearings featuring witnesses who were caustic in their criticism of the use of the list. Goldstein also points to the role of former senator Harry Cain, who in 1955 unleashed a bold verbal assault on the list. Cain argued that the list was fundamentally unfair. “A person may have been a dupe in joining a listed organization which is thought now to have been subversive,” declared Cain, “but it does not follow that he necessarily was disloyal” (p. 206). Cain’s

denunciation seemed to have special weight, given his fierce anticommunism and his Republican affiliation. The list lingered on for years, increasingly regarded as irrelevant, until it was finally abolished by the Nixon administration in 1974.

Goldstein provides a useful and thorough accounting of the origins of the list and of the legal and political challenges to the list. Unfortunately, *American Blacklist* has some minor errors. At one point, the book identifies Senator William Jenner as being from Indiana, but later asserts that he was from Ohio; Nixon budget official George Shultz is misspelled as George Schultz; Arkansas politician Orval Faubus’s first name is misspelled as Orville; Republican Senator Edward Gurney of Florida is identified as being from Alaska; Representative Richardson Preyer is described as a Republican from Arkansas, when in reality he was a Democrat from North Carolina; and Representative Richard Ichord, Missouri Democrat, is erroneously termed a Republican (pp. 209, 288, 86, 298, 286, 278). California Democrat Helen Gahagan Douglas, who ran unsuccessfully against Republican Representative Richard Nixon for the U.S. Senate in 1950, is described as the incumbent, when in fact she was a member of the House of Representatives (p. 86). These errors, of course, are of little significance in and of themselves, but they do raise questions as to whether there are other factual mistakes in the text. Still, *American Blacklist*, by detailing the political and legal debates over the Attorney General’s List, makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the post-World War II Red Scare.

At a theoretical level, I would argue that Goldstein is too willing to attribute the power of the Red Scare to domestic conservative factions, such as the Catholic Church and the Republican Party. Certainly, Republicans exploited communism as a way to peel off voters, especially those who had relatives on the other side of the Iron Curtain, from the New Deal coalition, but liberals in the late 1940s saw communism as a real threat—espe-

cially after the Communist coup that brought down the democratic government of Czechoslovakia in early 1948. The genuine concern that liberals had over Joseph Stalin's intentions helps to explain why Democrats, especially initially, failed to vigorously examine whether or not the list violated basic principles of free government. Despite these minor quibbles, Goldstein's book provides a valuable description of the inner workings of the government agencies that formulated the list and of the battles that ensued as various groups contested the list.

#### Notes

[1]. California Legislature, *Eleventh Report of the Senate Fact-Finding Subcommittee on Un-American Activities* (Sacramento, 1961), Online Archive of California, <http://content.cdlib.org/view?docId=kt396n99b3&query=&brand=oac>; and "Red Agitation Seen behind Elsinore Row," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 1961.

[2]. John Patrick Hunter, "4<sup>th</sup> of July Celebrants Afraid to Sign the 'Declaration and Bill of Rights,'" *Capital Times* [Madison, WI], July 5, 1951.

l

l

A

G

s

l

c

l

200,000

c

l

r

s

i

[

]

...

l

--

nineteen sixties

l

Attorney General's

r

s

p

(p. 209)

(p. 288)

(p. 86)

(p. 298)

(p. 286)

l

r

s

r

s

i

c

,

California Legislature,

:

B

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-law>

**Citation:** William Thomas. Review of Goldstein, Robert Justin. *American Blacklist: The Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. August, 2010.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25661>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.