

Lillian Hellman – Letter to HUAC – May 19, 1952

The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) held hearings in 1947 on Communist activity in Hollywood. Ten writers and directors were held in contempt when they refused to answer questions regarding their political affiliations or beliefs. They later served prison terms after the Supreme Court in April 1950 turned down their appeal that such questioning violated their First Amendment rights. Hearings began again in March 1951. While many of those testifying from the entertainment industry informed on their colleagues, others like playwright and screenwriter Lillian Hellman chose a different path. Before her testimony, she wrote the following letter to the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Dear Mr. Wood:

As you know, I am under subpoena to appear before your committee on May 21, 1952.

I am most willing to answer all questions about myself. I have nothing to hide from your committee and there is nothing in my life of which I am ashamed. I have been advised by counsel that under the fifth amendment I have a constitutional privilege to decline to answer any questions about my political opinions, activities, and associations, on the grounds of self-incrimination. I do not wish to claim this privilege. I am ready and willing to testify before the representatives of our Government as to my own opinions and my own actions, regardless of any risks or consequences to myself.

But I am advised by counsel that if I answer the committee's questions about myself, I must also answer questions about other people and that if I refuse to do so, I can be cited for contempt. My counsel tells me that if I answer questions about myself, I will have waived my rights under the fifth amendment and could be forced legally to answer questions about others. This is very difficult for a layman to understand. But there is one principle that I do understand: I am not willing, now or in the future, to bring bad trouble to people who, in my past association with them, were completely innocent of any talk or any action that was disloyal or subversive. I do not like subversion or disloyalty in any form and if I had ever seen any I would have considered it my duty to have reported it to the proper authorities. But to hurt innocent people whom I knew many years ago in order to save myself is, to me, inhuman and indecent and dishonorable. I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions, even though I long ago came to the conclusion that I was not a political person and could have no comfortable place in any political group.

I was raised in an old-fashioned American tradition and there were certain homely things that were taught to me: To try to tell the truth, not to bear false witness, not to harm my neighbor, to be loyal to my country, and so on. In general, I respected these ideals of Christian honor and did as well with them as I knew how. It is my belief that you will agree with these simple rules of human decency and will not expect me to violate the good American tradition from which they spring. I would, therefore, like to come before you and speak of myself.

I am prepared to waive the privilege against self-incrimination and to tell you everything you wish to know about my views or actions if your committee will agree to refrain from asking me to name other people. If the committee is unwilling to give me this assurance, I will be forced to plead the privilege of the fifth amendment at the hearing.

A reply to this letter would be appreciated.

Sincerely yours,

Lillian Hellman

Source: Congress, House, Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding Communist Infiltration of the Hollywood Motion-Picture Industry*, 82d Congress, May 21, 1952, in Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1994), 201–2. found at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6454/>

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Lillian Hellman's Letter to HUAC Reading Questions

Directions: Write down the quotes from Lillian Hellman's letter to HUAC that answer the following questions:

1. Who and what is Lillian Hellman willing to answer questions about?

2. What is the one principle she says she understands?

3. Does Lillian Hellman believe she has witnessed or seen any acts of subversion?

4. What does she think is inhuman, indecent, and dishonorable?

5. What are the old fashioned American traditions she was raised with and what are the things she was taught?