

CAMPS AND RATS

By Michael Ventura

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“The Justice Department refused again to disclose the purpose of five prison camps authorized by Congress for handling subversives... As many as 15,000 persons are believed ticketed for immediate seizure.”

That sinister item comes not from some Libertarian rumor mill or an unsubstantiated blog but from *The New York Times*, Jan. 13, 1952.

First let’s talk about the camps. Then we’ll talk about the rats.

The Emergency Detention Act was the brainchild of Democratic senators, as noted in a *Times* report of Sept. 6, 1950, under the banner, “Bill Would Permit Reds’ Internment.” (Note of clarification: At the time “Reds” meant leftists, not “red state” right-wingers.) The law would “subject known Communists and *others liable to become subversives* to concentration camp commitments” [my italics]. Yes, they called them concentration camps, and you were eligible if considered “liable” to get out of hand.

On Sept. 19, 1950, *The Times*, on its front page, reiterated that “Communists and others *reasonably suspect* would be interred summarily,” adding chillingly that “detentions would be prompt” [my italics]. The camps proposal was signed into law, over President Truman’s veto, on Sept. 24, 1950. The following day a *Times* editorial praised the camps as a “strengthening feature” of what was known as the McCarran Act. On Oct. 1, 1950, the paper announced, with no hint of disapproval, that those eligible for arrest were already on the Attorney General’s list, a list composed “on secret information, and on no hearings.”

Just in case anyone forgot about that list and those camps, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, a national hero at the time, regularly issued statements like this, as quoted in the *Times* on April 28, 1951: “The government [is] ready to arrest 14,000 of the more dangerous Reds on a moment’s notice.” On secret information, with no right of trial, anyone deemed subversive or liable to become subversive could consider themselves “a moment’s notice” away from arrest and indefinite imprisonment.

It was never clear if adults would be arrested singly or whether -- as our government did with more than 100,000 Japanese arrested without trial during the Second World War -- whole families would be scooped up. After all, most of those “Reds” had children, and what would the government do with thousands of kids suddenly, in effect, orphaned?

Throughout the 1950s, the camps were in the news. For instance, on Dec. 27, 1955, the *Times* ran an article of more than 2000 words, illustrated with photos of the camps, assuring Americans that “There is nothing at any of the camps to suggest the ‘concentration camps’ that horrified the free world in World War II. ...In the absence of evidence to the contrary and in the light of experience of American methods, the presumption must be that these camps would be humanely conducted, according to civilized rules and procedures.” We’re not the bad guys; we’ll run *good* concentration camps.

That the camps were well-known to the public in the 1950s cannot be denied.

The camps remained sanctioned by U.S. law until 1971. They were never used, but, as David Cole wrote in a 2004 article for *The Yale Law Journal*, “that does not mean that it did no damage to civil liberties. The FBI used the existence of this detention authority to

justify extensive political spying in order to compile, maintain, and update lists of ‘dangerous’ persons to be detained in the event an emergency was declared.”

That said, let’s talk about rats.

Last month, screenwriter and novelist Budd Schulberg died at the age of 95. A true child of Hollywood and son of silent-era movie mogul J.P. Schulberg, he incurred the film world’s wrath with his novel of its inner workings, *What Makes Sammy Run?*, and scripted two of Elia Kazan’s best films, *On the Waterfront* and *A Face in the Crowd*. On May 23, 1951, he appeared before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and “named names,” as the saying went – ratted out anyone he could remember whom he considered to have “Red” leanings, including Tillie Lerner Olson. Read her classic collection, *Silences*, to judge for yourself the caliber of person singled out by Schulberg. And you can read 24 pages of his testimony in *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968*, and judge for yourself.

Like fellow-rat Elia Kazan but with less self-doubt, for the rest of his life Budd Schulberg claimed he’d done the right thing speaking against the Red Menace, though, in a 2006 interview, “Mr. Schulberg said that in hindsight he believed that the attacks against real and imagined Communists in the United States were a greater threat to the country than the Communist Party itself. But he said he had named names because the party represented a real threat to freedom of speech” (*The New York Times*, Aug. 6). Schulberg failed to mention that he didn’t take his stand for freedom of speech until after he was named by someone else, when the only way he could avoid the blacklist and continue to make money in Hollywood was to take his own turn at naming names. Schulberg never mentioned the camps nor that they were a threat to freedom of speech nor that, as was well known at the time, people he named were “ticketed for immediate seizure” in the event that the camps were mobilized – a threat made repeatedly at the highest levels of government.

This amnesia about the camps is universal, apparently. The camps go unmentioned in obituaries, defenses and discussions of Schulberg last month in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *National Review* and *The Guardian*. They go unmentioned in any Schulberg interview I found and nor any Elia Kazan interview I’ve read (and I’ve read a lot of those). Richard Schickel doesn’t mention them in his lengthy defense of Kazan’s testimony in *Elia Kazan: A Biography*, and Kazan doesn’t mention them in his autobiography, *A Life*. The Left seems to have forgotten them, too. Victor S. Navasky’s otherwise thorough *Naming Names*, a history of the witch hunt, mentions the camps thrice, in passing, with no details. In the historical memory of Americans, even quite educated Americans, the camps have ceased to exist. But, from 1950 on, every namer of names had to know what his testimony meant for former friends and co-workers.

This is personal with me. My parents were leftist activists from the 1930s to the 1950s. According to my late father, Michael Luciano Ventura, circa 1940 they became members of the Young Communist League – a perfectly legal organization at the time, in case you were wondering. (Let’s also note that Pa volunteered for the Army to defend his country, shortly after Pearl Harbor.) What must my parents have felt when they read their *New York Times* one fine day in 1951, as the anti-Communist pogrom gained steam, to read that “15,000 persons are believed ticketed for immediate seizure”?

I never forget that I live in a country that built what were openly called “concentration camps” to imprison my parents, and perhaps our whole family, for what they believed. I love my country because I love my country, and there’s no explaining love. I want the best for my country. But I won’t forget. Or forgive.

On page 685 of *A Life*, Kazan finally came clean about his naming of names: “How is the world better for what I did? It had just been a game of power and influence, and I’d been taken in and twisted from my true self. I’d fallen for something I shouldn’t have, no matter how hard the pressure or how sound my reasons.”

Michael Ventura’s essay on Elia Kazan’s HUAC testimony appears in the recently published A New Literary History of America, edited by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollers (Harvard University Press).

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