Victor Navasky describes *Naming Names*, a book about the Hollywood blacklist, as a “moral detective story.” Navasky is not a historian; at the time the book was published, 1980, he had just been named editor of *Nation* magazine. Unlike historians of McCarthyism or the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) or the Hollywood blacklist, Navasky puts moral issues, arguments about right and wrong, at the center of his work. He focuses on the witnesses who cooperated with HUAC, and asks why – why they provided the committee with the names of communists or fellow travelers in the film industry. He begins by noting the longstanding tradition in American culture that views informing as wrong. The vocabulary says it all: “rat,” “stoolie,” “fink,” “squealer,” “Judas” – characters and themes often dramatized in the movies made by the people who were subpoenaed.

The moral questions are important also because of the consequences of the decision to cooperate: those who were named would be blacklisted, their careers ended, unless they also agreed to name names. The lines were especially sharp in this case because no crime was at issue – the committee was not seeking evidence of espionage or sabotage or treason. And the committee already had the names of all the communists in Hollywood, which it obtained when the FBI infiltrated the Communist Party (CPUSA).

Those who named names were some of the most important people in Hollywood: Sterling Hayden, Lee J. Cobb, Budd Schulberg, and at the top of the list, Elia Kazan. In the heart of the book, Navasky goes back to those who named names, almost thirty years after the fact, and asks each why he did it. All of his respondents are smart, articulate, political people, and most have been thinking about the question for decades. After recording their answers, Navasky engages in a kind of moral argument about whether their reasons were good reasons, whether what they did was right.

The intensity of the arguments Navasky has with his subjects gives the book its special power. Navasky identifies three reasons for cooperating with the committee. The first is a “lesser evil” argument – HUAC was bad, but the communists were worse. The Party did not believe in freedom. It defended Stalin, who had killed millions. In the United States, communists lied, manipulated, and bullied people. Why protect them? Why sacrifice one’s own career to protect a totalitarian group? Some of the friendly witnesses go farther and argue that they had a moral obligation to
help expose the evil of communism. “Defending the Communist Party was something worse than naming names,” Edward Dmytryk says. “I did not want to remain a martyr to something that I absolutely believed was immoral and wrong” (p. 238). Dmytryk spoke of “remaining a martyr” because he had originally refused to testify and went to jail with the Hollywood Ten, but changed his mind after the Korean War broke out.

Navasky criticizes the “lesser evil” position. He agrees that of course Stalin was a greater evil than HUAC, but argues that cooperating with HUAC was the wrong way to fight Stalinism. HUAC was attacking freedom and undermining democratic rights. Those who wanted to criticize Stalin and the CPUSA should have done so outside of HUAC, in their writing or speaking. It is significant for Navasky that none of the friendly witnesses took a stand until they faced a subpoena from HUAC.

The second argument for cooperating with the committee is “I didn’t hurt anybody.” These people agree on the wrongness of HUAC’s quest, and avoided being blacklisted by providing names — but, they insist, they named only people who had been named already. Some claim they named only those people who had already been named ten times. Their testimony was not harmful, they argue, and thus it was not wrong.

Navasky criticizes this argument on the grounds that naming any names contributed to HUAC’s legitimacy and gave credence to the committee’s methods as well as its claims. Naming names made it harder for subsequent witnesses to resist. He adds that in fact each time a person was named they were “hurt” — each time their name appeared in the news they faced additional pressures and risked ostracism. And friendly witnesses had no control over how the committee and the media would publicize the names they provided. Navasky also goes to the trouble of examining the testimony of each of the people who make this argument. He finds that they sometimes made mistakes: Lee J. Cobb said he had only given the names of people who had already been named, but in fact he was the first person to publicly name Lloyd Bridges.

The third reason friendly witnesses give Navasky is “I had no choice — I had higher obligations.” In this case the informer agrees that providing names was a bad thing, that it was wrong, that it hurt people, but they argue it was the only thing they could have done. Their responsibilities to support wives and children required that they do what was necessary to keep their jobs rather than sacrifice the present and future of their families for an abstract political idea. Lee J. Cobb, for example, resisted the committee for two years. During that time he was denied work and ran out of money and his wife was institutionalized as an alcoholic. Finally he named twenty people and concluded his testimony with the required statement: “I want to thank you for the privilege of setting the record straight” (p. 270). Almost thirty years later he tells Navasky, “I didn’t act out of principle. I wallowed in unprincipledness. . . . If I had not been in need, I’d never have cooperated” (p. 272).

Navasky’s critique of “I had no choice” consists of a single devastating fact: two-thirds of everyone who was subpoenaed refused to name names. They too had wives and children and family obligations. They too were subjected to terrible pressures. It was hard to stand up for a principle, to refuse to betray your friends; nevertheless, most of the people HUAC targeted were able to resist — even if it meant leaving Hollywood and finding a different job.
In teaching the book over the last decade, I’ve found that this last issue divides students along ethnic lines. The white students for the most part find Navasky’s critique convincing and powerful. But students from immigrant families, especially the Chinese, Taiwanese, and Koreans, tend to support the argument for family obligations. For them, family obligations are real and powerful and compelling, and political values and ideals are clearly secondary. Indeed, they are often puzzled by what seems to them a kind of empty rhetorical posturing by their white classmates: if the government – the American government – requires that you name names, and it is clear that your family will pay the price if you refuse, of course you should cooperate.

Latino students and especially black students in my classes have been divided on this point. They often appreciate the power of family obligations more acutely than the typical native-born whites, but at the University of California in the 1990s, black and Latino students were intensely politicized by the Republican campaign to end affirmative action. These students tended to be part of a more left-wing political culture than the Asian Americans, and to understand the logic of taking a stand against an unjust governmental policy or practice.

And of course Latino and black students have a different view of the US government than their Asian American classmates. For the Asian immigrants, the United States is a land of freedom and democracy compared to their countries of origin – flawed and imperfect, of course, but still greatly appreciated. In contrast, the Latinos and especially the blacks often can articulate the many forms of discrimination and injustice their people have suffered at the hands of the US majority and its government.

_Naming Names_ considers one additional response to Navasky’s question of why: the response of Elia Kazan, probably the most powerful person in Hollywood to be subpoenaed. If he had refused to cooperate, the blacklist might have been broken. But he named names in 1952 – and then took out a full page ad in the _New York Times_ declaring his position. When, almost thirty years later, Navasky asks him why, he refuses to answer. Indeed, he had refused to give interviews about his naming names to anyone else either. He says he feels no obligation to justify his actions, to explain himself to posterity.

In the book Navasky then searches Kazan’s work for a statement about naming names, and finds one in Kazan’s film _On the Waterfront_: he reads it as an allegory ofHUAC, in which the protagonist, played by Marlon Brando, has to overcome the cultural aversion to “ratting on your friends” and tell the truth about union corruption on the docks to the Waterfront Crime Commission – a stand-in forHUAC. Here the government’s cause is good; the claims made by its opponents only serve to justify wrongdoing and exploitation.

Navasky makes the most of “Elia Kazan and the Case for Silence,” as he titles that chapter, in the first edition of the book. (He calls Kazan’s refusal to talk “taking a retrospective Fifth” [p. 221].) But in 1988 Kazan published his autobiography, in which he broke his decades of silence on the topic. It turned out he did want to explain himself to posterity – but he did not have anything particularly original to say. He defended his cooperation by reiterating that communism was evil. In the second edition of _Naming Names_, Navasky’s new introduction takes note of Kazan
ending his silence, but in fact the book worked better when Navasky’s key witness refused to talk.

The reviews of the book provide a brief intellectual history of America in the age of Reagan. At the time the book was published – 1980 – the principal criticism came from Cold War liberals like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who complained that it made heroes out of communists. “His general tone,” Schlesinger wrote in the New Leader, “is that, while Stalinism was not so good, anti-Stalinism was really unforgivable” (Schlesinger, 1980, p. 9). The New Republic assigned the book to William Phillips, editor of Partisan Review, who criticized Naming Names for failing to distinguish liberal anti-communists like himself from the reactionaries on HUAC. “It was the liberal anti-communists and not the Communists who stood for a humane and open society,” he wrote (Phillips, 1981, p. 32). New Republic publisher Martin Peretz also criticized the book in his column in the magazine, calling it a “whining and partisan narrative” and declaring Navasky wrong to view unfriendly witnesses as “virtuous heroes” and the cooperative ones as “unmitigated villains” (Peretz, 1981, p. 38).

The scholarly reviews were less ideologically engaged. The reviewer for the Journal of American History criticized the book for “unbelievable” flaws in taping interviews, and for a “lack [of] overall coherence” (Culbert, 1981, p. 185). The American Political Science Review concluded that the book “should spur our generation to become ever more vigilant in protecting its civil liberties” (Weinstock, 1981, p. 1054), and Randy Robertson declared in Reviews in American History that the book was “profound” (Robertson, 1983, p. 448). The reviewer for American Historical Review declared that, “because of the subject, this volume cannot be considered a pleasant one”; nevertheless, the author was praised for being “both dispassionate and compassionate” (Plesur, 1981, p. 953).

Indeed, most reviewers praised Navasky for his fairness in treating people with whom he disagreed. (See also the reviews by Aaron, 1980; Fremont-Smith, 1980; Gordon, 1984; and Sennett, 1980.) That fairness indeed is the key to the success of this “moral detective story” – along with the sense of urgency underlying the entire project. The book is not simply a condemnation of the friendly witnesses. It makes a strong case for the subjects of the book, they take their arguments seriously – and then dissect and exposes their various alibis and excuses, and sorts out their motives and opportunities. The questions Navasky poses continue to have relevance after the end of the Cold War. Liberated from concerns about a communist threat, readers today can consider the ways “patriotism” has required betraying friends and colleagues – as well as democratic ideals – in our not-so-distant past.

REFERENCES


