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Un-American Activities

The Red Scare of the 1950s raises questions that are pertinent today.

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In 1952, the House Un-American Activities Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives summoned Elliott Maraniss to Room 740 of the Federal Building in Detroit. Asked about his membership in the Communist Party, Maraniss cited his constitutional privileges under the 5th Amendment and refused to answer. In a statement, whichHUAC Chairman John S. Wood did not allow him to read, Maraniss blasted a process that resembled the Spanish Inquisition and Salem witch trials. Many Americans, he declared, had not—and would not—“acquiesce in the proposition that persons could be punished for their beliefs.”

A World War II veteran who had led an all-black company, Maraniss was fired from his job as a copy editor for the Detroit Times and was blacklisted for five years. His brother-in-law, who fought Franco in the Spanish Civil War, lost his job as well.

In A Good American Family, David Maraniss, associate editor of The Washington Post, and the author of biographies of Vince Lombardi, Roberto Clemente, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama, uses the story of his dad to capture ordinary people “intersecting in the stream of American
history,” including Depression-era radicalism, a Red Scare, and its aftermath. Deeply personal, *A Good American Family* also asks questions that are pertinent today: Do Americans have the right to write and speak their mind and to affiliate with any political ideology or organization? What constitutes un-American activity?

Maraniss does not shed new light on the continued allegiance of American radicals, including his parents, following revelations about Stalin’s purges and the 1939 Non-Aggression Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Nor does he challenge existing interpretations of the Red Scare in the United States in the 1940s and ’50s.

That said, *A Good American Family* enriches our understanding of the era through vivid, humanizing portraits of individuals on both sides of the ideological divide. A southern Democrat, and, albeit briefly, a member of the KKK, John S. Wood, Chairman of HUAC, we learn, drove the Model T carrying Leo Frank to the funeral home in 1915 to prevent the mob who had just lynched him from mutilating his body. Ironically, when Wood’s wife discovered his mother was mostly Cherokee Indian, she never forgave him. Frank Tavenner, HUAC’s interrogator, had been acting Chief Counsel at the Tokyo war crimes tribunal. Coleman Young (executive secretary of the National Negro Labor Council and years later, mayor of Detroit), managed, somehow, to challenge the committee and escape punishment. “The word is Negro, not Niggras,” Coleman told Tavenner, and then proclaimed that he was “fighting against un-American activities such as lynchings and denial of the vote.” African-American attorney George Crockett, who represented Elliott Maraniss, became a judge and later a congressman.

As the title indicates, however, Maraniss’ book is a family drama. We follow Elliott as he searches for jobs, moving from place to place with Mary, his wife, and their children. Despite their precarious finances, the author tells us, Mary insisted that they live in a house, not an apartment.

Through it all, Maraniss maintains, Elliott and Mary (who may have been more radical than her husband) embraced The American Dream. Disorientated by the Depression, they never fell out of love with America’s promise, he writes, and “thought they were working toward a true and open democracy even as they were rationalizing the actions of what was in fact a ruthlessly totalitarian foreign power.”

In the end, then, *A Good American Family* is a tale of resilience and redemption. Elliott’s ordeal, David indicates, left him with “a righteous anger that burned far below the surface,” but “did not
dominate his personality, which seemed remarkably free of bitterness.” He rose, professionally, from reporter to city editor to executive editor, and taught journalism at the University of Wisconsin. Most important, Elliott and Mary “created a good American family.”

David Maraniss insists he is “not trying to play Professor Pangloss, presenting a ‘best of all possible worlds’ take on misfortune.” That said, his elegant, emotional, and empathetic narrative does not include targets of HUAC and Joseph McCarthy who didn’t fare as well as the Maraniss’s. These men and women—and their families—deserve their innings in every account of the Red Scare.