

# Dear Congressman Drinan, Dear Mr. Chairman

By Mary Callahan

Freshman  
Congressman  
Robert Drinan,  
SJ, accepted a  
position on the  
House Internal  
Security Com-  
mittee so he could  
destroy it. A series  
of letters in the BC  
Congressional  
Archives docu-  
ments his attempts  
to do so

Few Congressional committees have enjoyed the prominence of the House Internal Security Committee in its heyday. Founded as the Select Committee to Investigate Communist Propaganda in 1930, it saw its greatest power in the 1940s and 1950s when, as the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, it led anticommunist investigations of the movie industry, the labor movement, and of federal employees and college staffs. One committee member, Richard Nixon, drew his first national attention during the group's investigation of Alger Hiss, and the committee served as the locus for the McCarthy hearings.

In 1971, Robert Drinan, SJ, '42, MA'47, the newly elected Democratic congressman from Massachusetts' 4th Congressional District, accepted an appointment to the House Internal Security Committee (as HUAC had been renamed in 1970 in an attempt to improve its reputation).

It may seem an unusual appointment for a liberal Democrat, but Fr. Drinan was one in a series of liberal Democrats appointed to HISC by the House leadership to curb the committee and to act as its "good guy." "It was a terrible committee," he said in a recent interview. "It was expensive to maintain and it never really had a purpose. Well, it never really had a *good* purpose. Everyone knew I was out to abolish it."

While several attempts had been made in the House to kill the committee by cutting its funding, these had failed because congressmen were afraid that voting against the committee could open them to the charge of being "soft on communism." Fr. Drinan set about discrediting HISC in the eyes of both the House membership and the American

people by noting in public statements that the committee kept secret dossiers on the alleged subversive activities of some 750,000 American citizens.

In March 1974, three years after Fr. Drinan joined the committee, a *Village Voice* columnist wrote that members of Congress—and Fr. Drinan in particular—could secure copies of HISC files on American citizens. The column prompted some 79 people to write to Fr. Drinan, requesting copies of their files.

"It was in the air at the time," says Fr. Drinan of the requests. "Everyone was asking for their FBI files, their CIA files, under the Freedom of Information Act. And when they heard about the HISC files they asked for them, too." In fact, said Fr. Drinan, in some liberal circles, it became a badge of honor to have such a file and a disgrace not to. "You wouldn't tell anyone—it would be too embarrassing," he said with a chuckle. "It would mean you weren't considered subversive; that you weren't deemed a threat—that you weren't considered to be somebody."

Fr. Drinan passed along the 79 requests for files to the HISC staff, much to the chagrin of HISC chairman Richard Ichord, a Democrat from Missouri who, correctly, saw them as part of the Massachusetts congressman's campaign to disrupt the committee's activities.

Their polite, but pointed, exchange, portions of which are reprinted here, is preserved among papers given to Boston College by Fr. Drinan in 1981 and currently housed in its Congressional Archives (story page 41) along with the papers of House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr. '36, and Congressman Edward P. Boland.



Cong. Robert Drinan, SJ



Cong. Richard Ichord

May 31, 1974

*Dear Congressman Drinan:*

Please be advised that I am calling a meeting of the full committee for Tuesday, June 4, at 9:30 a.m. . . . to consider what disposition shall be made of your recent, unusual, numerous, and burdensome requests for information from the files of the Committee relating to individuals. I propose at this meeting to discuss the nature and propriety of these requests, such background as we possess in respect to them, and their relationship to the efficient work of our staff . . .

Sincerely yours,  
*Richard H. Ichord*  
Chairman

May 31, 1974

*Dear Mr. Chairman:*

. . . I am not certain I see the need for this particular meeting . . . When individuals write to me . . . requesting that they receive through my office any file held on them by the House Internal Security Committee, I merely carry out as a courtesy to them the right I have as a Member of Congress and which they have as an American citizen.

I therefore see no reason to discuss the "propriety" of the requests . . . While I understand that compliance with these requests may impose a burden on the staff of the Committee, I cannot tell these citizens that Members of Congress do not have the right to obtain from a Member of Congress the contents of any file maintained on them by a Committee of the Congress . . .

In addition to my feeling that there is no necessity for the meeting projected for June 4th, I have on that morning another meeting of the Judiciary Committee and the impeachment inquiry . . .

[T]here can be no question of what "disposition" shall be made of the requests for information . . . I shall expect to have these requests honored as they have been in the past . . .

Cordially yours,  
*Robert F. Drinan*  
Member of Congress

July 1, 1974

*Dear Chairman Ichord:*

I write to you about seventy-nine requests which I have made for information since May 1, 1974.

I am aware of the necessity of the staff spending a bit of time on these requests. At the same time I feel an unreasonable amount of time has gone by . . .

If I do not have within seventy-two hours after receipt of this letter some explanation as to the schedule when I will receive answers to my seventy-nine inquiries I will bring the denial of this request to the Speaker and will publish in the Congressional Record a notice of the fact that my rights as a member of the House of Representatives have been denied by the Chairman and staff of the House Internal Security Committee.

I send you in advance my appreciation of your attention to this matter.

Cordially yours,  
*Robert F. Drinan*  
Member of Congress

July 3, 1974

*Dear Mr. Drinan:*

I apologize for not giving you a prompt report on the meeting held on June 4th, which you did not choose to attend.

At the meeting, I pointed out that you had made requests for information involving 123 individuals, that 88 requests had been received from you in 1974, and that requests from you for information on 78 individuals were then pending . . .

Also discussed were your statements at the [May 5 National Committee Against Repressive Legislation] meeting in which you suggested that if the committee receives voluminous requests, records and personnel would be tied up and committee publications would go out of print. This action by you in light of your previous statement that you went on the committee for the purpose of destroying the committee from within certainly casts shadows upon the good faith of your requests.

No formal action was taken at the meeting, but it was suggested then that the chair should not permit such actions to constitute an harassment of the committee or its staff. Under the rules, as a member of Con-



*Prime time: views of HUAC in its heyday. From top, Hollywood's stars crowd the hearing room (1947); the probe of Methodist Bishop G. Brumley Oxnam (1953); Congressman Richard Nixon the morning after a federal grand jury found Alger Hiss guilty of perjury (1950).*

gress you are entitled to such information; however, the committee will not permit such requests to disrupt the work of the committee. Therefore, you are advised that your requests will be complied with so as not to constitute an undue hardship upon the staff . . .

Sincerely yours,  
*Richard H. Ichord*  
Chairman

December 13, 1974

*Dear Mr. Ichord:*

. . . In recent weeks I have noted that the Committee staff has answered a number of my requests for information on various individuals for which I am grateful. I am also aware, however, that approximately seventy requests for information are still before the Committee on Internal Security, the great majority of which were sent to you in May of 1974 . . . In almost all of the communications received from your staff, there have been no substantive references to possible "subversive" activities. Indeed, the majority of these requests are answered by stating that no record exists concerning the individual. In view of this fact, I can see no justification for a delay of seven months . . .

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter. I do feel that the staff of the Committee should be able to clear up most of my request backlog with no great difficulty.

Cordially yours,  
*Robert F. Drinan*  
Member of Congress

December 20, 1974

*Dear Mr. Drinan:*

...With the approach of the holiday season, the regular work load of the committee began to lighten enough that the staff was able to devote more time to the highly unusual quantity of requests submitted by you.

I might point out that whether or not there is a record on a name, the search itself takes time—particularly when there is a problem of identity . . . It may be of interest of you to know that, because of budget cuts, we now have only two employees in addition to the chief of files and reference who are trained to do this type of work. As you can

appreciate, they must serve all Members of Congress and the committee staff as equitably as possible, and they cannot devote a disproportionate amount of time to one—especially to one whose announced motive is to disrupt and obstruct the work of the committee.

. . . The staff has been instructed to furnish the reports requested by you, but it is impossible at this point to say how long it may take to complete them.

I might mention that many of the individuals with lengthy records are likely well aware of the information in our files, and I doubt that they are suffering a great deal of suspense as they await our reply.

Since your announced purpose was to tie up records and personnel, I am sure it would not surprise you to know that handling your requests on a priority basis would accomplish just that. I can assure you that your many letters have not been forgotten, and that all will be answered in due time.

Sincerely yours,  
*Richard H. Ichord*  
Chairman

**B**y the fall of 1974, by means of a careful building of coalitions, Fr. Drinan and other HISC opponents had gathered enough support among Democrats that the House Democratic Caucus conveniently "forgot" to appoint any Democratic members to HISC. The Democratic leadership of the House, in turn, seemed disinclined to order the caucus to do so. Recognizing his position, Ichord himself offered a resolution to transfer the committee to the jurisdiction of the House Judiciary Committee, a move that would, in effect, condemn the committee to political limbo. On January 14, 1975, the House of Representatives approved the transfer in a voice vote from the floor.

"No one lamented the committee's demise," said Fr. Drinan, who was credited in newspaper reports as "playing a key role in putting HISC to rest." The committee's records, including the 750,000 individual files, were transferred to the custody of the Judiciary Committee, which in turn consigned them to the U.S. Congressional Archives, where they will remain untouched until the year 2025.

*Mary Callahan is BCM's assistant editor.*