

# The Long Goodbye of Alger Hiss

By John Haynes

The recent death of Alger Hiss is a reminder that while the Cold War is over in fact, it is still being fought in the world of memory and history, and the outcome is undecided. ABC television, for example, reported Hiss's death in a manner implying that this onetime New Deal lawyer and high-ranking diplomat had been imprisoned on false charges of being a Soviet spy. Peter Jennings closed the segment with the statement that Boris Yeltsin himself had ordered the Soviet archives searched and no evidence of Hiss's guilt had been found. NBC also suggested Hiss's innocence, but its implication was more restrained and attributed his vindication to a search of the Soviet archives by Russian historian Dimitri Volkogonov.

That two of the nation's major news sources should present Alger Hiss as an innocent victim of anti-Communist paranoia was scandalous, but not unexpected. Unfortunately, a very large segment of those who set the tone of informed opinion continue to be unable to come to grips with the truth of the Hiss case, just as their predecessors were unable to see it clearly a half century ago.

Let us first dispose of the alleged exoneration by the Soviet archives. ABC mistakenly attributed this to Yeltsin. It later retracted that statement and, as NBC had, attributed it to Volkogonov. I have met with General Volkogonov and have great respect for him. In the 1980s his position as a senior Soviet military historian did indeed give him access to many closed archives. Indeed, what he found there undercut his Communist faith, and he became a semi-dissident and sided with Yeltsin when the latter faced down Communist hard-liners during the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Volkogonov's biographies of Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin are significant contributions to scholarship by any standard; in the Russian context in which they were first published, they were breathtakingly bold and will have a major salutary influence on the writing of Russian history. Volkogonov's involvement with the Hiss case, however, was a mistake, one which he came to regret. Volkogonov had not written on and never claimed any expertise in American or espionage history. In 1991, John Lowenthal, one of Hiss's most fervent defenders, approached him and asked, Volkogonov explained later, as a "primarily humanitarian" act that he assist the 88-year-old Hiss, who "would like to die peacefully." Six weeks later Volkogonov signed a statement which

tant the Hiss case was regarded in the U.S. and when journalists pressed for details, he realized he had walked into a historical controversy for which he was unprepared. He quickly backed out. He told reporters that "I was not properly understood" and that Lowenthal "pushed me to say things of which I was not fully convinced." Volkogonov explained that he had asked the Foreign Intelligence Service for records on Hiss, and it had provided some material, none of which implicated Hiss or Chambers. Further, and this most clearly showed his unfamiliarity with the Hiss case, Volkogonov said that he had not gotten anything from the Russian military intelligence agency and was not allowed to search the foreign intelligence section of the archive of its Soviet predecessor, the GRU. As serious students of the case know, Chambers and Hiss worked for a GRU espionage network.

In short, Volkogonov's statement about Hiss and Chambers was worthless, and realizing that he had stepped into a bramble bush of

examination of the material established that much of it was typed on a typewriter Hiss kept at his home.

After initially denying any knowledge of Chambers, Hiss backed off as the evidence accumulated, saying he had known him under a different name, but only casually. But Chambers testified at length about intimate details of Hiss's life, details that were confirmed. To give but one example, Chambers had testified that Hiss had given an old auto to the Communist party in the '30s.

Hiss testified that he had given it to Chambers as part of a deal for Chambers subleasing an apartment. But investigators turned up documentation that the car had passed directly from Hiss to a used car dealer to a Communist party organizer through a sham sale.

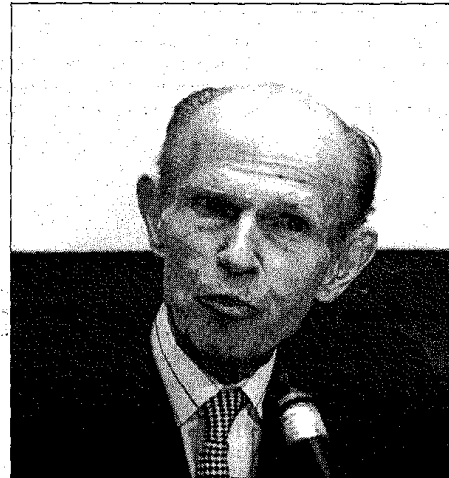
The government indicted Hiss for perjury. (The statute of limitations had passed for an espionage charge, but the perjury indictment got at the same issue by charging Hiss with lying to the Grand Jury.) At the trial, the government

introduced ample evidence supporting Chambers' story and shredding Hiss's testimony. Most damning of all, however, remained the documents that Chambers had produced. Hiss went to prison in 1951.

Since that time, evidence has continued to accumulate supporting Hiss's guilt. In 1977, Nadya Ulanovsky, a Soviet intelligence agent, defected from the USSR and confirmed her role as a supervisor of Chambers' espionage activities in 1934. In 1992, when Harvey Klehr and I went to Russia to do research

in Soviet archives, we found documents confirming Chambers' testimony about the Communist underground operating in the 1930s; we even found two stolen State Department letters. In 1993, Maria Schmidt, a Hungarian historian, found in her country's newly opened archives statements by another Soviet spy, Noel Field, that Hiss had been a fellow spy. Most recently, in the Venona Papers, a release of decrypted World War II Soviet cable traffic by the U.S. code breakers, a message turned up about agent "Ales." Even without the FBI-supplied footnote that this was "probably Alger Hiss," anyone familiar with the Hiss case would have recognized Ales as Hiss from information in the text.

Over the years, a number of books and a multitude of articles have appeared proclaiming Hiss's innocence. Most are polemics or, like the statements Hiss made during his life, lawyerly briefs for the defense taking issue with some narrow issue in the case and only presenting evidence that serves the advocate. Several of the exculpations of Hiss are conspiratorial fantasies. Among the theories advanced are that the FBI faked the evidence and coerced false testimony; that there was "forgery by typewriter" with a



## A Spy For All Seasons

American domestic politics he withdrew from the matter altogether. Not surprisingly, those newspapers that had put the Volkogonov's "vindication" on the front page either buried the retraction deep in the paper or ignored it altogether, as did ABC and NBC in their coverage of Hiss's death.

It is well to remember, in these times of mumbled apologetics about Hiss, just how strong the case against him was and is. Two former Soviet spies, Whittaker Chambers and Hede Massing, provided direct testimony of Hiss having participated in Communist underground operations in the 1930s. Julian Wadleigh and Vincent Reno, government employees who Chambers had also named as members of his spy ring, confessed. Three photographers who worked for Chambers' spy ring all confirmed that they had microfilmed documents for Chambers. Elizabeth Bentley, another defecting Soviet spy, said that members of her network knew of Hiss's espionage. Igor Gouzenko, defecting Soviet code clerk at the Soviet embassy in Canada, brought information that while not naming Hiss pointed at him.

But the chief accuser was Whittaker Chambers, the man to whom Hiss will always be

presented in the trials and various congressional investigations.

Since the late 1960s, the temper of the academic world has been decidedly friendly to Alger Hiss and, with even more fervor, hostile to Whittaker Chambers. In numerous historical accounts and textbooks, the Hiss-Chambers case is treated as an example of anti-Communist paranoia. Many scholarly accounts suggest Hiss's innocence but are worded so as to avoid actually taking responsibility for that position. Others are rigidly agnostic and insist that the case is a mystery and the truth unknown, which is tantamount to voting for innocence.

Despite the strong desire in the academic world to have its cynical view of America's paranoia, nativism, and intolerance vindicated by an innocent Hiss, the only comprehensive detailed scholarly study that has appeared, Allen Weinstein's *Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case* (1978), takes the view that the evidence strongly supports Hiss's guilt. While Weinstein has been repeatedly attacked for his book, the assaults are notable more for their viciousness than for their intellectual force. The attacks on Weinstein's book, like those on the case in general, take on some small narrow issue, claim that an error has

been found, and that, therefore, the entire book should be disregarded. This technique has some weight as polemic but little as scholarship.

Weinstein's book is subjected to constant sniping in academic publications, and many textbooks that cover the Hiss-Chambers case are written as if it did not exist. But there is no challenger, no alternative historical narrative that makes sense of the totality of the evidence.

This is not due to a lack of incentive. A comprehensive, detailed, coherent, and intelligently argued book of scholarly quality that proved Hiss innocent would be greeted by much of the historical profession with wild applause, academic prizes, and accolades galore. It would also be assured of massive coverage by the popular media and would be a sure bet for a Pulitzer. Over the last fifteen years the number of talented young scholars, and some senior ones, who have given thought to writing an alternative to Weinstein's *Perjury* has surely been in the hundreds. And yet it has not appeared and is not even on the horizon. The reason is simple. It cannot be written. The facts are too many, the documents too convincing, and the evidence too heavy for anyone to produce a coherent narrative that accounts for the evidence and shows that Hiss was innocent. So, scholars do what they regard as the

next best thing: look at the evidence and turn away.

Indeed, if one put most American historians up against a wall, most would admit through clenched teeth that Hiss was guilty. But, of course, one can't put scholars up against a wall. Consequently, on the Hiss-Chambers affair, one is left with weasel words and pretended agnosticism. Many scholars are so addicted to a vision of America in the 1945-to-1960 period as a nightmarish era of witch-hunting McCarthyists who railroad innocent progressives into the gas chamber (the Rosenbergs) or into prison (Hiss) on framed-up charges of espionage and smash the careers of blameless civil servants with sneering "are you now or have you ever been" inquiries that they cannot face the truth. To maintain this sinister and ugly portrait of America, Hiss must be innocent or at least his guilt must be doubtful. Historical scholarship, however, is only of value if it is a search for the truth. Anything else is a fraud. That the truth of the Hiss-Chambers case is so painful to so many scholars is a symptom of the intellectual corruption that threatens the American academy today.



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Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers were joined in life and now that Hiss is gone they are joined in death. Whenever the issues of the Cold War, domestic subversion, and the nature of life on the homefront during 1950s are raised, their names will appear in the same sentence. For decades, the left has been able to dictate the structure of that sentence: "Alger Hiss was framed, and the evil, devious Whittaker Chambers was the man who framed him." But now that the Cold War is over and the secret vaults of information, here and in Russia, have been opened, the heavy weight of the evidence of Hiss' guilt has become undeniable. Even many of those who had once insisted on his innocence as an article of faith would probably now agree that the sentence must begin, "Alger Hiss was guilty..." But how should this sentence end? This is something the anti anti-communists will find the bitterest pill of all: "... and his accuser, Whittaker Chambers, was an heroic figure who told the truth about this treasonable activity, helped his country in its life and death struggle with the Evil Empire, and as a result saw his reputation blackened and his life cut short."

The Hiss-Chambers case is filled with bizarre detail. The generation that lived through the trial was as familiar with hollowed-out pumpkins, a prothornatory warbler, bad dentition, a 1937 Ford, and a battered Woodstock typewriter as the present generation is with O.J.'s glove and his Bruno Magli shoes. In time the memory of these objects faded into kitsch, but the questions raised by the Hiss-Chambers case did not. Far more even than the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the question of Alger Hiss's guilt or innocence has always been the elemental Cold War drama. No other moment in that era posed the issues of treason and patriotism so clearly as did the conflict between these two men. There was no middle ground between them: if Chambers was right then Hiss must be guilty; if Chambers was wrong, then Hiss was an innocent man.

For his supporters, people like the venerable Dean Acheson, who had attended the same elite schools and gone through the same rite of passage on the way to membership in the establishment, it was simply unthinkable that a man of Alger Hiss's parts could sell out his country. It was only necessary to consider the source of the accusations against him—an intellectual guttersnipe and parvenu who was either a former communist or an imagined one—to know that Hiss could not have done it. The only question was why would this bizarre figure attempt to bring down this pillar of the establishment. It was inconceivable that Whittaker Chambers—a shambling wreck of a man, particularly in comparison to the elegant and aristocratic Hiss; a man of dark imaginings and mysterious provenance—could be telling the truth. For those who considered themselves The Right People, the question was never Hiss's innocence, but Chambers' motives. That the arch anti-communist and *bete noire* of a generation of leftists, Richard Nixon, had become Chambers' sponsor and (they assumed) his ventriloquist made the issue all the clearer for them.

Chambers was vindicated by the outcome of the 1950 perjury trial but was too saturnine a figure to take pleasure in the victory and too pessimistic to try to claim

things, a ravaging and unrequited homosexual attraction for Hiss; a devil's bargain with Nixon and the forces of the Right; and other weird and ingrown neuroses that had led him capriciously to destroy the reputation of one of America's best and brightest and to unleash the witch-hunt that had lacerated the nation for a generation.

When Hiss is referred to in books about the '50s it is with at least a distant sympathy: even if he was wrong he was wrong for the right reasons. When Chambers is mentioned it is as the worm in the American apple, the unappeasable Other whose only commitment was to desecration. In the hands of the leftist intellectuals and academics who created a cartoon of the 1950s as a "haunted" era filled with paranoia and dark nativism, Whittaker Chambers, more than any other individual (with the exception of his puppetmaster Nixon), was the man who sold the country out to the anti-communists and set America on a course that would lead to the great fear, to near nuclear war, and ultimately even to the catastrophe in Vietnam.

Chambers died early, although he knew the fate that awaited him, having written in his classic autobiography *Witness* that he had "traded the winning side for the losing side" in deciding to tell about his early career in the Communist Party and his relationship with Hiss. Hiss, on the other hand, saw himself become an icon for the hate-America Left, someone who had perfected the posture of being more sinned against than sinning and was so innocent that he didn't have to prove it, although in reality he engaged in a subtle campaign of self-rehabilitation for the last forty years of his life. The results of his campaign can be seen in the Alger Hiss Endowed Chair of History at Bard College and the fact that even those intellectuals who have come over

the years to wonder about him would never be so gross as to mention their doubts in public. As Lionel Trilling once noted, in America's intellectual high society, it might be regarded as a bit tacky to be a communist, but God save the man who was an anti-communist.

But now that Hiss has been shown almost certainly to have been guilty of treason, will Whittaker Chambers finally be rescued? If those who have perpetuated the myth of Hiss's innocence have their way, the answer is no. Chambers will continue to be imprisoned in the hell reserved for those who named names, even if the names were the correct ones. If those who now grudgingly admit that Hiss was compromised have their way, the answer is also no. Chambers will never get farther than the purgatory reserved for those who are right for the wrong reasons.

The miscarriage of justice has gone on long enough. Whittaker Chambers (and Elizabeth Bentley and all the other "contemptible snitches" who saw their reputations destroyed after telling the truth about the enemies within) should be recognized for what they were—American heroes. They should be accorded heroes' status in the history books. They should be rehabilitated by the government which has acceded too long to their obloquy. They should be officially praised as the embodiment of that willingness to go against the grain, whatever the consequences, that has always exemplified

America at its best. They should be liberated from the penumbra created by their enemies and brought back into the light where their memory deserves to live.

## Whittaker Chambers Commemorative

