The Honor of Alger Hiss

Garry Wills

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Suspecting Alger Hiss was somehow, on the face of it, indecent. He was almost drearily correct. He specialized in innocence. He was innocent of failure—so he could not understand his father. He was innocent of doubt—so he could not understand his brother Bosley. He was so innocent of psychic turmoil that his sister was in and out of mental institutions for several years without his being aware of her disturbance. He passed through the Thirties so innocent of ideology that he could later swear he met no communists at all, or—if he did meet any—he could not recognize them. He was innocent of friendships except with the well placed, with patrons. He seemed to spring fully armed from the head of Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. He became the perfect civil servant, a political Jeeves who knew his place and filled it perfectly. If anything, he was so correct as to rule out originality. Justice Frankfurter, another of his early patrons, was puzzled in 1946 to reflect that Hiss had not quite lived up to the promise of his youth which boded something beyond mere rectitude.[1]

Yet this man drab with the proper virtues had known something vivid in his life, "a cross between Jim Tully, the author, and Jack London" (in his own later words). The contrast between the two men—pale Alger and technicolor Whittaker—should have made their encounters, however fleeting, things to remember. But, no, Hiss stayed innocent of interest. He took and gave gifts—a rug, a car—while barely noticing the donor/recipient who actually moved in his oblivious acquaintance. Hiss's only recollected interest was, characteristically, a distaste for the improper. He remembered no tales from this Jack London, just bad teeth. The true succeeder can spot a failer far off.

It is a wonder he did not keep him farther off. They shared holidays and trips (Alger fraternizing, apparently, in a fit of absentmindedness), hobbies and small talk—just enough for the vagabond to bring down the paragon. Why did this two-bit Jack London do it? Envy, perhaps, or rejected sexual feelings. The failer would call it "a tragedy of history." The bewildered succeeder first tried to laugh it off as a comedy of errors. Only later did he come to see that innocence is an affront to the narrow-minded. Nixon did not like Hiss's earned air of superiority any more than Hiss liked Chambers's teeth. The mob abhors a gentleman—even a political gentleman's gentleman like the impeccable Jeeves of Yalta, the New Deal's first civil martyr.

The only explanation Hiss's lawyers could come up with was a clash of personalities. The obscure Chambers grudge was more a matter for psychiatrists than lawyers. It was rumored that Chambers had been under psychiatric care (enough, then, to disqualify him as a witness to anything). When the defense could not substantiate those rumors, lawyers remedied the oversight by bringing in a psychiatrist as part of their courtroom team and calling on him to describe the "mental illness" that made Chambers incapable of the truth—one of the first and least glorious uses of psychobiography at a distance. Still, what other weapon could be used to defend a man from what was so clearly a *psychic* affront? The question was not Hiss's innocence, but the craziness of anyone who would challenge it. That

Hiss could err was improbable: that Chambers would imagine, invent, and exaggerate was inevitable.

But one thing puzzled even Hiss's lawyers. A gentleman does not lie to his friends; and Hiss was, beyond doubt, a gentleman. Why, then, did he tell John Foster Dulles he had not called his wife about the Chambers accusations when he had? Why would he later write that he went to the first HUAC sessions without counsel, though his lawyer John F. Davis went with him? This precise and orderly man early began telling odd little needless lies, or suffering inexplicable "blackouts" of memory. In his first appearances before the House committee Hiss remembered the names of three former servants, but not of the one maid with whom he had maintained contact—the maid who worked for him, full time, for three years (the key years so far as Chambers was concerned), the woman whose whole family had been involved with the Hisses then and afterward, and the maid to whose son he gave the typewriter on which damaging documents were typed.

Perhaps he just forgot Claudia Catlett's name. But by December 7 he had remembered it. He called John F. Davis, that invisible lawyer from his first appearance before the committee, and said he had given the Woodstock to Mrs. Catlett's son. Yet three days later he suffered another spell of forgetfulness, this time under oath, and told a grand jury he had no idea where the typewriter was. He repeated this claim five days later before the same tribunal. Nor was Alger the only one who lied about that typewriter. His brother Donald later claimed that he learned of its whereabouts only when Mrs. Catlett's son came to him—though John Davis had relayed Alger's message before that.

Of course, Whittaker Chambers lied under oath. But that was to be expected. He was as clearly disreputable as Hiss was honorable. Why did the honorable man lie? How could *he* be doing "what gentlemen just don't do"? He claimed that doubts about his loyalty "had blown over" when he left the State Department to become president of the Carnegie Endowment. But they had not. John

anything. He listened to charges, separated them, minimized them, working always by reaction. His life in the years when Chambers knew him comes out, in all his own accounts, as a curious blank, filled with nothing but official endorsements and separate denials. It was important *not* to pursue greater detail—as in the case of the car. Counsel for the known partner in that transfer, William Rosen, warned Hiss's lawyers that it was arranged by "a very high communist," whose name "would be a sensation in this case."

Hiss's reluctance to proffer material of his own was so marked that defenders have made a great deal of one apparent exception—his lawyer found and produced the Woodstock typewriter the FBI was searching for. But: 1) The typewriter itself was irrelevant as evidence. The charge against Hiss rested both on Hiss's handwritten memos and on the identity of the type in letters admittedly done by Priscilla Hiss and in stolen documents produced by Chambers. 2) Alger Hiss knew generally where the typewriter was to be sought by December 7 and Donald Hiss had been told by mid-February that it had come into the possession of Ira Lockey. They sat on this knowledge for two months. 3) The lawyer who got the typewriter acted on his own initiative (not prompted by either of the Hiss brothers, despite their knowledge). And 4) that lawyer's motive seems to have been fear that the FBI, then questioning the Catletts, would build a case that Hiss was suppressing evidence.

Allen Weinstein has many—literally thousands—of new facts to offer in clarifying this much-worked-over case. But the discovery that Donald Hiss had traced the typewriter to Lockey two months before it was produced is probably the most damaging item of all. It knocks into a cocked hat all the theories of a planted, altered, or forged typewriter. Herbert Packer had shot holes in that theory in 1962,[2] arguing that the typewriter was not relevant, so building one would have been both wasteful and dangerous (depending on confidentially in all the sources of parts and expertise and planting); or that, *if* a fake machine had been produced to type

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Weinstein's discovery is important not only or mainly because it destroys the most popular theories of conspiracy against Hiss, but because it shows Hiss had reason to know those theories were flawed through all the years he has been espousing and promoting them. The honorable gentleman is misleading his own friends.

Weinstein's major findings were in the defense files. But practically everything he acquired from the FBI serves to confirm the Chambers version of events. Ironically, even the one damaging thing Hiss's lawyers most yearned for—proof of Chambers's homosexual relations—helps confirm Chambers's story. He had steeled himself to the inevitable revelation of episodes he considered supremely shameful (though in fact the defense only found one embarrassing witness—a communist—to claim Chambers was a homosexual, and it did not use him). Chambers forewarned the FBI of this damaging material, though it led the agents to distrust him. This accords with Chambers's portrayal in *Witness* of the ordeal he felt obliged to undergo, and makes melodramatic events like his own attempted suicide during the hearings far more credible.

Even improbable stuff like Chambers's fear of assassination by the communists has been vindicated. The friend he went to, Herbert Solow, shared and deepened those fears, since he had worked on the "disappearance" or murder of others who fell out with the Party—Juliette Poyntz and Adolf Rubens.[3] Weinstein's own interviews with J. Peters in Budapest, with Nadya Ulanovskaya in Jerusalem, and with Maxim Lieber have corroborated many details of Chambers's account of life in the Party underground. He has traced the reports against Hiss that were independent of Chambers—not only Elizabeth Bentley's and Hedda Massing's, but Herta Field's, Edouard Daladier's, and Igor Gouzenko's; and he has gathered later testimony on Hiss's connections with the Ware Group.

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Weinstein's use of his material is impeccably fair. He does not accept things just because they are favorable to his conclusion (see, for instance, his measured treatment of Nathaniel Weyl's and Louis Budenz's testimony). He is tentative about any charges other than those brought and proved in court. He refrains from psychological theorizing, treats Hiss defenders fairly, and shows no personal or ideological animus of any sort. The narrative of the story is cleanly told despite the mass of details he must organize. So far as any one book can dispel a large historical mystery, this book does it, magnificently.

But its virtues of restraint and hard-headedness will leave certain people unsatisfied. He does not try to explain Alger Hiss, just to deal with the evidence for certain acts having occurred. He rightly sticks to that as his first priority, and does not try to tell us *why* the acts occurred. So, the dogged and infectious air of innocence around Hiss will continue to give people pause. The problem is not simply how he could have spied for a certain period, but (even more) how he could have lied to his friends in the first place and maintained the lies with assurance—even with serenity—for over a quarter of a century.

Most of those who conclude, reluctantly, that Hiss lied cannot believe that he kept a foreign allegiance after America went to war, or—even more unthinkable—after America's break with Russia. But neither could they think that of Kim Philby, another impeccable civil servant with a disreputable friend. Philby was about to be knighted, and was being groomed to head the British secret service, when the first doubts about him forced him from the service. Hugh Trevor-Roper notes that Philby had a vague reputation as an intellectual though he showed no real interest in ideas. The same is true of Hiss, whose intellectual reputation rests almost entirely on a book Justice Holmes inscribed for him.

Philby, it should be remembered, did not flee to Russia after his first uncovering. He stayed on, maintained his innocence, and worked his way back into the service. He even profited from doubts expressed about his loyalty. Harold Macmillan, lacking legally actionable proof of Philby's Russian ties, had to exonerate him in public. "He really could not have done me a better turn if he had wanted to. By naming me he [his accuser, Colonel Lipton] virtually forced Harold Macmillan to clear me."[4] Weinstein shows that Dean Acheson's defense of Alger Hiss, at his own confirmation hearings, was dutiful, lukewarm, and motivated by Acheson's much closer ties to Donald Hiss. Acheson refused to testify for Hiss at his trial.

It was only after clear legal evidence was found against him that Philby skipped to Russia. He was facing a death penalty. Hiss, by contrast, faced much less serious charges, and had a chance to ride them out. Chambers might crack—tie himself up in imagined self-dramatizings, go crazy, or commit suicide (as he almost did). Hiss had many defenders, and his first trial ended in a hung jury. His conviction for perjury was a comparatively minor affair. He could dream of rehabilitation. Perhaps he was urged to undertake the line he did. The Russians' interest in Hiss is indicated, according to Weinstein's research, by the kinds of FBI files Judith Coplon was stealing, and by Gromyko's suggestion in 1945 that Alger Hiss be the first UN secretary general.

Weinstein does not conclude that Hiss was still engaged in espionage after the Chambers incidents. But he shows that during and after the war Hiss did ask for highly classified material outside his area of specialization. I prefer to think Hiss was a principled believer throughout this time; that his early radical sympathy did not disappear into the organization man he later made of himself; that his energetic protestations of literal innocence drew on deep conviction that he was working for the country's (and the world's) ultimate good; that he was not summoning a mistaken heroism of denial to cover up peccadilloes; that friends were deceived to advance a cause, not to salvage a career.

Hiss's strategy of total and universal denial and forgetfulness from the very outset, his refusal to volunteer autobiography, make sense if Hiss had more to hide than the Chambers documents. That is why I would not pay him the insult of believing him. I would rather think he has been serving his own gods with hidden gallantry. It is only as a secret foe that he regains the integrity people have always sensed in him. Chambers, confirmed in so many other ways, would thus be confirmed in his belief that Hiss was still a communist in 1949, an enemy he could salute even as he tried to destroy him. The drama of the courtroom was not overstated. It was a battlefield transaction.