

Alger Hiss: Truth And Consequences

PERJURY: The Hiss-Chambers Case. By Allen Weinstein. Knopf. 674 pp. \$15

By MERLE MILLER

AT 73, ALGER HISS, while not quite the star of the college lecture circuit, is receiving standing ovations and impressive fees (to be used, he says, in his continuing fight for vindication) after telling students who were not born at the time that he was the victim of a black period of American history, of Richard M. Nixon (and after Watergate who wants to doubt that?) and assorted other scoundrels, including a man named (although he used several other names at one time or another) Whittaker Chambers, who was then a senior editor at *Time* magazine and who said that he and Alger had been Communists and spies together.

At first Alger said that he had never laid eyes on the man; then he admitted that, yes, he had had a brief encounter with him although he had called himself George Crosley and had pretended to be a journalist; they had never been close, and "Crosley" turned out to be a deadbeat with bad teeth. What might be called the dental scene in this book, at the Commodore Hotel in New York, is alone worth the price of admission. Yes, Alger guessed that the "George Crosleys" had from time to time stayed in the Hiss apartment, and yes, he and his wife Priscilla had sublet an apartment to the "Crosleys" in 1935, although previously he had denied seeing "Crosley" after 1934. And, yes, out of the goodness of Alger's heart, they had at the time of the subletting thrown in an old Ford. And no one could have been more surprised than Alger when it was discovered that the

MERLE MILLER, the author of *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman*, is working on an oral biography of Lyndon Baines Johnson.

Ford ended up in the hands of a Communist functionary.

Clearly somebody was lying.

I must begin this review of Allen Weinstein's superb and detailed book by saying that I went to the second Hiss perjury trial in November 1949 (at first, eight members of the jury had believed him guilty and four had not) convinced as most good liberals were then and some still are that Alger was innocent. Had I not myself seen Chambers *lurking* around the halls of *Time* during my brief tenure there? He was a fat, untidy man, and I knew from friends on the staff that he changed a lot of copy from foreign correspondents on the grounds that it wasn't anti-Communist enough.

Alger—well, he wasn't really, but he looked and acted as if he were a true patrician, clean, with what appeared to be a perfect set of teeth, and it was impossible to imagine him *lurking*.

By January 1950—I didn't miss a day of the trial—I agreed with the jury; Alger had lied. I wrote the whole thing up for *The New Republic* saying just that, although adding that it was likely that Alger was one of those young idealists who in the 1930s agreed with that great muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens that the Soviet Union represented "the future, and it works."

I did not then address myself to the question of why so high-minded a young man should a decade later lie, a lie that later helped Senator Joe McCarthy's most preposterous charges seem possible. To many Americans, if an impeccable young man who had been secretary to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes and an impressive public servant in several responsible government jobs—the last in the State Department—and who was then president of the Carnegie Endowment, if he had been a Communist spy, then maybe ole Joe was right in saying that there were still 210 or 180 or however many it was Communists in the Department. And God and Joe alone knew where else.

(Continued on page E6)

Alger Hiss: Truth and Consequences

(Continued from page E1)

Most of my friends—a few of whom preferred to become ex-friends—believed every word that Hiss said and discounted all of Chambers' testimony despite substantial evidence that supported it.

Anyway, they said, suppose Alger had storied a little. He was either protecting his wife Priscilla—because that's the kind of noble guy he was—or his stepson Timothy Hobson, whom Chambers was alleged to have seduced, and that explained why. Or else, and this was a hypothesis Alger himself tried out then and still is trying out, Chambers, a man who admitted to homosexual experience, had made a pass at him; Alger had rejected him, and angry at being spurned, Chambers had . . .

One large, quite vehement group insisted that Alger had been a double agent and had done what he had done under the secret and personal orders of Franklin D. Roosevelt himself, although one wondered why Roosevelt would want Alger to spy on the Soviet Union since, many of these same people said, there would have been no cold war if Franklin were still alive. He and Uncle Joe Stalin, a man well known for his benevolence, understood each other. All the trouble had been started by that dreadful little man from Missouri who wore those awful double-breasted J. C. Penney suits.

Then and now the Hiss-Chambers case has seldom been discussed rationally. In those days some lifetime members of the American Civil Liberties Union wrote angry letters to newspapers saying that Chambers' an-

guished memoir, *Witness*, should not be published. If by some mischance it was, it should not be reviewed or advertised. And anyway, nobody nice would read it.

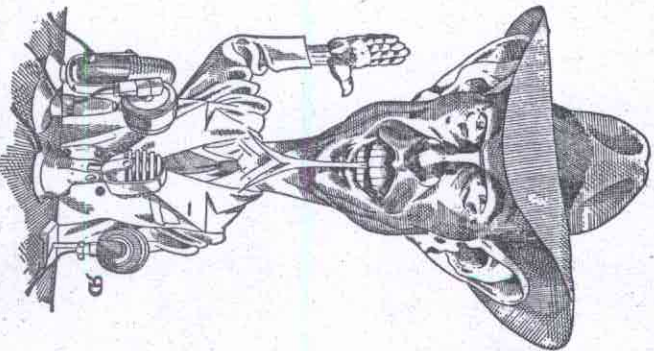
Of course, a great many people did read it and were convinced and even moved by it. Almost nobody read Alger's little book, published in 1987, called *In the Court of Public Opinion*. It said nothing that had not been said before and said it with a singular lack of passion.

I do not see how anybody can read Allen Weinstein's book and continue to believe in Alger's innocence, although a great many will. Some, without reading it, have already denounced it. Alger, somewhat shabby but still jaunty, continues to tell the same old lies, and a great many people who have listened to them and to him for 30 years continue to believe. He's a cut figure; maybe he should found a religion; perhaps he has.

He even lied to his loving and loyal son Tony, the result of which is Tony's cloyingly cute book called *Laughing Last*, which tells a good deal one would as soon not know about his parents' sex life. Tony also says that "Al" is a dandy father, which is no doubt true if one overlooks lying to his son.

Tony adds that in "Al's" Washington days he not only was not a Communist himself, he didn't even know any—at least not well—although indisputable evidence has proved for 30 years now that many people he worked with and saw socially in those days have admitted that they were Party members.

I have seen Alger, though not frequently, quite a few times since November of 1984 when he got out of Lewisburg prison, where he spent 44



months. One long afternoon he sat on a sofa in my living room saying that the only regret of his life was the failure of his marriage. When a drunken friend said that he had once considered Hiss "the worst traitor since Benedict Arnold," Alger smiled disarmingly—he often does—and said, "A great many people do, but before the end of my life I shall prove them wrong."

Now he says that he expects to be "respected and vindicated" by the time he is 80, in 1982; after all, Holmes was 88 when Alger started working for him.

Alger is not a simple man. I go along with the late Hiram Haydn, the writer and editor, who while he was at Random House described what was to have been a job interview with Alger. Haydn wrote, "Mask succeeded mask, role role, personality personality. There was a half-hour during which our actual situation was reversed, as though he had granted me an interview."

It is quite possible that Alger now himself believes he was innocent and believes the nonsense about the "faked" Woodstock typewriter—which Alger's supporters thought was used to forge copies of government documents—the details of which I leave to Weinstein. Three years ago at his favorite Greenwich Village restaurant, Alger told me that he knew who had built the phony Woodstock and where the man lived. He said he was going to announce his findings to the press in a week or so.

There are those who say that Allen Weinstein's book is cruel and inhuman, again without having read it, which is the best way. Hasn't poor Alger suffered enough? Perhaps, although he has always seemed to me to enjoy the role of martyr. He may be, as Tony says, laughing last, laughing at his lengthy success as an impostor. He has betrayed his country, his family, and his friends, and as a great many writers, including E. M. Forster, Shakespeare, and Dante, have said, betraying one's friends is a far more heinous crime than betraying one's country.

Allen Weinstein's obligation was not to soften things up for Alger; his obligation was to history, and he has performed it brilliantly. □