

The Editorial Notebook

The Conspirators

The controversy over "Perjury," Alan Weinstein's new book about the Hiss-Chambers case, has given fresh work to the cottage industry dedicated to manufacturing theories of conspiracy for the convenience of Alger Hiss. Mr. Weinstein, a historian, studied newly released F.B.I. files as well as defense materials, and concluded that the jury that convicted Alger Hiss was right: he had lied about his relationship with Whittaker Chambers and had passed State Department documents to that courier for the Russians. If those who have been committed to the Hiss cause for three decades were susceptible to evidence, this imposing work would end the matter, but that is unrealistic.

To hold to the innocence of Alger Hiss requires a belief that he was the victim of a psycho-political conspiracy fomented by Whittaker Chambers, Richard Nixon, J. Edgar Hoover and the like. The Conspiracy Against Alger Hiss, a perennial favorite in the trade, is not the only such model still in production. The Conspiracy Against Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a companion piece, is also available at selected outlets.

Our conspiracy designers begin their production process with a firm faith that wherever there is a Red-hunter, there are no Reds, and that the C.I.A.

and the F.B.I. have a monopoly on the world's dirty tricks. From here on, the production line practically runs itself. Any observer who concludes that so-and-so was a Communist or spy must have ulterior motives; prosecution witnesses must be either venal or mad. Circumstantial evidence is, well, circumstantial. If the evidence begins to grow oppressive, it can be explained as Forgery by Typewriter. Most important, any rumor, hint, supposition, any possibility becomes raw material for construction of an over-arching conspiracy. Imagination is encouraged.

There are related models produced by associated enterprises: The Conspiracy Against John F. Kennedy and the Conspiracy Against Martin Luther King. The left's taste in culprits has never been entirely satisfied by Lee Harvey Oswald or James Earl Ray, and elaborate theories involving rich Texans, Cuban émigrés and, of course, the C.I.A., are hauled out seasonally for test runs. The right wing, too, has its favorite conspiracy theories, which attribute all manner of witchcraft to rad-libs. But these have been muted since the decline of Spiro Agnew.

What can account for the readiness of educated people to swallow any sort of farrago rather than accept the overwhelming evidence that Alger Hiss was and remains a liar? In part, the ex-

planation may lie in the Manichean political mentality found on both ends of the political spectrum; it wallows in tales that pit shadowy powers against a single right-thinking or left-feeling individual. For veterans of the Alger Hiss brigade to give up on him now not only would be desertion; it would call into doubt a deeply held view of the way the world works. Lifetime faiths are at stake.

But an official conspiracy of the proportions needed to frame Alger Hiss or the Rosenbergs, to say nothing of killing a President, would have had to involve scores of people, some of whom would by now assuredly have written their memoirs. If this were a nation where official secrets could be well kept, Richard Nixon might still be President. (As a matter of fact, the tack taken by Mr. Nixon's defenders to steer free of Watergate was not so different from that of the Hiss forces; one rebuttal, remember, had to do with an anti-Nixon cabal within the C.I.A.) Alas, Watergate may have created a new and receptive audience for conspiracy theories. It will doubtless be served. For those who have dedicated themselves to Alger Hiss, what choice is there after 30 years but to keep improvising conspiracies or concede that they have been conspirators in a farce?

WALTER GOODMAN