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Whittaker Chambers before the House Un-American Activities Committee on Aug. 25, 1948

World

Witness for the Prosecution

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WHITTAKER CHAMBERS

A Biography

By Sam Tanenhaus
Random House. 638 pp. \$35

By David Oshinsky

ON A BLISTERING August afternoon in 1948, a conservative journalist accused a liberal former government official of belonging to the Communist Party a decade before. The journalist was Whittaker Chambers, an editor at Time magazine; the former official was Alger Hiss, then president of the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace. Chambers's testimony before the rabidly right-wing House Un-American Activities Committee set off a political firestorm that smolders to this day. Was Hiss a traitor or the victim of a right-wing witch hunt? Was Chambers a liar or a born-again patriot with a crucial story to tell?

Sam Tanenhaus devotes about half of his splendid biography to these questions, and his verdict is clear: Chambers told the truth. Yet it is the other half of his book, apart from the Hiss case, that constitutes the more interesting and original part of the story. The

David Oshinsky, a professor of history at Rutgers, is the author of "A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy."

Whittaker Chambers we meet in these pages is a brooding loner who sees every human event as a struggle between good and evil, with nothing in between. He is both a relentless crusader and a perfect fatalist—always ready for battle, fully prepared for defeat.

Born outside New York City in 1901, Chambers grew up amid lunacy and pain. His only sibling committed suicide, his grandmother roamed the house with a hatchet, and his bisexual father often deserted the family for months. A talented but troubled young man, Chambers withdrew from Columbia University after writing a "blasphemous" play, and then lost his job at the New York Public Library when stolen books were found in his locker. In 1925 he joined the infant Communist Party, barely 7,000 strong. "He was used to being outnumbered," writes Tanenhaus. "He had at last found his church."

The Communists put him to work as a propagandist. "Almost overnight," Tanenhaus writes, he became "the 'hottest literary Bolshevik' in New York," praised for his authentic portrayals of the working-class struggle. The party, however, had bigger plans for him. In 1931, after marrying a fellow Communist, he left New York to join the "underground." As an Ivy League Protestant in an organization of working-class immigrants, Chambers seemed perfect for espionage. His job: to earn the con- —Continued on page 11

hicle of mass enlightenment."

There was another side to this story, however. Rising to the rank of foreign news editor in 1944, Chambers began a tireless campaign to portray Stalinist Russia, then a wartime ally, as a monstrous regime determined to expand communism throughout the world. As a result, he either ignored or rewrote the cables of Time field correspondents who did not accept his point of view, including John Hersey and Theodore White. It turned out that Chambers was largely correct about events in Europe, where the Russians moved in quickly to fill the void left by Hitler's defeat. Yet his exaggeration of the global threat emanating from Moscow, as well as his method of stifling dissent within the ranks, led to a full-scale rebellion that nearly cost him his job.

When the call came from HUAC in 1948, Chambers was both frightened and relieved. He wanted to warn the country about domestic subversion, yet he feared the consequences of telling the truth. If he spoke openly about his role in espionage, he could be prosecuted and forced to betray one-time friends. In addition, his active homosexual life in the 1930s—"my darkest personal secret," he wrote—could well be exposed.

On the witness stand, Chambers told far less than he knew. After describing the formation of a "Communist cell" in Washington, and naming Alger Hiss as one of its key members, he focused on the group's attempt to mold government policy, not to pilfer secrets. Even so, the headlines were spectacular: "Time Editor Charges Carnegie Endowment Chief with Red Ties."

Hiss demanded—and received—a HUAC invitation to respond. "I am not and have never been a member of the Communist Party," he declared. "To the best of my knowledge, I [have] never heard of Whittaker Chambers." His confident manner shook HUAC to the core. "We've been had," moaned one committee member. "We're ruined." In an editorial the next morning, The Washington Post likened Hiss to "an innocent pedestrian, splattered with mud by a passing vehicle."

Only one HUAC member expressed his doubts about Hiss's credibility: a first-term California congressman named Richard Nixon. Aided by Robert Stripling,

the committee's chief investigator, Nixon studied the testimony of Hiss and Chambers as well as classified documents supplied by J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. As Tanenhaus demonstrates, however, it was Stripling who did the heavy lifting while Nixon grabbed the lion's share of credit. And it was Stripling who kept the investigation on track when Nixon panicked over details gone awry. "This is the end of my political career!" the congressman would scream at committee members.

In September 1948, Hiss filed a \$75,000 slander suit against Chambers for calling him a communist on the national radio show "Meet the Press." In response, Chambers retrieved the "life preserver" he had hidden a decade before. It included five rolls of microfilm and summaries of confidential government documents written by Hiss in longhand or typed on a Woodstock typewriter he owned at that time. These documents convinced a federal grand jury to indict Hiss for lying under oath before HUAC. (The 10-year statute of limitations on espionage had just run out.)

Tanenhaus portrays the case as both a political and cultural drama played out against the rising emotions of the domestic Cold War. Hiss was the quintessential New Dealer—confident and well-connected, with degrees from Johns Hopkins and Harvard Law School. His liberal admirers included Eleanor Roosevelt, Adlai Stevenson and Felix Frankfurter, to name a few. Nixon regarded Hiss and his "crowd" as condescending elitists who looked down on real-

Americans like himself. From their first encounter, Stripling noted, Nixon "set his hat on Hiss. It was a personal thing."

This did not mean that Hiss was an innocent scapegoat. The evidence of his treason was entirely convincing in 1948, says Tanenhaus, and, indeed, is even more damning today. In 1995, he notes, the National Security Agency released hundreds of Russian spy cables decoded by American counterintelligence experts. One such cable, dated March 30, 1945, identified a Soviet agent code-named "Ales" who bears an unmistakable resemblance to Alger Hiss.

THE FIRST TRIAL ended in a hung jury; the second trial brought a guilty verdict, and a sentence of five years in the federal penitentiary at Lewisburg, Pa. The main weakness in Tanenhaus's account is his failure to tie this courtroom drama to larger world events. There is little in these pages that link the Hiss case to rising Cold War tensions fueled by China's fall to communism or Russia's successful testing of an atomic bomb.

Luce did not ask Chambers back, fearing a backlash among Time readers and the staff. Instead, Chambers retired to his farm to write his autobiography, a

riveting account of his life on the margins of society. At 800 pages, *Witness* became an instant best-seller in 1952, described by the *New York Times* as one of the "most significant" memoirs of the modern era. Shortly thereafter, William F. Buckley hired Chambers as a columnist for his new magazine, *The National Review*. Though the two men admired each other, Chambers never quite fit in. Unlike many conservatives, he came to fear and despise Sen. Joseph McCarthy as an embarrassment to responsible anti-communism. And his deep libertarian streak caused him to oppose the effort to deny Alger Hiss a passport in 1959.

At his death from a heart attack in 1961, Chambers was a hero to the American right. His broadsides against socialism, "statism," and atheism were quoted by Sen. Barry Goldwater and President Ronald Reagan, who awarded Chambers a posthumous Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, in 1984. With this new book, Sam Tanenhaus has given Chambers the best tribute of all—a firm place in history. His passionate work of scholarship recalls the words that Arthur Koestler wrote upon learning of Chambers's death: "The witness is gone, the testimony will stand." ■