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## Alger Hiss: Liar, Spy, Traitor ...

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Anchorman Peter Jennings concluded his elegiac obituary of Alger Hiss on ABC's evening news broadcast Nov. 16 by noting Boris Yeltsin had declared that nothing in KGB files branded the former State Department official a Soviet espionage agent. The problem is that the Russian president never said any such thing.

The source of this misinformation might have been a dispatch by Agence France-Presse claiming Yeltsin "recently said secret KGB files confirmed that Hiss never worked for the Soviets." AFP possibly was confused by a statement supposedly clearing Hiss from the late Gen. Dmitri Volkogonov, military historian and sometime Yeltsin adviser. But Volkogonov recanted by admitting he had not inspected files of Soviet military intelligence, where Whittaker Chambers said he and Hiss were employed.

Other obituaries did not go as far as Jennings, but the prevailing tone suggested that here was an unsolved riddle of the Cold War. Allen Weinstein, whose 1978 book "Perjury" conclusively found Hiss guilty, told me this was "exoneration by obituary."

That is ironic considering the new evidence substantiating Chambers's accusations that he and Hiss were secret agents: from Communist spy Noel Field's confession that Hiss was his key accomplice to the National Security Agency's deceptions identifying Hiss as Soviet agent "Ales."

Why then, 50 years after the event, is there deep-seated reluctance within the American liberal

establishment to acknowledge that Hiss was a liar, a spy and a traitor?

The answer is in the corollaries to Hiss's guilt: Joe McCarthy, for all his excesses, had a point. Freshman Rep. Richard Nixon performed a signal service in pursuing Hiss. The New Deal harbored Communists and even traitors in high places.

To accept Hiss's guilt implies an acceptance of Chambers's description of the New Deal (in "Witness," his 1952 account of the Hiss case): "It was a revolution by bookkeeping and lawmaking. In so far as it was successful, the power of politics had replaced the power of business. This is the basic power shift of all the revolutions of our time. . . . Whether the revolutionists prefer to call themselves Fabians, who seek power by the inevitability of gradualism, or Bolsheviks, who seek power by the dictatorship of the proletariat, the struggle is for power."

Chambers wrote that Hiss could not be separated from the New Deal and liberalism. Nixon, to his dying day, believed the dominant political culture never forgave him for uncovering Hiss. Roger Morris, in order to destroy Nixon's credibility in "Richard Milhous Nixon: The Rise of an American Politician" (1991), embraced a conspiracy theory of a plot to frame Hiss.

Liberal historian Walter LaFeber contends, "It was the Hiss trial . . . that triggered the McCarthy era." To McCarthyites, he continues, Hiss became the symbol for an establishment "that had sold the nation out."

Thus, disregarding all new evidence, LaFeber concludes that the

question of Hiss's guilt or innocence "is like the argument over who started the Cold War—it's going to go on forever." This stance from a supposedly serious historian of the Cold War links continued defense of Hiss to revisionist analysis of Soviet intentions.

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan is one liberal intellectual with no doubts about Hiss's guilt—and a theory about why the best and the brightest betray their country.

In his new book, "Miles to Go: A Personal History of Social Policy," Moynihan notes that the United States suffered through a brutal series of booms and busts between 1890 and 1945, climaxed by the Great Depression and 25 percent unemployment. Since the Employment Act of 1946, there has been stability (reason enough, the senator says, to oppose a balanced budget constitutional amendment). But Hiss and his colleagues had witnessed the failure of capitalism and their own New Deal, and they turned to Moscow.

Moynihan expounded this theory to me the day it was announced that the CIA's Harold Nicholson had been arrested for giving secrets to the Kremlin, as Hiss did. Unlike Hiss and like Aldrich Ames, Nicholson allegedly did it for money, not ideology.

But Alger Hiss's idealistic base for his treason is no reason to persist in unfounded doubts about his guilt. It is surely no reason to confuse matters with manufactured assessments by Boris Yeltsin.

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*George F. Will*

## ... Emblem of the Governing Class

Alger Hiss spent 44 months in prison and then his remaining 42 years in the dungeon of his grotesque fidelity to the fiction of his innocence. The costs of his unconditional surrender to the totalitarian temptation was steep for his supporters. Clinging to their belief in his martyrdom in order to preserve their belief in their "progressive" virtue, they were drawn into an intellectual corruption that hastened the moral bankruptcy of the American left.

Hiss died last week at 92. The insufferable agnosticism expressed in many obituaries concerning his guilt is proof of the continuing queasiness of "anti-anti-communist" thinkers confronting the facts of communism and its servants.

When Hiss was accused of espionage for the Soviet Union, his background—Johns Hopkins and Harvard Law School; protege of Felix Frankfurter; aide to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes; a diplomatic career that carried him to the upper reaches of the State Department, and to Yalta and the United Nations' birth in San Francisco; at the time of the accusation, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—made him a perfect symbol of cosmopolitan sophistication under siege from America's paranoid majority of yahoos. And then there was his accuser, Whittaker Chambers.

Porcine, rumpled and tormented, with bad teeth and a worse tailor, he was as declassé as Hiss was elegantly emblematic of the governing class. The trouble was that Chambers knew things. He knew Hiss.

When Chambers said that while he had been a communist operative he had dealt with Hiss, Hiss testified that

he had never known "a man by the name of Whittaker Chambers." A very lawyerly answer, that. During his protracted self-destruction, he was driven to admit to having known Chambers by another name, but not well. However, Chambers knew so many intimacies—from Hiss's household effects to the thrill Hiss, an amateur ornithologist, felt when he spotted a prothonotary warbler—that Hiss was forced to weave an ever more tangled web.

He lied about transferring his car through Chambers to communists, and about not remembering how he had disposed of the Woodstock typewriter on which some incriminating documents had been typed. He lied by omitting from a list of former maids the one to whose family he gave the typewriter. He was convicted of perjury (the statute of limitations saved him from espionage charges).

In 1978 historian Allen Weinstein, who began his research believing Hiss innocent, published his definitive "Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case," based on 40,000 pages of previously classified material and interviews with 40 people involved in the case but never before interviewed, including Soviet agents who confirmed Chambers's testimony. Weinstein's conclusion: "There has yet to emerge, from any source, a coherent body of evidence that seriously undermines the credibility of the evidence against Mr. Hiss."

What emerged after the end of the Cold War would have made peace hell for Hiss, had he been susceptible to guilt or even embarrassment. A Soviet general, falsely described as familiar with all pertinent archives, was pressured by a Hiss emissary to say there

was no evidence of Hiss espionage. The general later recanted. From Russia came documents confirming Chambers's account of the communist underground in the United States in the 1930s. From Hungarian archives came documentary evidence (from another Harvard-educated American spy) that Hiss spied.

In a 1990 memoir, a former KGB officer asserted that Hiss's Soviet code name was "Ales." Earlier this year, the U.S. government released files from the "Venona Project," which intercepted 2,200 wartime Soviet cables. A March 30, 1945, cable refers to an agent Ales in terms congruent with testimony about Hiss by Chambers and others.

There is no hatred as corrupting as intellectual hatred, so Hiss's supporters always responded to evidence by redoubling their concoction of roccoco reasons for believing him framed by a conspiracy so vast and proficient it left no trace of itself. They still require his innocence so they can convict America of pathological injustice. Never has so much ingenuity been invested in so low a cause, or such futility.

Hiss loyalists finally were reduced to proclaiming that their loyalty was self-vindicating. As one of them said, "Alger would not have put his friends and others through what they went through for him if he was guilty." That is, he was either innocent or a moral monster, which is unthinkable. No, indubitable. He, enveloped in his enigmatic fanaticism, and they, impervious to evidence, were all monstrosities, huddled together for warmth in what G. K. Chesterton called "the clean well-lit prison of one idea."