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Above photos by Associated Press; Right photo from the dust jacket of "Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case"
Then-Rep. Richard Nixon, above left, Whittaker Chambers and Alger Hiss, right. Far right, Allen Weinstein.

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A Literary Skirmish Over Hiss

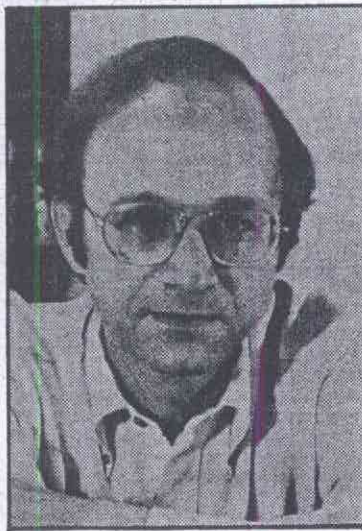
Attack and Counterattack, in a Battle Fought for 30 Years

By Michael Kernan

The Hiss-Chambers affair is 30 years old and heading into its second generation — and people who were in knee pants when it began still get fighting mad over it.

The latest episode on Publishers Row is the lead article in the April 8 *Nation* magazine, titled "The Case Not Proved Against Alger Hiss, an Investigation by Victor Navasky." It consists of an attack on Allen Weinstein's just-published book, which concludes that Hiss was "guilty as charged" of perjury.

And Weinstein's book, "Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case," followed on the heels of another book, by John Chabot Smith, defending Hiss. Furious magazine pieces and reviews have swirled around New York, especially after Weinstein laid out some of his findings in an article two years ago in *The New York Review of Books*.



And so, Alistair Cooke's comment that the case put "a generation on trial" continues to reverberate.

Weinstein's book, five years in the writing, draws on a huge mass of new material — 30,000 pages of FBI and Justice Department records, interviews with former Soviet spymasters and other figures — so overwhelming, Weinstein says, that he himself switched from his initial belief in Hiss' innocence.

And now Navasky attacks the 40-year-old Smith College historian with a series of statements by Weinstein interviewees, denying some of the things that the book has them saying.

I sent Xeroxed galleys to the sources for some of Weinstein's most spectacular research finds, people who haven't been talked to before, Navasky said, and I asked whether his use of their quotes reflected what

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they had told him. I put the nickel in—and hit the jackpot.

But Weinstein says he stands by his research and welcomes inspection of his documents.

For those who came in late, the original case went something like this

Hiss was handsome and tall, a Harvard Law graduate and Phi Beta Kappa who glided easily through life as clerk for Justice Oliver Wendell Hillmes, State Department golden boy, presiding officer at the United Nations organizing conference, president of the Carnegie Endowment. Whitaker Chambers, fat and rumped, was a former Communist, later a senior editor at Time.

On Aug. 3, 1948, Chambers testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee that he had known Hiss as a fellow Communist. A young member of the committee, Rep. Richard Nixon, seized on the case in the face of a cool and effective denial by Hiss of any knowledge of Chambers and his charges.

The case wound its tortuous way through a peculiarly American landscape a prothonotary warbler, a pumpkin containing microfilm, a typewriter who imprint allegedly was gorged.

Denying everything steadfastly (though he finally had to acknowledge that he had known Chambers under another name), Hiss was indicted for perjury. His first trial ended in a hung jury; his second, in 1950, sent him to jail for 44 months.

Now 73, Hiss still maintains his innocence and has filed a petition to set aside the trial verdict. Chambers died in 1961. His book, "Witness," came out in 1952.

The Navasky article mainly concerns itself with Weinstein's scholarship, his use of quotations, treatment of context and factual precision. A number of people who produced new information in the book told Navasky that they had been misrepresented.

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To take one example out of 10 listed, here are the claims about Maxim Lieber, identified in the book as "Chambers' sometimes associate in the underground," who Weinstein said named one "J. Peter," or Jozef Peters, "as the head of the whole Communist espionage apparatus in this country."

According to the book, Peters and Chambers set up the plan for the American Feature Writers Syndicate, an espionage cover. According to the book, Lieber said, "Some things are romanticized in 'Witness' but most of it, as I know of the incidents, is true." And Lieber is quoted as confirming chambers' identification of Col. Boris Bykov as his Russian spymaster.

Lieber, now ailing and elderly, wrote to Navasky that Weinstein must have "made all these things up out of whole cloth" and that he knew nothing of the underground or of Peters as its head. He denied that the writers group was an underground project. "I never read 'Witness.' I do not remember meeting anyone named Bykov; I never met any Russian with Chambers."

Now talk to Weinstein—who invites Navasky, Hiss or anybody else to examine his thousands of documents, his tapes and notes, his original 1,600-page manuscript.

"Lieber and I corresponded for

three years," he said, "and he was friendly until last May. I have a dozen letters and a 36-page transcript of a taped interview."

He showed the quotations on the tape transcript: Lieber speaks of seeing Bykov and of seeing Bykov together with Peters. He describes Peters physically.

"Was it through Chambers that you learned of (Peters') role as head of the underground?" Weinstein asks on the tape. "Yes," replies Lieber.

Weinstein: "Do you know that passage in 'Witness' where he kind of appeals to you to come out and tell everything you know—you've read 'Witness,' of course..."

Lieber: "Well, I've read it..."

Now listen to Maxim Lieber, speaking yesterday from his East Hartford home:

"Weinstein came to see me under false colors, representing himself as very friendly to Hiss. I never would have said a single word to him if I'd known he was friendly to Chambers.

"I may have said things I wouldn't have said under different circumstances... I never read the book 'Witness.' I was out of the country from 1950 to 1963, and it was published in 1952..."

He was in Mexico when the book, a Weinstein, whose attitude toward the case changed gradually during the

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five years of research because, he said, of the accumulating challenges to Hiss' credibility, stands by his book.

"I have tapes of several other interviews that contradict Navasky's quotes, and I also have a mass of corroborative evidence and documents in support of my statements," he said.

Several of the other people quoted by Navasky as being misrepresented had written Weinstein earlier, Weinstein says—to repudiate him because he had changed his position in the case.

This summer he plans to write an essay responding to "legitimate criticism." The Navasky article was not unexpected, he said. Weinstein also foresees a hostile review by John Chabot Smith in a future issue of Harper's since Smith has been asking Smith College for information about Weinstein's finances and background.

It was Smith's 1976 book, "Alger Hiss: The True Story," that served as the framework for Weinstein's critique in *The New York Review*.

Buckley's "Firing Line" invited Navasky several times to meet me in public, and he refused," Weinstein said. "I'll meet him any time. And if he feels he needs help, since he puts down everyone else as generalists, he can bring along all the experts he wants, including Hiss."

Navasky's reply: "The producers of 'Firing Line' called me when I was in the middle of writing my article and asked if I would debate the case, taking the position that Hiss was innocent, while Weinstein took the other side and a Baltimore newspaperman would moderate. Well, I haven't taken that kind of position at all. I don't know where I'll come out about Hiss. I suggested sending someone who had really specialized in the case to take that position—and I'd be happy to be the third party and ask the questions.

"I'd be happy to be part of a discussion with Allen Weinstein on the question of his scholarship. Someone else should take up the matter of his thesis."

So don't touch that dial . . . not yet.



Alger Hiss, 1975, by James A. Parcell—*The Washington Post*