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 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...
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 Holmes, State Department golden boy, presiding officer at the United Nations organizing conference, president of the Carnegie Endowment. Whitaker Chambers, fat and rumpled, 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 imputed 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.


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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fifteen 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.