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# Father Knew Best

**LAUGHING LAST: Alger Hiss.**  
By Tony Hiss. Houghton Mifflin. 194 pp. \$8.95

By BRUCE COOK

**A**LTHOUGH TONY HISS's brief book about his father is far from perfect, *Laughing Last* is certainly a necessary book. It should also fascinate anyone with even a casual background—a reader will need at least that—in the case that dirtied the reputation of Alger Hiss and provided Richard M. Nixon with a springboard that brought him eventually to the presidency.

In a way, it may seem remarkable that there is anything left to be said. After all, Whittaker Chambers made personal melodrama of it all in his best-selling *Witness*. Alger Hiss himself countered with *In the Court of Public Opinion*. In addition, there was Alistair Cooke's early and reasonably skeptical account of the affair. And more recently Michael Zelig's *Friend-*

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*ship and Fratricide*, which took much of what Chambers said quite literally, explored the supposed relationship of the accuser and his accused. Just last year, in *Alger Hiss, the True Story*, John Smith made use of the original pumpkin papers and other previously restricted material to which he had gained access through the Freedom of Information Act, and made an impres-

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sive defense of Hiss. What, after all this, has Tony Hiss to add?

Alger's son, a staff writer on *The New Yorker*, has written the account his father earlier refused to write. In *In the Court of Public Opinion* was a lawyer's book, in effect a careful brief for the defense which brought together evidence that had been overlooked at the time of his perjury trial and other

material that he felt had not been given proper emphasis. Some said it was a cold book. It was certainly an impersonal one. Alger Hiss seemed so reluctant to discuss his feelings during the ordeal that it may have appeared he had none.

Well, he did, as *Laughing Last* makes clear. Over the years he has talked freely about the affair with Tony Hiss, as he naturally would to his son. Tony kept notes from these conversations and has pored over his father's past with an eye that has been sharpened by years of reporting for his magazine's "Talk of the Town" section. The result is a decent, unpretentious and quite personal book that can and probably should be read as a supplement to Alger's. Don't look in it for an orderly presentation of the Hiss-Chambers affair and the resultant trials. What you will find, however, is a fascinating account of his father's early life—Baltimore, Harvard, his brief career in private practice, and his long service as a New Deal lawyer—that makes clear how and why Hiss subsequently became a prime target for Chambers and Nixon.

As Tony Hiss presents him, Alger comes across as a kind of patsy, too naively virtuous to have guarded himself properly against the attacks of less

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## Alger Hiss

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principled enemies. Was he? Could he have survived in the Federal government with a political sense so undeveloped? Yes, I think he could, for Hiss was a man who lived by his intelligence. He was known for his ability to think problems through and come up with reasonable solutions. This was his peculiar value to the Roosevelt administration. It is easy to see how such a man, one who believed profoundly in the System, could fall prey to those

who had found how to subvert the System and make it work for them.

What Tony Hiss provides here is a personal perspective on all this. He did not know Chambers, Nixon, or any of the others involved in the Hiss case, and he scrupulously addresses himself only to what and whom he does know. As a result, we get not much on the trials, but rather the sort of intimate picture of the effect of the ordeal on Alger Hiss and his family that until now nobody had provided. We get the story of the three years Hiss spent in jail following his conviction for perjury. We learn of how, upon his release, his marriage fell apart. And we find out, in a rather poignant chapter titled

"Son of Liar," the influence all this had on young Tony as he was growing up.

Occasionally the tone of the book falters. Tony Hiss sometimes adopts a colloquial, almost breezy manner to help himself over the rough spots. Thus, what he is saying is often oddly at variance with how he says it. Nevertheless it all manages somehow to get said—not perhaps the whole Hiss-Chambers story, but certainly as much of it as Tony Hiss himself knows.

If, in a sense, Alger Hiss's intelligence and high principles were his undoing, they later proved his salvation. For after all, he had an advantage: he knew he was right. After pris-

on he found a new life for himself in New York, and as his son informs us in the book's first lines, "At the age of seventy-two, my dad, Alger Hiss, has never been happier in his life."

In the end what does it prove, this cautionary tale of a man brought low? Tony Hiss has a handle on that, too: "My father was a decent, hardworking blind fool in a pack of shrewd operators. Every time something needed to be done that the shrewd shuddered at, it was given to Al. So the Nixon case was the ultimate result of this. And Nixon has proved that sooner or later the shrewd are outshrewded." □

Alger Hiss is laughing last.