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Q and A

Author Talks Of Hiss Case, Nixon's Role

Allen Weinstein, author of the controversial book "Perjury, The Hiss-Chambers Case," was interviewed by Washington Star Staff Writer Jeffrey A. Frank.

Question: *The events, the trials and the heat of the Alger Hiss case have been over for decades. Why are we so interested in the Hiss case today?*

Weinstein: I think that one reason has been picked up very nicely by The New York Times — namely that a number of Americans interested in the political history of the last 30 years have invested an extraordinary amount of interpretive and symbolic commitment to the case. So, if not in reality, at least in the imagination of many politically conscious Americans the case has come to stand for perhaps much more than the facts themselves.

Q: *In the iconography at the end of the book you speak of the case being dealt with in symbols and images beyond the fact. What do you mean by that?*

A: Well, for one thing, you have the figure of Richard Nixon moving across the case. And almost any case of this kind in which Nixon figures so prominently would inevitably disturb passions on both sides. Nixon's role in the case has been disputed from the beginning. Hiss supporters have claimed that Nixon was involved somehow in the frameup against him. Even those who believed in Hiss' guilt always had difficulty in dealing with the case, partly because of the fact that it was the case that brought Nixon to prominence. As for Nixon, he babbled incessantly about the Hiss case all throughout the Watergate crisis, urging his advisers to read and re-read "Six Crises" — I believe Colson holds the record for 14 times for that intolerable book. But still it was a case which obsessed his imagination. He kept, I think, yearning for the far simpler, more exciting and

naturally more positive moment in his career when all America had focused on the activities of Richard Nixon in a friendlier vein.

Q: *Nixon was not the cool, shrewd investigator that he liked to portray?*

A: Nixon was frightened, anxious, politically obsessed. And at the critical moment in the case, knowing that Whittaker Chambers was about to spring what later became identified as the Pumpkin Papers, Nixon fled to a cruise ship vacation, recognizing that if things worked out he would be recalled to front page headlines. If things did not work out, if the papers were not genuine and something interfered, then he was far from the scene of carnage. The Nixon of the latter stages of the Hiss case would be fully recognizable to careful readers of the Watergate tapes.

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WEINSTEIN

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Q: You quoted a letter that Chambers wrote to William Buckley in which he himself did not think a good deal of Nixon either, even though he thought Nixon his friend.

A: Chambers is a very complicated fellow as we all know. And among his many complications was his changed attitude towards Nixon. He called Nixon his friend. Nixon had assisted him during the Hiss case. He was grateful. At the same time he never thought Nixon had the capacity to be president. He said as much to Buckley and to other friends. And he worried about the country and about Nixon if Nixon became president. Chambers was also horrified at McCarthy. He felt McCarthy was a disaster for the cause that was nearest to Chambers' heart, namely anti-Communist.

Q: Hiss only reluctantly admitted knowing Chambers but Chambers called Hiss his best friend at one time. Did they ever have a friendship that you could call a close friendship?

A: That's difficult to determine. I think it's fair to say that both Chambers and Hiss have a propensity for describing people as friends who quite often would not recognize themselves in that description. I'm prepared to accept the fact that the Hisses, both of the Hisses, were intrigued by Chambers, and perhaps horrified at the same time, but certainly fascinated, and for the period of their involvement together in the 1930s, I think they probably could be described as friendly. Whether you would describe them as best friends or not, I don't know. There's no evidence of that.

Q: Why has Hiss continued to defend himself in the face of so much evidence?

A: What choice does he have? If for the 30 years you had been a rallying point for friends, supporters, people who because of their own political liberalism believed that, in effect, you had been wrongly convicted — at this point thinking about E.M. Forster's comment about betraying one's friends or betraying one's country, the choice one has — wouldn't it be a betrayal of one's friends to turn around and say, "Well, yes, this is what happened." Or, some people have suggested to me that he may have come to genuinely believe in his innocence by now. I do my best in this book not to speculate about motives. I present what facts I have that bear on the question of motivation, but I've tried to be fairly restrained about that.

Q: You spoke to J. Peters, who was highly placed in the Soviet espionage ring here. How pervasive was this Communist underground?

A: Well, I don't think it was pervasive in the government in the '30s. I think you're talking about a patchwork group of people who lived on quite dif-

ferent things. You have to distinguish immediately between the professionals and the amateurs. Chambers was a professional. He may have been a good or a bad one, but he was a person who was being paid to wander about and organize this network of people stealing things. Hiss and the others who took documents at the time were amateurs. They were doing it in part because of their ideological commitments to communism, in part because of their anger at Hitler, in part because of the Spanish Civil War, and in large part because of the fascination of living a second life, a secret life, a dual life, as a romantic conspirator. I think that fascination's probably still with us.

Q: It has also a particularly American flavor to it. Chambers wouldn't even go to Baltimore when J. Peters assigned him there.

A: Chambers — I call him "the unsecret agent." The most amazing thing about Chambers in the 1930s is the number of lives he led simultaneously. He was a family man, raising two children. He was in the underground, working there. He would go and visit his non-Communist, in fact even by then anti-Stalinist friends and Communist friends in New York and tell them what he was doing. And he would even be, on occasional moments, cruising the streets of Baltimore and New York for homosexual pickups. It was an incredible story. One of the things I've tried to do is to restore the drama of the damn thing.

Q: You tracked Peters all the way to Budapest, didn't you?

A: It's not a question of tracking him in that sense. I was helped. A correspondent for the New York Times tracked him, but he refused to see that correspondent. He agreed to see me, God knows why. I came the day of the Hungarian party congress. Brezhnev was in town, and all the other Russian leaders. Security was very tight. Everywhere you walked in my hotel, people would peer at you. Two minutes before Peters showed up at our interview, a knock on the door — this was out of a grade B melodrama, really. A chambermaid who talked English was there. She said "plumbing bad." And these two very strapping fellows, without a callous on either hand, walk into the room dressed as plumbers. I said, "What's wrong with the plumbing?" She said, "Toilet seat shakes." They went into the toilet, spent a few minutes banging on the pipes and things and kind of left, and I walked into the toilet. Of course, it still shook. And no more than 30 seconds after that J. Peters walked into the room. And I made some crack to him about how he just missed his plumbers.