The Honor of Alger Hiss

Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case
by Allen Weinstein.
Knopf, 674 pp., $15.00

Garry Wills

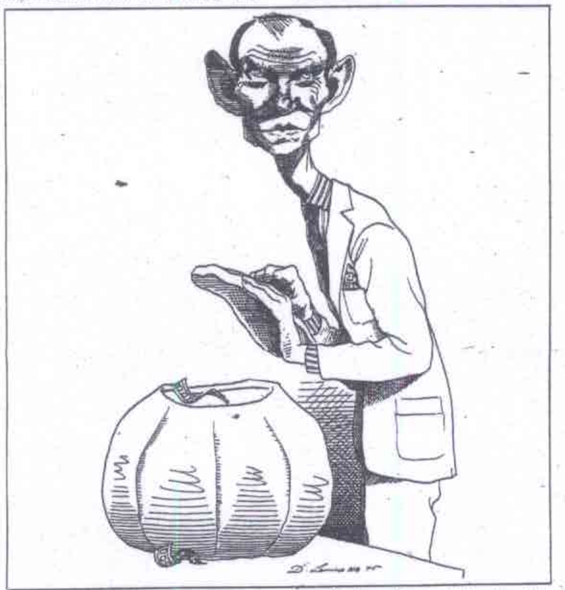
Suspecting Alger Hiss was somehow, on the face of it, indecent. He was almost drearily correct. He specialized in innocence. He was innocent of failure—so he could not understand his father. He was innocent of doubt—so he could not understand his brother Bosley. He was so innocent of psychic turmoil that his sister was in and out of mental institutions for several years without his being aware of her disturbance. He passed through the Thirties so innocent of ideology that he could later swear he met no communists at all, or—if he did meet any—he could not recognize them. He was innocent of friendships except with the well placed, with patrons. He seemed to spring fully armed from the head of Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. He became the perfect civil servant, a political Jeeves who knew his place and filled it perfectly. If anything, he was so correct as to rule out originality. Justice Frankfurter, another of his early patrons, was puzzled in 1946 to reflect that Hiss had not quite lived up to the promise of his youth which boded something beyond mere rectitude.[1]

Yet this man drab with the proper virtues had known something vivid in his life, "a cross between Jim Tully, the author, and Jack London" (in his own later words). The contrast between the two men—pale Alger and technicolor Whittaker—should have made their encounters, however fleeting, things to remember. But, no, Hiss stayed innocent of interest. He took and gave gifts—a rug, a car—while barely noticing the donor/recipient who actually moved in his oblivious acquaintance. Hiss's only recollected interest was, characteristically, a distaste for the improper. He remembered no tales from this Jack London, just bad teeth. The true succeeder can spot a failer far off.

It is a wonder he did not keep him farther off. They shared holidays and trips (Alger fraternizing, apparently, in a fit of absentmindedness), hobbies and small talk—just enough for the vagabond to bring down the paragon. Why did this two-bit Jack London do it? Envy, perhaps, or rejected sexual feelings. The failer would call it "a tragedy of history." The bewildered succeeder first tried to laugh it off as a comedy of errors. Only later did he come to see that innocence is an affront to the narrow-minded. Nixon did not like Hiss's earned air of superiority any more than Hiss liked Chambers's teeth. The mob abhors a gentleman—even a political gentleman's gentleman like the impeccable Jeeves of Yalta, the New Deal's first civil martyr.

The only explanation Hiss's lawyers could come up with was a clash of personalities. The obscure Chambers grudge was more a matter for psychiatrists than lawyers. It was rumored that Chambers had been under psychiatric care (enough, then, to disqualify him as a witness to anything). When the defense could not substantiate those rumors, lawyers remedied the oversight by bringing in a psychiatrist as part of their courtroom team and calling on him to describe the "mental illness" that made Chambers incapable of the truth—one of the first and least glorious uses of psychobiography at a distance. Still, what other weapon could be used to defend a man from what was so clearly a *psychic* affront? The question was not Hiss's innocence, but the craziness of anyone who would challenge it. That Hiss could err was improbable: that Chambers would imagine, invent, and exaggerate was inevitable.

But one thing puzzled even Hiss's lawyers. A gentleman does not lie to his friends; and Hiss was, beyond doubt, a gentleman. Why, then, did he tell John Foster Dulles he had not called his wife about the Chambers accusations when he had? Why would he later write that he went to the first HUAC sessions without counsel, though his lawyer John F. Davis went with him? This precise and orderly man early began telling odd little needless lies, or suffering inexplicable "blackouts" of memory. In his first appearances before the House committee Hiss remembered the names of three former servants, but not of the one maid with whom he had maintained contact—the maid who worked for him, full time, for three years (the key years so far as Chambers was concerned), the woman whose whole family had been involved with the Hisses then and afterward, and the maid to whose son he gave the typewriter on which damaging documents were typed.



Perhaps he just forgot Claudia Catlett's name. But by December 7 he had remembered it. He called John F. Davis, that invisible lawyer from his first appearance before the committee, and said he had given the Woodstock to Mrs. Catlett's son. Yet three days later he suffered another spell of forgetfulness, this time under oath, and told a grand jury he had no idea where the typewriter was. He repeated this claim five days later before the same tribunal. Nor was Alger the only one who lied about that typewriter. His brother Donald later claimed that he learned of its whereabouts only when Mrs. Catlett's son came to him—though John Davis had relayed Alger's message before that.

Of course, Whittaker Chambers lied under oath. But that was to be expected. He was as clearly disreputable as Hiss was honorable. Why did the honorable man lie? How could *he* be doing "what gentlemen just don't do"? He claimed that doubts about his loyalty "had blown over" when he left the State Department to become president of the Carnegie Endowment. But they had not. John Foster Dulles, chairman of the Endowment's board, found out after the appointment that Hiss had been suspected of communist ties. When Dulles questioned him about this, Hiss dismissed the investigation as unimportant, not really worth mentioning. Yet it had been important enough for him to ask Acheson if it posed a threat to his advancement (Acheson said that it did) —important enough, in other words, to motivate a decision to accept the Carnegie appointment.

Hiss's sluggish memory, his hedged denials of each Chambers story until external evidence forced him to remember or revise (e.g., his tale of the gift of his car), led certain of his own lawyers to feel he was hiding something. But they thought he was covering up some radical indiscretion on his wife's part. Priscilla had always been more ardent than her proper husband. Even his lies were noble.

Hiss's lawyers learned not to probe too far, which explains some odd reticences in his trials. Thus the government expert was allowed to identify stolen documents as having been typed on Hiss's typewriter from a study of only ten characters. This has been called inadequate by later Hiss defenders, who ask why his lawyers did not demand further evidence (which, by the way, the FBI expert possessed). But the defense did not want to dwell on this matter—one of its own experts had not only made the same identification, but said the stolen documents had most of the typist's characteristics of *Priscilla Hiss*.

Hiss said he received a rug from Chambers in 1935—which could not have been the one picked out by the art historian Meyer Schapiro in December of 1936 and delivered after January 1 of 1937. Asked what had become of the rug, Hiss admitted he still had it. Why did his lawyers not show it to Schapiro when he was on the stand? A denial that he chose this rug would have countered the second of two perjury counts in the indictment—Hiss's claim that he never even saw Chambers in 1937. But Hiss volunteered little if anything. He listened to charges, separated them, minimized them, working always by reaction. His life in the years when Chambers knew him comes out, in all his own accounts, as a curious blank, filled with nothing but official endorsements and separate denials. It was important *not* to pursue greater detail—as in the case of the car. Counsel for the known partner in that transfer, William Rosen, warned Hiss's lawyers that it was arranged by "a very high communist," whose name "would be a sensation in this case."

Hiss's reluctance to proffer material of his own was so marked that defenders have made a great deal of one apparent exception—his lawyer found and produced the Woodstock typewriter the FBI was searching for. But: 1) The typewriter itself was irrelevant as evidence. The charge against Hiss rested both on Hiss's handwritten memos and on the identity of the type in letters admittedly done by Priscilla Hiss and in stolen documents produced by Chambers. 2) Alger Hiss knew generally where the typewriter was to be sought by December 7 and Donald Hiss had been told by mid-February that it had come into the possession of Ira Lockey. They sat on this knowledge for two months. 3) The lawyer who got the typewriter acted on his own initiative (not prompted by either of the Hiss brothers, despite their knowledge). And 4) that lawyer's motive seems to have been fear that the FBI, then questioning the Catletts, would build a case that Hiss was suppressing evidence.

Allen Weinstein has many—literally thousands—of new facts to offer in clarifying this much-worked-over case. But the discovery that Donald Hiss had traced the typewriter to Lockey two months before it was produced is probably the most damaging item of all. It knocks into a cocked hat all the theories of a planted, altered, or forged typewriter. Herbert Packer had shot holes in that theory in 1962,[2] arguing that the typewriter was not relevant, so building one would have been both wasteful and dangerous (depending on confidentiality in all the sources of parts and expertise and planting); or that, *if* a fake machine had been produced to type out the stolen documents, the first priority after it had performed that function would be the machine's destruction, for fear the real one would show up and reveal the imposture—would, that is, show up *just as the Hiss machine did.* The Hisses knew where the typewriter was, and the friendly Catletts were misleading the FBI. They almost certainly would have known if the FBI had found and fiddled with the machine, and they would have told the Hisses.

Weinstein's discovery is important not only or mainly because it destroys the most popular theories of conspiracy against Hiss, but because it shows Hiss had reason to know those theories were flawed through all the years he has been espousing and promoting them. The honorable gentleman is misleading his own friends.

---

[1] Murray Kempton, *Part of Our Time: Some Monuments and Ruins of the Thirties* (Dell, 1955), p.21.

[2] Herbert Packer, *Ex-Communist Witnesses* (Stanford, 1962).

LIFE AMONG OTHERS

POEMS BY DANIEL HALPERN

"Brilliantly lighted poems," said the BBC of Daniel Halpern's last book, *Street Fire*, "perfectly turned gems of people-centered verse." In this elegant and lucid new collection, he explores the lives that each man creates—the world he builds for himself, by himself, and the life lived among others—and speaks of the obsessive desire to remain protected from the eyes and hands of others and the equally strong desire to "kick open the air and, my friend . . . walk out."

THE VIKING PRESS $8.95 PENGUIN BOOKS $2.95
625 MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10022

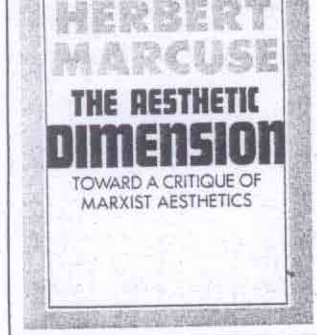
A Call in the Midst of the Crowd

"Alfred Corn has enormous resources at work in his poems: wit, strength, sureness of touch. The poems interweave the strands of a world richly apprehended, of a world of touchingly recollected, and of a world jubilantly imagined. . . . He belongs very clearly with the best of those poets—Williams, O'Hara, L. E. Sissman, and Stevens—who have made first-rate poetry out of the filth, confusion, and steeliness of urban life."
—Anthony Hecht, author of *Hard Hours*

"He has had the skill and courage to confront, absorb, and renew our poetic tradition at its most vital."—Harold Bloom, Yale University

Poems by Alfred Corn

THE VIKING PRESS $8.95 PENGUIN BOOKS $3.95
625 MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10022



HERBERT MARCUSE
THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION
TOWARD A CRITIQUE OF MARXIST AESTHETICS

". . . his insights are genuine and his dryly written . . . work . . . has a prophetic quality that suggests new generations will look on the Marxian model [of art] as a quaint artifact."
PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

At bookstores now – $6.95
Also available directly through Beacon Press offer in centerfold of this publication.

For books by Herbert Marcuse available from Beacon Press see centerfold.

BEACON PRESS
25 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02108

Weinstein's major findings were in the defense files. But practically everything he acquired from the FBI serves to confirm the Chambers version of events. Ironically, even the one damaging thing Hiss's lawyers most yearned for—proof of Chambers's homosexual relations—helps confirm Chambers's story. He had steeled himself to the inevitable revelation of episodes he considered supremely shameful (though in fact the defense only found one embarrassing witness—a communist—to claim Chambers was a homosexual, and it did not use him). Chambers forewarned the FBI of this damaging material, though it led the agents to distrust him. This accords with Chambers's portrayal in *Witness* of the ordeal he felt obliged to undergo, and makes melodramatic events like his own attempted suicide during the hearings far more credible.

Even improbable stuff like Chambers's fear of assassination by the communists has been vindicated. The friend he went to, Herbert Solow, shared and deepened those fears, since he had worked on the "disappearance" or murder of others who fell out with the Party—Juliette Poyntz and Adolf Rubens.[3] Weinstein's own interviews with J. Peters in Budapest, with Nadya Ulanovskaya in Jerusalem, and with Maxim Lieber have corroborated many details of Chambers's account of life in the Party underground. He has traced the reports against Hiss that were independent of Chambers—not only Elizabeth Bentley's and Hedda Massing's, but Herta Field's, Edouard Daladier's, and Igor Gouzenko's; and he has gathered later testimony on Hiss's connections with the Ware Group.

Weinstein's use of his material is impeccably fair. He does not accept things just because they are favorable to his conclusion (see, for instance, his measured treatment of Nathaniel Weyl's and Louis Budenz's testimony). He is tentative about any charges other than those brought and proved in court. He refrains from psychological theorizing, treats Hiss defenders fairly, and shows no personal or ideological animus of any sort. The narrative of the story is cleanly told despite the mass of details he must organize. So far as any one book can dispel a large historical mystery, this book does it, magnificently.

But its virtues of restraint and hardheadedness will leave certain people unsatisfied. He does not try to explain Alger Hiss, just to deal with the evidence for certain acts having occurred. He rightly sticks to that as his first priority, and does not try to tell us *why* the acts occurred. So, the dogged and infectious air of innocence around Hiss will continue to give people pause. The problem is not simply how he could have spied for a certain period, but (even more) how he could have lied to his friends in the first place and maintained the lies with assurance—even with serenity—for over a quarter of a century.

Most of those who conclude, reluctantly, that Hiss lied cannot believe that he kept a foreign allegiance after America went to war, or—even more unthinkable—after America's break with Russia. But neither could they think that of Kim Philby, another impeccable civil servant with a disreputable friend. Philby was about to be knighted, and was being groomed to head the British secret service, when the first doubts about him forced him from the service. Hugh Trevor-Roper notes that Philby had a vague reputation as an intellectual though he showed no real interest in ideas. The same is true of Hiss, whose intellectual reputation rests almost entirely on a book Justice Holmes inscribed for him.

Philby, it should be remembered, did not flee to Russia after his first uncovering. He stayed on, maintained his innocence, and worked his way back into the service. He even profited from doubts expressed about his loyalty. Harold Macmillan, lacking legally actionable proof of Philby's Russian ties, had to exonerate him in public. "He really could not have done me a better turn if he had wanted to. By naming me he [his accuser, Colonel Lipton] virtually forced Harold Macmillan to clear me."[4] Weinstein shows that Dean Acheson's defense of Alger Hiss, at his own confirmation hearings, was dutiful, lukewarm, and motivated by Acheson's much closer ties to Donald Hiss. Acheson refused to testify for Hiss at his trial.

It was only after clear legal evidence was found against him that Philby skipped to Russia. He was facing a death penalty. Hiss, by contrast, faced much less serious charges, and had a chance to ride them out. Chambers might crack—tie himself up in imagined self-dramatizings, go crazy, or commit suicide (as he almost did). Hiss had many defenders, and his first trial ended in a hung jury. His conviction for perjury was a comparatively minor affair. He could dream of rehabilitation. Perhaps he was urged to undertake the line he did. The Russians' interest in Hiss is indicated, according to Weinstein's research, by the kinds of FBI files Judith Coplon was stealing, and by Gromyko's suggestion in 1945 that Alger Hiss be the first UN secretary general.

Weinstein does not conclude that Hiss was still engaged in espionage after the Chambers incidents. But he shows that during and after the war Hiss did ask for highly classified material outside his area of specialization. I prefer to think Hiss was a principled believer throughout this time; that his early radical sympathy did not disappear into the organization man he later made of himself; that his energetic protestations of literal innocence drew on deep conviction that he was working for the country's (and the world's) ultimate good; that he was not summoning a mistaken heroism of denial to cover up peccadilloes; that friends were deceived to advance a cause, not to salvage a career.

Hiss's strategy of total and universal denial and forgetfulness from the very outset, his refusal to volunteer autobiography, make sense if Hiss had more to hide than the Chambers documents. That is why I would not pay him the insult of believing him. I would rather think he has been serving his own gods with hidden gallantry. It is only as a secret foe that he regains the integrity people have always sensed in him. Chambers, confirmed in so many other ways, would thus be confirmed in his belief that Hiss was still a communist in 1949, an enemy he could salute even as he tried to destroy him. The drama of the courtroom was not overstated. It was a battlefield transaction. ☐

---

[3] Alan Wald, "Herbert Solow: Portrait of a New York Intellectual" in *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies*, No. 3, 1977, pp. 419-60.

[4] Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Philby Affair* (William Kimber, 1968), p.53.