

Nixon nemesis Alger Hiss, 92, dies

NEW YORK (AP) — Alger Hiss, the patrician public servant who fell from grace in a Communist spy scandal that propelled Richard Nixon to higher office, died Friday afternoon. He was 92.

Mr. Hiss died after a long illness, just four days after his birthday, said Lenox Hill Hospital hospital spokeswoman Jean Brett.

Writer Tony Hiss praised his father Friday for courageously standing up for American principles. He said, "other people, whose vision was clouded by Cold War passions, couldn't see the truth of the man."

Mr. Hiss' life can be neatly broken into two parts. The first was a stellar rise — a brilliant academic career, clerking for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, a series of important posts in the New Deal and the foreign policy establishment, foundation work.

Then, on Aug. 3, 1948, a rump, overweight magazine editor named Whittaker Chambers alleged that 10 years earlier, Mr. Hiss had given him State Department secrets which

Mr. Chambers, in turn, passed to the Soviet Union.

At the end of the investigations and trials that followed, after spectacular developments involving microfilm in a hollowed-out pumpkin and an ancient typewriter, Mr. Hiss was convicted of two counts of perjury and imprisoned for three years and eight months.

For the rest of his life, he worked for vindication, in courts of law and in the court of public opinion.

He proclaimed that it had come finally in 1992, at age 87, when a Russian general in charge of Soviet intelligence archives declared that Mr. Hiss had never been a spy, but rather a victim of Cold War hysteria and the McCarthy Red-hunting era.

Gen. Dmitry A. Volkogonov later qualified his statement, saying that while he had found no evidence against Mr. Hiss in KGB files, he couldn't speak for other Soviet intelligence agencies, and many documents had been destroyed.

The controversy flared again this March, when the National Security Agency released hundreds of pages of newly declassified material that included a reference to a Soviet spy working in the United States during World War II.

A cable, dated March 30, 1945, said the spy went by the code name "Ales" and was "probably Alger Hiss." But the cable offered no supporting information for that identification.

During the decades of controversy, such conservatives as William F. Buckley Jr. backed Mr. Chambers and felt justice was served by jailing Mr. Hiss. Mr. Hiss' defenders included liberals like Supreme Court Justices William O. Douglas and Abe Fortas and Secretary of State Dean Acheson.

Mr. Hiss' establishment credentials were impeccable: He attended private schools, then Johns Hopkins, where he was Phi Beta Kappa, and Harvard Law, where he was a

member of the law review. At Harvard he attracted the attention of Felix Frankfurter, at whose recommendation Mr. Hiss served a year as Holmes' law clerk.

After three years in private law practice in Boston, Mr. Hiss joined the New Deal — first as an official with the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, and then as a Senate legal assistant and as a Justice Department attorney.

At the Dumbarton Oaks meeting to lay the groundwork for the United Nations, Mr. Hiss was executive secretary. In February 1945, he was a delegate to the Yalta Conference, where President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Josef Stalin settled the map of postwar Europe. At the San Francisco Conference that adopted the U.N. Charter, Mr. Hiss was secretary-general.

He left government at the end of 1946 to take the presidency of the prestigious Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Enter Whittaker Chambers. A senior editor at Time magazine, Mr. Chambers told the House Un-American Activities Committee that he had been a member of a Communist underground that operated in Washington in the 1930s. And during that time, he shuttled U.S. government secrets to Soviet spies.

Mr. Chambers said that in 1937 and 1938 Mr. Hiss was a Communist who betrayed his country by giving him documents to give to the Soviets.

Freshman Rep. Richard Nixon pressed the case and drew his first national publicity. Mr. Nixon later told intimates that he would never have been in a position to run for president if not for his pursuit of Mr. Hiss.

"If the American people knew the real nature of Alger Hiss, they would boil him in oil," Mr. Nixon once said. Mr. Hiss denied it all.