

# Hiss Seen as Suspect Earlier

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In 1946, nearly three years before Alger Hiss was publicly accused of furnishing secret documents to Communist spies, Secretary of State James Byrnes wanted to discharge him because of alleged subversive connections, according to documents released by the FBI.

Byrnes was urged not to do so by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who argued that the dismissal of Hiss might disclose information on another espionage plot he said he was investigating.

The government's early suspicions of Hiss, who was convicted of perjury in 1950, are recorded in a memorandum in which Hoover defended himself against charges that the FBI had been faulty in not exposing Hiss' alleged espionage activities.

It is contained in more than 15,000 pages released by the FBI in response to a Freedom of Information Act suit.

The papers, opened to the public last week, appear to shed little new light on the Hiss case, except to show that various government agencies suspected him far earlier than previously supposed and to portray Hoover in the ironic position of defending himself against charges of insensitivity to Communist subversion of the government.

Hiss, a State Department official, was convicted of perjury for denying that he passed secret documents to Whittaker Chambers, an admitted espionage courier, in the 1930s.

Hiss served 44 months of a 5-year term. Now 71 and recently admitted to the practice of law in Massachusetts, Hiss still maintains his innocence and claims he was the victim of a frame-up by Chambers and the government.

The celebrated case launched the career of a young congressman named Richard



ALGER HISS

... subversive links reported

M. Nixon, who, as a member of the House Un-American Activities Committee, led a campaign to expose Hiss and accused the Truman administration of concealing evidence of subversion.

In late 1948, when Chambers' first charges against Hiss were publicized, Hoover and the FBI were nervous about charges they had suppressed information on Hiss. In particular, Hoover was upset by repeated suggestions in print that the FBI had once "cleared" Hiss of any subversive taint.

In a lengthy memo to Attorney General Tom C. Clark, Hoover defended his agency against those charges asserting that they "... are entirely false since the FBI, as you know, never clears or charges anyone."

But in reviewing what he knew of Hiss, Hoover acknowledged that as early as December, 1945, he had told Secretary of State Byrnes that Hiss had been mentioned as a member of the Communist underground in Washington by Elizabeth Bentley, an ex-Communist who had told her story to the FBI earlier that year.

By March, 1946, Hoover wrote in his memo, Byrnes had wanted to discharge Hiss. But during a conversation,



JAMES BYRNES

... said to ask Hiss firing

both men decided it would not be wise to do so. Byrnes did not want to go through a civil service appeal, which he thought Hiss probably would demand. Hoover thought a hearing might damage another espionage investigation — not detailed in the memo — the FBI was conducting. He suggested that Byrnes demote Hiss to a minor position and hope that he would resign.

In that same month, Hiss voluntarily sought an FBI review of his record. No charges were brought. Hiss eventually resigned from the State Department and became president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The earliest FBI files on the case suggest that the agency was initially more concerned about Chambers than Hiss. Its file designation for the case was "Chambers — Perjury" and agents spent a considerable time investigating Chambers' background. Ultimately, however, the FBI strenuously investigated all leads attempting to link Chambers and Hiss.

Conflict between the FBI and the House committee is apparent in the files. Several FBI memos express concern that the committee was keeping pieces of evidence, including microfilmed

documents, away from the bureau. At one point, Nixon sent word through an intermediary that he had heard rumors that he was "out to get" Hoover. Nixon told the intermediary to assure Hoover that was not true.

Thousands of pages in the documents describe the massive nationwide search for letters which Hiss and his wife, Priscilla, typed on their old Woodstock typewriter, the one used to copy documents passed along to Chambers and his underground superior, known as "Colonel Bykov." At Hiss' trial, FBI experts testified that the copied documents had been typed on the typewriter the Hisses owned in 1937 and 1938.

The FBI tracked down former friends, employers and casual contacts to whom the Hisses had written letters in that period. Agents discovered from Hiss' tax returns he had received \$200 from The New York Times for an article he wrote, and they attempted to find the manuscript to compare typewriting similarities. The investigation delved into the Bryn Mawr Alumnae Society, of which Mrs. Hiss was a member, and the files of the Illinois Law Review for an article Hiss had written on the United Nations.

Ultimately, the document that proved most useful in the trial, according to FBI records, was a three-page letter Mrs. Hiss had typed and sent to the Landon School in Bethesda, seeking to enroll her son, Timothy. Experts later testified that letter was typed on the same Woodstock used to copy the stolen State Department documents.

The Freedom of Information suit was filed by the American Civil Liberties Union and by Allen Weinstein, a Smith College professor who is completing a book on the Hiss case.

The FBI has refused to release an additional 1,055 pages, claiming they are covered by exemptions permitted in the Freedom of Information Act.