

Garry Wills

Hiss-Chambers tragedy: victims of their stories

The tangled story of Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers will never go away. It may not be the "tragedy of history" Chambers made of it; but it was a tale of talents blighted and virtues twisted, one that will be perennially interesting. It even affords us an uncharacteristic glimpse of Richard Nixon going after the truth.

Ironically, one of the things the Hiss camp tried to prove over 20 years ago — that Chambers was a homosexual — has just been established; but in a way that enhances Chambers's credibility, instead of diminishing it.

It was the "liberal" side that tried to tarnish Chambers by saying he had been to a psychiatrist or was a homosexual. The Hiss lawyers put a psychiatrist on the stand with allegations that would make civil libertarians shudder today. It was the Hiss side, too, that looked for vindication when the Justice Department began releasing FBI documents under the Freedom of Information Act. Actually, the documents released so far, over 15,000 pages of them, tend to substantiate the Chambers version of events. The FBI did not build a duplicate typewriter, as Hiss defenders have long, rather lamely, main-

tained. In fact, Hoover was angry that FBI men let others find the typewriter ahead of them.

Now we can read a statement Chambers volunteered to the FBI in 1949. In it, Chambers admitted to "numerous homosexual activities in New York and Washington." These were furtive anonymous encounters in city parks and such places. They resemble the activities that led to the downfall of a Lyndon Johnson aide. Though such actions reveal an unintegrated personality, that kind of secret life is usually kept separate from a man's profession and desired concerns. So it is believable that Chambers kept the encounters a secret, even from fellow Communists. He also swore that his homosexual acts had ended by 1939.

Chambers felt the actions of which he was ashamed would come out in the course of the trial, and he wanted the FBI to know everything; and, damaging as it would be to him, he felt obliged to carry on.

Allen Weinstein, the Smith College historian who sought the release of the Hiss documents, finds that the homosexual admission fits the confirming pattern that is emerging from all the newer revelations: "If

Chambers was willing to acknowledge to the FBI these painful memories, does it not add to his overall credibility as a witness? I think that it does." Other FBI interviews — especially with two Communists who admitted passing documents to Chambers — fill in the gaps of Chambers's story, and do so consistently.

The tragedy arises from the fact that so much of Hiss was admirable, and so much in Chambers was deplorable. Yet the "good guy" lied, and the bad one told the truth on that one testable point of law over which they clashed.

Chambers was always a misfit. Hiss was well-tuned to his times — to the radical '30s and the patriotic '40s. When the two times were set at odds by Chambers's crusading "cured drunk" anti-communism, Hiss thought total denial would save him — and it almost did. Once set on that course, he has never been able to abandon it.

Both men were victims of their own story, trapped in it all the rest of their lives. The matter is tangled, and perfect right was on neither man's side; but it is becoming clearer every day that Hiss was rightly convicted of perjury.