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Alger Hiss and the professor

The scene is dramatically described in a recent issue of *Politicks* magazine. Allen Weinstein, professor of history at Smith College, is answering questions by journalist Philip Nobile. Nobile begins by explaining that Alger Hiss has had many problems in the last 30 years, but that his main problem right now is the new book by Weinstein called "Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case." Briefly put, the book establishes beyond even unreasonable doubt that Alger Hiss was guilty.

The scene in question is the last of six visits between Weinstein and Hiss. At the first visit, six years earlier, the young historian was eagerly resolved to document the innocence of Alger Hiss, to which end he secured the cooperation of Hiss who turned over his huge defense file to Weinstein.

One should add that Hiss, over the years, has become habituated to sycophantic journalists and historians who accept his innocence as dogma, and then scoop up whatever data are lying around and arrange them to confirm the previously

established thesis. It is not true that all those who have proclaimed Hiss's innocence were sycophantic to the man, Alger. I.F. Stone is sycophantic not to discrete individuals, so much as to doctrines. The relevant doctrine in this case is that the U.S. engaged in a hysterical witchhunt after the war. Reasoning backward, everyone tripped up during that period was in fact innocent. The sustenance of the myth of Hiss's innocence comes from a fidelity to that and cognate doctrines.

So there is Hiss, and there is the young professor who has spent five years going over not only all the defense files of Hiss, but over 40,000 FBI documents released under the Freedom of Information Act. That, and tracking down and interviewing, and surveying the correspondence of, dozens and dozens of persons involved in however minor a way in the great Hiss-Chambers drama; talking to Communists in Bulgaria, ex-Communists in Israel, and coming slowly, but irrevocably, to the conclusion that: Hiss is a liar.

How do you tell a man whose innocence you set out to establish that you have concluded that he is a liar? Worse, really: Because such duplicity as Hiss engages in isn't designed merely to help himself. Hiss's lies require that his flock come to grisly conclusions about Whittaker Chambers, and Mrs. Chambers; and about the FBI, and the prosecutor, and the courts. If Hiss were innocent; America is unjust.

"I was very nervous. Hiss is an imposing figure. He has marvelous presence, if a bit stagy. He's gracious. After some small talk, I blurted out something like, 'When I began working on this book four years ago, I thought that I would be able to demonstrate your innocence, but unfortunately I have to tell you that I cannot; that my assumption was wrong.'

"I meant to continue, but before I could, Hiss interrupted me and said quietly, 'I'm not surprised.' I waited and he said nothing more . . . My hands began trembling, and so were Hiss's. Yet I made a point of staring straight at him during

this exchange. For at least a full half hour, I tried to get eye contact with Alger Hiss, but he refused. His responses were often directed to some place beyond me. He gave me his profile for part of the time. I thought to myself, 'My God, this has happened once before.' It was, from the testimony of all observers, exactly what Alger Hiss did in his Commodore Hotel confrontation with Whittaker Chambers . . . When Hiss finally looked at me, he said, 'I've always known you were prejudiced against me.'

"I had only a few seconds, so I said what I felt at that moment: 'I don't think you'll believe me, but I want you to know how hard this has been for me and how terrible I feel that what emerges now may cause various of your friends whom I have gotten to know as individuals additional suffering.' He looked at me and said, 'You really believe that this is going to make me suffer?' I said, 'No, sir, I don't think it will make you suffer, but I think it might make those who care about you suffer a bit more.' "