

Supporting Testimony

A biography goes beyond the Pumpkin Papers to assess the troubled life of Whittaker Chambers

By LANCE MORROW



AS A BOY, HE WAS called by the middle name that he hated, Vivian, or else by nicknames that he hated even more—"Girlie," or "Stinky," or "Mr. Chamber Pot."

His favorite book was *Les Misérables*, and in the family's doomed house on Earle Avenue in Lynbrook, New York, his mother kept an ax under the bed to even the odds against the murderers she imagined. His father, a sardonically unhappy bisexual, was much given to long absences; his younger brother became an alcoholic suicide. Young Vivian Chambers never went to a dentist, and by the time he grew up and began calling himself by his mother's family name of Whittaker, his teeth had gone to memorable ruin. In his mouth, as in his early life's story, he came to believe that he harbored a tiny, secret civilization in a state of advanced decay.

So the themes were there from childhood, and when Whittaker Chambers went out into the history of the 20th century, he found a huge historical correlative, a macrocosm, to match—and to explain—his own biography and, he thought, to enlarge it with the prestige of destiny. Chambers' high school classmates voted him "Class Prophet." Many years later, in the '50s, after Alger Hiss had been convicted of perjury and the cold war had hardened into a nuclear stalemate, Chambers wrote his summum, which he called *Witness*, meaning history's witness, a prophet looking backward.

That strange and sometimes brilliant testament aside, Sam Tanenhaus has now written the best biography that Chambers is likely to receive, *Whittaker Chambers* (Random House; 638 pages; \$35). Tanenhaus' account, essentially

sympathetic, is patient, admirably balanced and fascinating in its rich detail. On the great litmus question of postwar politics—which of them was telling the truth?—Tanenhaus is clear. Walking again through all the familiar elements of the case (the Woodstock typewriter, the Bokhara rug, the prothonotary warbler, the famous Pumpkin Papers), Tanenhaus shows, if anyone still doubts it, that Alger Hiss was lying.

But Chambers' story is larger and more interesting than just that event. For a brief, hilarious season early on, at Columbia University, he campaigned for the 1920 Republican vice-presidential nominee, Calvin Coolidge; but in the

enough espionage, although the U.S. authorities were fairly heedless of it at the time. One of Chambers' Soviet accomplices remembered, "If you wore a sign saying, 'I am a spy,' you might still not get arrested."

Chambers broke with the party in 1937-38, during the height of the Moscow trials. In September 1939, just as Hitler smashed into Poland, Chambers told Adolph Berle, an assistant Secretary of State, about the so-called Ware Group, the cadre of Washington bureaucrats, including Hiss, with whom Chambers had collaborated as a secret agent. But nothing came of his revelation then. It was yesterday's news. A war was on, and the enemy was Germany, not Russia.

By 1942, Tanenhaus writes, Chambers had become a Quaker and "had completely evolved a new religious-political philosophy. Its crux was the 'irreconcilable issue' that underlay modern man's spiritual crisis and also defined the struggle against communism: 'Belief in God or Belief in Man.'"

Chambers became a book reviewer for *TIME*, then rose to become the magazine's controversial senior editor for foreign news, eloquently and, some thought, obsessively pressing his anti-communist views. It was in 1948 that the House Committee on Un-American Activities and an ambitious young California Congressman, Richard Nixon, interviewed Chambers and then zeroed in on the impressive, elegant Hiss, who had been an adviser to President Roosevelt at Yalta, and helped organize the founding of the U.N. By 1948 he was head of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Hiss eventually served 3½ years for perjury; he denied, up to his death at 92 last November, that he had ever been a communist or had conspired with Chambers.

Tanenhaus does not altogether vindicate Chambers. He writes, "The awful fact, which Chambers could not admit—and never did—was that his own world view, stripped of its lyrical refinements and humanist vibrato, had helped bring McCarthyism into existence." This is true, although Chambers' music was darker than the lyricism Tanenhaus suggests. It was grandiloquent and tragic, and, as Joseph R. McCarthy proved, subject to ugly distortions. ■



COMRADES: Chambers, left, found an ally in the young Nixon, center

mid-'20s he pinballed leftward and joined the Communist Party, animated by an anguished convert's zeal. A melodramatically *ernste Mensch* (serious man), as he liked to say, Chambers began as a useful party "literate," hacking away as a foreign-news reporter for the dreary *Daily Worker*, contributing to the *New Masses*.

In 1932, just before the start of the New Deal, he went underground for the party. Based in New York City or Baltimore, Maryland, Chambers—code-named "Bob" and later "Karl"—made his furtive way in the world of disappearing ink and microfilm. It was serious