

A Reply to I. F. Stone

To the Editor:

A "red herring," according to the Doubleday Dictionary, is an "irrelevant topic introduced in order to divert attention from the main point under discussion." Harry S. Truman used the term in 1948 to describe the House Committee on Un-American Activities' Communist spy probes, including the Hiss-Chambers inquiry.

Several weeks ago, I. F. Stone in his article "The 'Flimflam' in the Pumpkin Papers," diverted readers of this page with a red herring on the Alger Hiss case. Stone advised portentously of "new revelations [that] are too important to be lost sight of, and deserve full investigation." The revelations are neither new nor important.

First, Stone points out that two rolls of the "pumpkin papers" microfilm committee investigators received from Whittaker Chambers in December 1948 consisted of documents from the Navy Bureau of Aeronautics.

Stone neglects to mention that Chambers also turned over in December 1948 two rolls of microfilm that contained copies of confidential 1937-38 State Department documents, material that Chambers charged — and a second trial jury believed — had been stolen by Mr. Hiss for the Soviet underground. This information (the fact that the "pumpkin microfilm" included Navy Department documents also) was no secret in 1949, and Hiss's lawyers knew that during both trials.

Next, Stone tells us that Federal Bureau of Investigation laboratory experts had analyzed the Navy Department rolls as well as the State Department documents. To no one's surprise, since only State Department papers related to Chambers's accusations against Hiss, the prosecutors did not introduce the Navy Department material into evidence. All of this received ample publicity at the time.

Finally, and here is new information learned from the recently released F.B.I. files — Stone dismisses the Navy Department material as "technical memos of little consequence . . . available . . . at the Bureau of Standards Library to any member of the public." But the secret State Department materials whose theft helped account for Hiss's perjury conviction in 1950 were not available to the public. Stone has here misled his readers in an efforts to vindicate Alger Hiss.

Stone neglected to remind readers that Hiss first tried to divert public attention from the stolen State Department microfilms to the Navy Department materials in an August 1975 news conference, a ploy which received wide coverage in the national media.

Last year's press release by Hiss has now become Stone's warmed-over "revelation." Neither Stone nor Hiss has yet attempted to analyze and rebut the findings described in my New York Review article, only to denounce it. They prefer to shift public attention to a rather flimsy bit of flotsam

in the form of some re-discovered and apparently innocuous pumpkin papers.

The microfilm in question also bears closer examination. Briefly, F.B.I. laboratory experts tested the rolls of State Department documents and concluded on Feb. 23, 1949, after looking at a number of cameras that the rolls had been exposed with a Leica camera belonging to a photographer named Felix Inslerman.

Inslerman later testified that, as a member of the Communist underground network in 1937-38, he photographed State Department documents for Chambers. Chambers, earlier, had testified that he had only two confederates at State, Alger Hiss and Julian Wadleigh. Wadleigh, however, left the country on business in March 1938, a month before the date of the last stolen (typed) documents. Furthermore, Wadleigh testified that he worked with an underground contact and photographer named David Carpenter, not with Inslerman. Stone mentions none of this.

Turning to the Navy Department material, Stone (and Alger Hiss) have alluded with bemusement to the fact that the technical data included instructions on the proper method of painting fire extinguishers. Stone neglects to point out that the F.B.I. laboratory report (March 15, 1949) which lists the contents of the two rolls of Navy microfilm also contains documents that deal with technical data on aircraft fuel systems, parachutes, radio transmitters, fuel pressure settings, carburetors, and inertia starters.

Stone's "revelation" confirms conclusively that Chambers had better luck getting top-quality documents stolen from the State Department than from his sources in the Navy Bureau of Standards.

Richard M. Nixon, a member of the House Committee on Un-American Affairs, certainly exaggerated the importance of the Navy Department material, but this is an irrelevant point however gleefully Stone may pounce upon it. Nixon's antics merely divert our attention from a serious assessment of the mass of incriminating evidence that Alger Hiss has yet to explain away.

Hiss and those of his friends and supporters who have closed their minds to the possibility of Hiss's guilt will continue to grasp at documentary straws, however flimsy. But I. F. Stone, who has prided himself in the past on the careful assessment of evidence, might wish in future writings on the Hiss case to restrain his evident anger and stick to the facts.

ALLEN WEINSTEIN
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The writer, professor of history at Smith College, is author of the forthcoming book, "Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Conflict."