

Alger Hiss: Gentle Words After 25 Years of Suspicion

By Jean M. White

Alger Hiss, a man whose case still nags at the American conscience after more than a quarter-century, had stayed up into the early-morning hours yesterday to read 355 pages of FBI documents just released to him, searching for fresh evidence and encouragement in his long fight for vindication.

Still, the lawyer and former diplomat, now 70 and still working as a salesman for a New York printing house, kept his appointment to come to Washington to talk and answer questions for the Washington Press Club last night before an audience of more than 250, a big turnout for such an event.

If Hiss avoided direct mention of the downfall of Richard Nixon in his introductory remarks, he couldn't escape questions about Watergate and the man who, as an ambitious freshman congressman, pursued the Hiss case to vault to national political prominence as his first step to the White House.

Finally, after being asked a question about the benefits of Watergate, Hiss spoke of its cleansing value and the restoration of public confidence. He then paused to add—joyfully but without gloating: "And we got rid of Nixon!"

In the midst of the fiery emotions and righteous indignation that have

swirled around his name, Hiss remains a soft-spoken, courtly, gentle man. He answers pointed questions, lights his pipe, and thinks out an answer with deliberateness. Now nearing 71 (his birthday is in November), his leanness—which always made him appear taller than his 6 feet—tends to gauntness and his graying to match his favorite gray suits. Only his deep-set blue eyes give any hint of emotion.

Last night there was no bitterness or anger of a wronged man, no hyperbole of words. But over the years, Hiss, best known earlier as an indifferent speaker a bit standoffish, has acquired a gentle wit and a charming grace in handling questions.

Asked "Are you bitter?" and then before he could answer, "Are you still bitter?" Hiss parried a reply: "This is like Alice in Wonderland. How can you have more when you haven't had any?"

For his own remarks last night, Hiss chose the long perspective to look back on the McCarthy years "to remind you there was a time when McCarthy . . . was respectable." He warned that a demagogue could be given power and respectability if public figures avoided taking stands. Two anecdotes which Hiss heard only recently made his point: how Sen. McCarthy had been invited into the homes of Sen. Robert Taft and then

Sen. John F. Kennedy in the early days of his rise to power.

Later, asked if he thought this country could "survive" another era of McCarthyism with politically motivated witch hunts, Hiss—whose own case came to the headlines just as McCarthy appeared—held out hope that the public today has become "politically sophisticated" and would resist the "confusion and fear that led to the public hysteria" of the McCarthy era.

Hiss always has argued that he was convicted more by the public climate than by hard evidence. He was charged with perjury in denying that he passed State Department documents to Whittaker Chambers, a confessed Communist spy and courier.

Accompanied by his son, Tony, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, Hiss had taken the day off from his job as a stationery salesman to catch the afternoon shuttle to Washington.

"I can't take too much time off. I still have to earn my living and now I'm a fledgling new lawyer," he explained after arriving late.

It is one of those ironies that comes with the passage of time that Alger Hiss could come to Washington for a press reception last night while his former chief antagonist, Richard Nixon, remained in self-imposed isolation on his estate on the West Coast.

See HISS, B3, Col. 1

Lawyer and former diplomat Alger Hiss at the Washington Press Club last night, left, and in 1948 on the day he was charged with perjury in denying he had passed documents to a confessed Communist spy-courier.



Photo at left by
Janice A. Parcell
—The Washington Post;
at right, Associated Press

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HISS. From B1

And then there is Hiss, receiving only his plane fare and quick airport crab cake dinner as his fee for his appearance before the Washington Press Club, while former President Nixon has signed a lucrative contract for television interviews with David Frost.

The ghosts of the Hiss case—with its dramatic testimony about an ancient Woodstock typewriter, the sighting of a rare bird in the Alexandria marshes along the Potomac, the microfilm hidden in a pumpkin—still haunt the public mind and cast a long shadow of doubt onto many people.

With the revelations of Watergate, a new pertinency has come to questions raised about the case 25 years after Hiss, a high State Department official, stood in federal court in New York City and was sentenced to five years in prison for perjury. Hiss served 44 months in the federal penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pa., before his release in November, 1954.

In Chambers' testimony on his closeness to Hiss, a telling point was his anecdote recalling how enthusiastic Hiss had been on sighting a rare

Prothonotary Warbler. Later Hiss was to recall the same incident as he was led into testimony about his hobby as an amateur birdwatcher.

Today, despite that incident, Hiss still is a birdwatcher. Chatting over dinner, he told about his "small, un-stylish," and mortgaged summer home at East Hampton and the bird refuge nearby.

"No, I never have seen another Prothonotary Warbler since that day along the Potomac," he added ruefully.

In response to a question last night, Hiss said his best hope for vindication is for the Attorney General to recommend to the President that he be pardoned on the grounds of a miscarriage of justice—"the only grounds on which I would accept a pardon."

He is steadfast in insisting that his name be completely cleared and his reinstatement to the Massachusetts Bar—to which he had first been admitted as a brilliant Harvard Law School graduate in 1930—was delayed until last month because Hiss refused to make a statement of "contriteness" that opponents argued was required by the law before a disbarred lawyer could be reinstated.

Hiss argues that he was the victim of a frame-up with fabricated evidence. Last night in answer to a question, he pointed to Chambers, who died in 1961, as a "pretty good fabricator" and then added: "But the question is how many other people knew of that fabrication?"

Now, as during his trial 25 years ago, Hiss does not seem to be cast in the same mold as Capt. Dreyfus or Sacco and Vanzetti. There are still reminders of a prep-school education, a Phi Beta Kappa key at Johns Hopkins, the Harvard Law Review, his experience as a law clerk to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes and as a diplomat who went to Yalta.

But Hiss has relaxed and warmed with the years. Last night a questioner recalled an observation once made that Hiss lost the jury and the case by lecturing a prosecutor on the correct use of "infer" and "imply."

"I was more arrogant than that," Hiss said last night. "When asked if I had ran after someone, I answered: 'No, I would have run . . . ' Certainly, needless arrogance. I can't believe the case turned on my bad manners. I hope not."



Alger Hiss last night at the Washington Press Club, where he held out hope that the public today has become "politically sophisticated" and would resist the "confusion and fear" that led to the public hysteria of the McCarthy era.

Photo by James A. Farrell
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