

Charles McCabe Himself

The Hiss Case That Wasn't

IF YOU WANT to figure out why the man in the White House brought his own secret police force into being; and why a fellow named Dan Ellsberg, above almost anybody else, bugged that same man in the White House almost beyond endurance, you have to know a little about a man named Alger Hiss and what he meant to the political fortunes of Mr. Nixon.

In the years 1948-49, Alger Hiss literally made Richard Nixon a figure of national prominence. He taught the freshman Congressman from Whittier a sure-fire way to win an election, a way that Mr. Nixon has never forgotten.



Hiss was the perfect target for Mr. Nixon. He was head of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and had been a figure of some prominence in the State Department. Hiss was aristocratic and arrogant, the epitome of those "Eastern Establishment" characteristics that have so fascinated and repelled Mr. Nixon.

Hiss was accused by a rather creepy magazine writer named Whittaker Chambers of having passed secrets to the Russians during the 1930s. Nixon picked up the ball, and proceeded to crucify Hiss. The country was enjoying a collective paranoia about Communism at the time. He pressed for an investigation of Chambers' charges before the House Un-American Activities Committee (and that name is for real). In the end, in 1950, a federal district court convicted Hiss of perjury, and gave him five years in the bucket.

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NOTHING as marvelous, politically, ever happened to Mr. Nixon again. Yet somewhere in the well of his unconscious he must have yearned for another Hiss on which he could exercise his talents for destruction of a foe while apotheosizing himself at the same time.

In 1971 it appeared that fate had delivered another Hiss on his doorstep. The President's reelection was by no means certain. Ed Muskie looked as if he might cut it.

Then, on June 13, the New York Times began to print the "Top Secret-Sensitive" details and documents from the 47 volumes on the "History of U.S. Decision-Making Process on Vietnam Policy." The Pentagon Papers, as they got to be called.

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A 40-YEAR-OLD researcher from the Rand Corporation, a Santa Monica "think tank," readily confessed to having made the papers available to The Times and other newspapers. His name was Daniel Ellsberg. Ellsberg, like Hiss, was intellectual, sensitive, easy for Everyman to dislike.

Ellsberg looked like a real possible spy, another Hiss. Though nobody else seemed to care much of a nickel about the disclosure of the Pentagon Papers, the White House went absolutely wild. The paranoia about Ellsberg got so great that the White House asked British intelligence to find out whether Ellsberg had been approached by Soviet espionage agents while a student in England in the early 1950s.

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MR. MITCHELL'S Justice Department decided that the continued publication of the papers supplied by Ellsberg would cause "immediate and irreparable harm" to the national security.

Ellsberg didn't quite wash as a spy. The office of his shrink was burgled by White House plumbers and yielded zilch. With all the ill will in the world, the White House couldn't make a Hiss out of an Ellsberg. Nine days after the last of the Pentagon Papers was finally, and legally, published, President Nixon announced that he would visit China. China was the Communist nation whose containment was the reason why we were in Vietnam. Mr. Nixon would go to seek world peace.