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Trump, Nixon, Reagan and the Alger Hiss Case



Alger Hiss testifying before Congress in 1948. Library of Congress. New York World-Telegram & Sun Collection.

Although the details of the case would be lost on him (don't forget, presidential aides had to explain the historical rudiments of Pearl Harbor when Tropical Storm Donald made landfall in Hawaii), Trump's assault on democracy and the Bill of Rights has its antecedents in the 1949 persecution of former State Department official Alger Hiss, who was sent to a federal penitentiary for forty-four months for denying under oath that he had seen Whittaker Chambers after January 1, 1937.

Hiss's conviction, less than a month later, led to Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy's 1950 proclamation that he had in his hand the names of 205 Communist subversives buried deep within the State Department. The Hiss case also assured Richard Nixon's political

ascendency—Nixon was a young member of Congress when Hiss was ensnared by the House Un-American Affairs Committee (HUAC)—and he rode Hiss’s conviction to the vice-presidency and later the presidency on the assertion that there were probably many Communists hiding under innocent American beds.

Then in 1984, after Ronald Reagan became the corporate sponsor in the White House of an angry right-wing agenda, the celluloid president conferred political sainthood upon the same Whittaker Chambers, Hiss’s nemesis and accuser who leveraged histrionics, lies, prosecutorial misconduct, and FBI duplicity to attack Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. (In the 1930s Hiss had been with FDR in the Agriculture Department and later went with him to Yalta.)

Reagan wasn’t the only president to deify the creepy Chambers (when he worked at *Time* magazine, Chambers kept a loaded gun in his desk). In 2001, the dark circle that schemed George W. Bush into the presidency held a secret, almost voodoo-like ceremony in the White House to celebrate the centenary of Chambers’ birth, to make the point that his underground journey from Communist errand boy to conservative icon was the inspirational story of America itself.

Finally, in 2017 and then again in 2025, when Trump restored his rackets to American politics, the legacies of the Hiss case and the subsequent McCarthy era of witch-hunting were re-inshrined in the White House. The consigliere who instilled in Trump the idea of American politics as a hate-crime was the Army-McCarthy hearing chief counsel, Roy Cohn Esq., who also railroaded Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to the electric chair. Cohn was not one of the prosecutors who sent Hiss up the river, except in spirit, but if you are looking for a connection between McCarthyite injustice and Trump’s current assault on individual freedom, Cohn is one of the lynchpins.

In the same way, an understanding of the Hiss case, distant as it is in our political memory, is crucial to understanding the extent to which the modern Republican Party sees its mission to conduct government as one endless show trial (now with Trump as the only judge and juror).

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By good fortune, the University Press of Kansas has just published Jeff Kisseloff’s excellent *Rewriting Hisstory: A Fifty-Year Journey to Uncover the Truth About Alger Hiss*, which is both a fresh examination of the campaign to clear Hiss’s name and overturn his convictions, and a deep dive into the Hiss archives and related papers. Unlike many previous writers on the subject, Kisseloff has run down every suspicion and lead, consulting the trial transcripts, the grand jury testimony, the vast FBI files on the case, and the many papers and documents he was able to study during his fifty years as a Hiss researcher. (His rebuttal of the theory that Priscilla Hiss typed the so-called Baltimore documents is a masterclass in investigative journalism.)

The result isn't so much a blockbuster as a calm recitation of the facts in the case, along with profiles of the major players (many of whom Kisseloff met), and descriptions of the trials that are trenchant and often humorous. Here, for example, is how he describes the first public testimony that Chambers gave against Hiss, which gives an excellent example of the extent to which Richard Nixon and his HUAC accomplices used their Hiss allegations to form the basis of the broad political attack on the New Deal (just in time for the 1948 presidential election):

It was Nixon's unique theory that if Hiss was lying about his relationship with Chambers, then he must also be lying when he denied being a Communist. Since Hiss said he didn't know anyone "by the name" of Chambers, the committee could pretend he was denying that he had known him, which Nixon and Mandel knew to be untrue.

According to Chambers, Mandel came up with the plan to call Chambers before the committee again, but this time in executive session. They would ask him questions about the Hisses' home furnishings or their hobbies with the intention of proving that Chambers had known them. The committee would then subpoena Hiss and ask him the same questions, so he would inadvertently confirm Chambers's story. While technically this proved nothing, since Hiss had known Chambers, the opening was there for HUAC to leak Chambers's testimony and Hiss's testimony selectively to give a false impression that Chambers was telling the truth and Hiss wasn't.

Chambers testified on August 7 for four hours of friendly questioning about the Hisses and still botched most of it. His testimony about the Hisses was so frequently and incredibly wrong that it was clear he hardly knew them. If one were to follow Nixon's reasoning, that would have meant that Hiss was not a Communist.

But from that early hearing, the suspicion has lingered that Hiss might have "done something" for the Russians.

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For those too young to recognize the name Alger Hiss, let me provide a libretto to the case that divided American politics after World War II and the death of Franklin Roosevelt in 1945.

Born in 1904, Hiss grew up in Baltimore and on Maryland's Eastern Shore. His father's death when Alger was age two created a void in his childhood. Still, Hiss managed to attend Johns Hopkins University and Harvard Law School, and after graduating he was chosen to clerk for the legendary justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

In the Depression of the 1930s, Hiss answered the New Deal's call to service, and from 1933 to 1947 he occupied positions of increasing responsibility in the Agriculture, Justice, and State departments and on the Nye committee—always with the goal of promoting Franklin Roosevelt's policies.

Hiss's accusers would later say he was a closet Communist in the 1930s, but no evidence of that exists. He was a New Deal Democrat who wanted to alleviate the widespread unemployment of the Depression, but his tastes in literature ran to Victor Hugo, not Karl Marx, and his persona was that of a Harvard-trained civil servant ready to throw downfield blocks for the causes of the New Deal. This, to be sure, made him enemies around Washington, including the likes of the FBI's J. Edgar Hoover and the wealthy investor Bernard Baruch. Kisseloff writes:

In the fifteen years between 1933 and 1948, beginning with Fuller, Alger earned the enmity of five influential people, Leonore Fuller, Ray Murphy, James Byrnes, Ben Mandel, and John Cronin, all of whom contributed to his downfall. Fuller's comments were still a prominent part of the FBI's case.

When World War II broke out on December 7, 1941, Hiss was assigned to the Far Eastern division of the State Department, where he was among those (including most of the U.S. government) who missed the warning signs of a pending Japanese attack on American outposts.

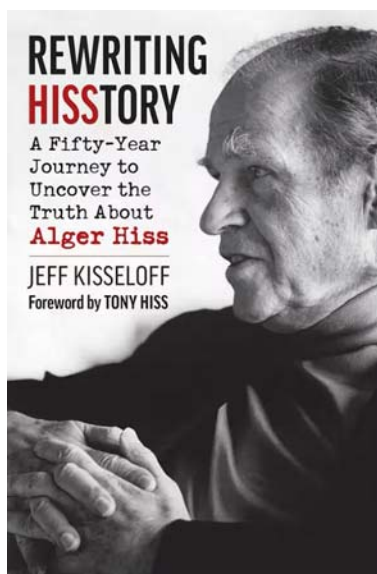
During the war years, his responsibilities shifted to international organizations, including the nascent United Nations, and it was Hiss who was the secretary of its first meeting in San Francisco in April 1945. Before that, he was a junior aide in the presidential delegation that met Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin at Yalta (but he was more a notetaker than someone whispering in FDR's ear).

Later on, when the American right-wing came to the conclusion that Yalta had been a sell-out to Stalin's Russia, Hiss became a convenient scapegoat to charge with espionage (even though the charges against him related to passing documents to Chambers in 1937-38, something Hiss denied).

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So who or what brought down Alger Hiss and turned him into a symbol, in the minds of many, of Communist subversion of the American government at its highest levels?

Technically, the charges brought against Hiss were for perjury: for lying under oath that he had never seen Chambers (whom he knew as George Crosley) after January 1, 1937. More broadly, however, Hiss was alleged to have passed State Department documents to his courier, Chambers, who had them photographed and passed on to other Moscow agents. But by 1948 the statute of limitations had run out on any charge of espionage (besides, in 1938 the United States was not at war with Russia). So Hiss's tormentors (notably Richard Nixon) had him frogmarched on perjury charges, which are a prosecutorial catch-all when you want to "get" someone.



From the beginning and through his two trials for perjury, the only real accuser Hiss ever had was Whittaker Chambers, although over the course of ten years (roughly 1939 – 1949) the witch-hunting Chambers picked up right-wing fellow travelers who found it politically expedient to attack the New Deal by charging that all sorts of men and women in Roosevelt's administration had been closet Communists.

Mind you, during World War II, the Soviet Union was a close American ally, and if you were looking for American officials who aided and abetted the Russians, you need not look any further than President Franklin Roosevelt, who almost single-handedly kept the Soviets alive at Stalingrad in 1942 with American aid. (During the war, when told by an aide that there were suspicions about Hiss being a Communist, FDR just laughed.)

In the 1930s, Russia was not an American ally, but the U.S. domestic political spectrum included many parties promoting socialism, labor, communism, and other collectives. (Ironically, Hiss was not involved in any these flirtations, despite Chambers' later accusations.)

In 1948, when Harry Truman was running (in effect, for Roosevelt's fourth term), and the Soviet Union was seizing eastern and central Europe for its sphere of influence, it made for good retail Republican politics to make the point that the New Deal Democrats were nothing more than the dupes and stooges of Stalin's darkness at noon.

FDR himself was dead, but there were lots of junior ministers (including Alger Hiss) who might well turn out Republican votes if they could be tarred-and-feathered in the smear of an illicit Communist past.

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To make the charges against a fifth column buried deep within the Roosevelt administration, no one played the part better than Whittaker Chambers, whose troubled childhood on Long Island, New York, turned him into a chameleon who could change to the color of whatever powerful man wanted him to do their bidding.

Although he dressed like an unmade bed, Chambers was intelligent, well read, good at languages, and a facile writer. But the truth wasn't in him. He lived his life as if a character in a fabulist novel, assuming a series of names, identities and professions. In one such fictional pose, he was freelance magazine writer George Crosley who professed interest in writing articles about the Nye Committee, for which Alger Hiss served as the general counsel in 1935.

During this period (a difficult time in the Depression, when Chambers was struggling to feed his family), Hiss and Crosley were friendly; Hiss even sublet him an apartment for a few months, and gave him a car and some money.

But when Crosley showed Hiss his true colors as a swindler, Hiss cut him off, which may later explain why Chambers bore a ten-year grudge against the more successful, well-connected Hiss, whose picture appeared routinely in newspaper articles about Dumbarton Oaks, Yalta or the United Nations.

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During the 1930s, one of the personas that Chambers adopted—for which there is no proof other, again, than his own word—was that of a Soviet intelligence courier in the Communist underground. (In all likelihood his alleged handlers were characters in Dostoevsky novels.)

Previously Chambers had been a member of the open Communist Party USA, and a contributing editor to various left-wing publications, including the *Daily Worker* and *New Masses*, but now he added “secret agent” to his portfolio, although his clownish public antics gave him more the appearance of Maxwell Smart than James Bond. (Among his college friends it was a great joke that the eccentric Chambers had taken up “spying,” and they wondered what the Kremlin thought of the postcards that he sent in from the cold.)

The other underground that attracted Chambers in the 1930s was cruising homosexuality, which perhaps more than his efforts for the Comintern might explain why he spent so much of his time meeting strange men while standing in the back of dark movie theaters. Kisseloff writes of his duplex personality:

I'm not a psychiatrist, psychologist, or social worker. I'm in no position to diagnose anyone, but as an observer of people and their actions, I believe a sympathetic person can make judgments without formal training. In this case, Whittaker Chambers was not a well man psychologically. Thanks in part to a brutal home life as a young boy, and to societal pressures that led him to believe he should only feel shame about his sexuality, he had no self-esteem, and his natural tendency toward paranoia took root. In later years, it manifested itself in a variety of ways, whether it was thinking that people who had no such intention were out to do him harm and that he needed to act first before he was victimized, a feeling that cost too many people the happiness and success they so deserved. Though he was comfortable financially, he had a compulsion to borrow and steal money, and it was that—not the fear of reprisal from his spy bosses (if he had any)—that caused him to flee the Communist Party.

After the trials in the 1950s, Chambers published a memoir, *Witness*, which to this day the Reagan/Trump right-wing hails as a definitive account of “the enemy within.” (In both his presidential campaigns Trump harangued “the enemy from within” and spoke of deploying the U.S. military to root out such evil.)

I have read *Witness*, which is absurd as a political narrative of the “Communist underground” and the threat it posed to American life. (Think of it as world’s longest *Time* magazine cover story on “The Communist Conspiracy,” written by *Time* rewrite man Whittaker Chambers.) But if you were to change the word “Communist” to “homosexual” at each instance it appears in the book, *Witness* could be read as an early gay novel. As a treatise about American politics it is as fatuous as *Forrest Gump*.

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Hiss’s two show trials for perjury were held in federal court in New York in 1949, and at the zenith of the Cold War he didn’t have a chance. Although the first trial ended in a hung jury, he was convicted in the second, and delivered to Lewisburg penitentiary for his five-year sentence (he ended up serving three years and eight months). He survived in the joint by befriending some influential mobsters, including Frank Costello. (By contrast, despite his consecration as the patron saint of William F Buckley, Jr.’s *National Review*, Chambers lived out the rest of his life in apparent misery, dying in 1960, but not before failing at several suicide attempts.)

After his release from prison, Hiss returned to New York in 1954, eked out a living as a stationery salesman, and spent the rest of his life (he died in 1996) campaigning to have his guilty verdicts overturned in the courts. He never succeeded. In many other ways, Hiss led a rich and rewarding life, and had strong family ties, despite his marriage failing over his case. He made many friends, spoke on college campuses, and even had his law license restored after Richard Nixon’s fall from grace in 1974. But his hopes for judicial exoneration ended in 1983, when the Supreme Court declined to hear his petition for *coram nobis*, which would have “set aside” his convictions based on prosecutorial misconduct during the two trials (essentially, the FBI and the prosecution withheld from Hiss’s defense damning evidence it had collected about Chambers).

Instead, the fight for Hiss’s innocence (or continuing guilt, depending on your views) has turned into competing schools of literature, in which authors on both sides of the case weigh in for or against Hiss’s claims.

Around the time of Richard Nixon’s duplicity and presidential resignation, many people were inclined to believe that Hiss was innocent and had been railroaded. Later on, when the United States began lurching to the McCarthyite right (in which the canonization of Whittaker Chambers was an important article of faith), there appeared a series of books and articles, all of which asserted that Hiss was guilty as charged. The most famous book about Hiss’s presumed guilt was Allen Weinstein’s *Perjury*, which came out in 1978.

Weinstein's claim to fame (other than riding the tide of neoconservatism into a Reagan administration sinecure) was his assertion that he began his research assuming that Hiss was innocent, but that once he had dug into the archives he found him to be guilty.

Having read *Perjury* carefully, I can report that Weinstein rewrote *Witness* (adding in self-serving footnotes, so that he could cite Chambers to...confirm Chambers), and *Witness* itself is a rewrite of the many FBI field reports that J. Edgar Hoover commissioned to prove that his detractor, Alger Hiss, was a Communist. Hence for 70 years all we have ever had is an endless loop of The Whittaker Chambers Story.

Yes, there are books that take Hiss's side of the argument, notably John Chabot Smith's *Alger Hiss: The True Story* and Meyer A. Zeligs *Friendship and Fratricide: An Analysis of Whittaker Chambers and Alger Hiss*. But in the last twenty years there has mostly been an onslaught of books proclaiming that Hiss was America's Kim Philby, in the pay of the Kremlin and operating as a mole within the administration of Franklin Roosevelt.

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To redress this imbalance we now have *Rewriting Hisstory*, a book that goes directly to all the controversies in the case.

Kisseloff is in his early seventies and as a undergraduate at Clark College in Wooster, Massachusetts, in the late 1970s, he got an internship in New York City to help the Hiss legal team review all of the documents (some 150,000 pages) that had come their way via the Freedom of Information Act.

As an intern, he got to know Alger Hiss, all of his lawyers, and many of writers and authors who had an interest in the case. He also developed a talent for archival research that mixed well with his passion for gumshoe journalistic reporting. Hence, his new book includes many sentences like this one: "I eventually found [Felix] Inslerman's widow in a nursing home, and she was enormously helpful."

You name the allegation against Hiss—those of Chambers, Weinstein, Hede Massing, the Fields, Elizabeth Bentley, Venona, et al.—and in his book Kisseloff has searched the massive Hiss archive to verify who said what about it in FBI reports, to the grand jury, at trial, or in witness statements.

It can make for some complicated paragraphs, but at least, finally, someone has dug into every archive (including Weinstein's own papers), and he quotes fully from the transcripts. Kisseloff's conclusion? He writes:

My belief that Hiss was not a spy was an easy call, confirmed by years of careful research into the government and defense files and the simple, straightforward logic that too often has been absent from writing on the Hiss case. Leftists commit political crimes. Alger just wasn't one of them.

That's my take, too.

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What's great about *Rewriting Hisstory* is that from now on, anyone wishing to write about the Hiss case will have to put in more time than Kisseloff's fifty years' of research and interviews. No longer will it be enough in proclaiming Hiss guilty to say, "Well, Weinstein looked into it, and he thought he was guilty."

When Weinstein's book was published in 1978, one of the headlines it produced was his report of a dinner party in Vermont at which he alleged that Priscilla Hiss (married to Alger until 1959) announced to the other guests that her former husband had been guilty. For the headline-hunting Weinstein, it was "case closed"—at least against Alger—although as Kisseloff writes:

What she [Priscilla] didn't know was that Weinstein had a story that he must have thought would clinch the case for him. It involved Priscilla, and it was devastating. It was also untrue, something he must have suspected because he never asked her about it before recklessly putting it into *Perjury*. The subsequent uproar caused the book's publication to be delayed.

Later on in his book, Kisseloff adds a postscript to this story:

When the galleys were released, Priscilla was informed of the story and furiously insisted that it was a lie. In Alger's defense and as a rebuke to Weinstein, she wrote a brief but powerful letter to the editor in the *New York Times*, quoted here in its entirety:

"For more than a quarter of a century, I have kept silence amid the clamor concerning the conviction of Alger Hiss. Recently, statements have appeared in print to the effect that I have made remarks indicating that Alger Hiss was guilty. I fear that if I do not now speak out, my silence will be interpreted as confirming these statements.

"At all times, and with my every fiber, I have believed in the innocence of Alger Hiss. I have never spoken a word to the contrary. To me the conviction of Alger Hiss represents a cruel miscarriage of justice.

"I do not intend to make any further statements concerning this painful subject."

Years later, I [Kisseloff] asked Tony [Hiss, Alger's son] if anyone might still be alive who was at that lunch, and he said that the senator's daughter, Ellen Flanders, was. I got her number and called. She told me that she had no memory of Priscilla saying any such thing, and that if she had said something as momentous as that, she certainly would have recalled it. Most important, Weinstein never contacted her to check whether the story was true.

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Needless to say, Priscilla Hiss wasn't the only person that Weinstein abused or misquoted. Several sources sued him and forced retractions. All this should have discredited Weinstein's book, but now, almost fifty years later, I still see it quoted in the literature as the "final word" on the Hiss case.

Then in 2005 the George W. Bush White House (after conducting its seance with the departed spirit of Whittaker Chambers in 2001) appointed Weinstein as the Archivist of the

United States, crowning his career as America's greatest researcher. Too bad no one consulted Kisseloff about the appointment, as he writes in his book:

At the National Archives, though, he [Weinstein] became even more physically aggressive against women. His behavior was documented in a 2018 exposé by a historian, Dr. Anthony Clark. Clark found that Weinstein was a serial predator who sexually harassed, and at least in one case sexually assaulted, women. The behavior was even conceded by Weinstein's children—who attributed it to his Parkinson's. The behavior cost him one job and then a second when he targeted another woman.

Too bad Weinstein died in 2015. He would have fit right into the two Trump administrations, with their institutionalized McCarthyism and use of the Big Lie to attack an endless list of imagined enemies for political gain.

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For newcomers to the Hiss case, it's possible that Kisseloff's book might come with too many names and too much detail (although his writing is confident and excellent). I met Hiss in the 1970s (about the same time that Kisseloff began his interning for the defense team) and have been reading about and following the case since then. So I can digest the complicated paragraphs about the serial number of the Woodstock typewriter or the contents of the Pumpkin Papers (in Nixon's hands, agitation propaganda, straight from a Stalinist show trial, but nothing that passed remotely near Hiss's desk in the State Department). I can imagine someone without any case background finding Kisseloff's detail, initially anyway, to be daunting.

For someone wanting to dip their toes in Hiss case history, I recommend starting with John Lowenthal's 1979 film, *The Trials of Alger Hiss*. Kisseloff is mentioned in the credits, although he confesses in *Rewriting Hisstory* that he had a complicated relationship with Lowenthal (who in 2003 won a London court case over his denial that Hiss was the Russian asset code-named ALES, as is hinted at in Venona intercepts).

The film is a three-hour viewing on [YouTube](#), but is worth that time, as you see the key figures in the case. The film includes many long interviews with Hiss himself, who candidly answers hard questions about how he lost in court or whether the homosexual Chambers ever made a pass at him (he says he did not).

From the Lowenthal film, I would move on to either the Chabot Smith biography or *Friendship and Fratricide*, and also a booklet published on the Alger Hiss website entitled *Two Foolish Men* by William Howard Moore, which explains, in accessible language, how someone with Hiss's sophistication and intelligence could have found himself entangled with the clearly erratic Whittaker Chambers.

Finally, because it is so well written, I might add to your reading list The Earl Jowitt's *The Strange Case of Alger Hiss*, which the English parliamentarian and legal scholar published in 1953, based entirely on the trial transcripts. Then, at long last, I would move on to Kisseloff's

new book, as it answers every lingering question in the case, and includes, in the last section, his take on who framed Hiss and why.

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Kisseloff's thesis is that neither Whittaker Chambers nor Hoover's FBI (my usual suspects, along with Richard Nixon) decided to take Hiss down, but that two men in particular—right-wing journalist Issac Don Levine and HUAC staffer Benjamin Mandel—had the motivation and means over many years to denounce Hiss within the government and later to fabricate the evidence against him. (Mandel had known Chambers since the 1920s, when both were members of the USA Communist Party—until each saw the light.)

In fingering this axis of evil, Kisseloff eases up a bit on blaming Chambers, presenting him more as a dupe of a powerful faction that wanted to win the 1948 election (if not to dominate American politics as Trump is now doing).

Here's how Kisseloff describes witness Chambers' pliability:

The question about why Hiss was targeted becomes even more of a mystery when you consider that until the late 1940s, neither Levine nor Mandel had ever met Hiss, yet there they were dedicating themselves to destroying his life. They both had the same motive—bringing about the end of the Roosevelt administration with the allegations against Hiss acting like poison-tipped arrows. As always with the Hiss case, the answer is there and it's clear, but to find it you have to navigate through a lot of sludge. To work my way through it, I pulled out a notepad and began making lists of subsets of accusers who led Levine and Mandel to Hiss, the reasons for their animosity toward him, and how they all fit in with each other. I also added Mandel and Levine to the diagram to see where they fit in. Very quickly, my lines and arrows began to make sense, especially when I placed them onto a timeline where they suddenly all fit into place, each with a different role in the conspiracy. Apparently, as with raising children, creating a successful frame-up also takes a village.

But it wasn't just that they were targeting Hiss to the exclusion of other New Dealers.

Hiss became the the focus of the take-down when instead of pleading the Fifth Amendment or refusing to appear before the HUAC (as many of those falsely-accused did), he walked into the lions' den and tried to engage the likes of congressmen Nixon and Karl Mundt in Socratic dialogue (when all that interested them was executing a drive-by shooting). As Kisseloff writes: "Like a junkyard dog, Mandel was vicious toward his enemies and fanatically loyal to anyone who petted him, none more so than Chambers, to whom he was devoted."

In searching for a motive for these crimes, Kisseloff asks:

The one question that Alger Hiss always struggled with was: What was Chambers's motive? Hiss thought maybe it was because he cut Chambers off personally and financially. Others thought the reason was Hiss had rebuffed Chambers's sexual advances.

I think both are wrong. It has almost always been assumed that Chambers was the driving force behind the case. I've come to believe that was not true at all. Make no mistake, he made his own choices when it came to Hiss, but he did so at the behest of people who knew which buttons to push. The people who framed Hiss hoped to build up his notoriety and then use it to bury the liberal New Deal coalition. They would get help on that end from Chambers and his allies on HUAC and Joseph McCarthy, Wisconsin's junior senator, who saw in Hiss's troubles a way to get reelected. Together, they rocked this country so powerfully that the seismic impact is still being felt more than seventy years later.

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As much as I admire Hiss, I can acknowledge that for a graduate of Harvard Law School and a former Supreme Court clerk, he was terrible at defending his own legal interests. At one point he attended a critical HUAC meeting without counsel (actually, he never should have turned up at all), and his decision to sue Chambers' for libel—while admirable for those who believe in truth—did nothing but bring down on his head every spurious allegation from the likes of Isaac Don Levine and Ben Mandel (later backed up by hundreds of FBI agents who combed the country looking for dirt on Hiss).

Hiss should have known that the Woodstock typewriter dragged into court as evidence against him wasn't the one his wife's family had owned in the 1920s. (Alas, Hiss wasn't a typewriter man). Finally, at the two perjury trials, he had the chance to destroy Chambers on the witness stand (for his many perjuries, factual inventions, and fictional lives), but somehow let him appear credible to the jury.

Not only did the FBI hide Chambers' penchant for thievery, assumed names, and homosexuality from the defense, it also infiltrated the Hiss defense team with several moles, including Horace Schmahl and Francis Sayre. It also managed to cover up the fact that much of Chambers' mysterious "party" activities in the 1930 can best be understood as part of his obsession for gifting.

Intriguingly, Kisseloff raises the possibility that Chambers's life in the underground was nothing more than an elaborate hoax to pad his party expense account or scam his so-called comrades—agents "running in the field" as fictional cost centers. (At one point Chambers and his wife attempted credit card fraud at some Washington, D.C. department stores, when they figured out that there was a wealthier family named "Chambers" shopping in their neighborhood.)

But at the two perjury trials, the FBI's front man, Whittaker Chambers, came across as an unfrocked Communist who had seen the light on the road to Moscow and sought nothing more than to purify the poisoned American soul (for which thirty years later Ronald Reagan posthumously awarded him the Medal of Freedom). And now in the White House we have a president who is the spiritual heir of McCarthyite lawyer Roy Cohn and someone who lies

with the same facility as Whittaker Chambers, only in Trump's case it is to mislead the public on his own affiliations as a Kremlin asset.

MAY 2, 2025

Matthew Stevenson is the author of many books, including [Reading the Rails](#), [Appalachia Spring](#), and [The Revolution as a Dinner Party](#), about China throughout its turbulent twentieth century. His most recent books are [Biking with Bismarck](#) and [Our Man in Iran](#). Out now: [Donald Trump's Circus Maximus and Joe Biden's Excellent Adventure](#), about the 2016 and 2020 elections.