

## Chapter 4

### The Strange Case of Alger Hiss

Alger Hiss seemed to have been born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Slim, tall, and handsome, with an aristocratic bearing, Hiss's list of prestigious schools included Harvard Law. His career included clerking for a Supreme Court Justice, advising President Roosevelt at Yalta, helping found the UN, and heading the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

On August 2, 1948 this man received a phone call informing him that Whittaker Chambers, an editor of *Time Magazine* and a self-confessed communist, was going to testify before the House of Un-American Activities Committee that he {Hiss} had also been a member of the Communist Party. Alger Hiss replied that he did not know Chambers, had never been in the Party, and had no friends who were communists. The next day, Chambers denounced Hiss before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Two days later, Hiss repeated his denials before the Committee and made such a convincing case that the Committee was fully prepared to drop the charges.

But before the Hiss case had ended and partially because of it, the threat of communists in the US government had become a national concern. Ultimately Hiss spent 44 months in jail for perjury and the rest of his long life protesting his innocence. In addition, thousands of Americans were dismissed from their jobs on questionable evidence that they were communists, communist sympathizers, or sympathetic to communist causes. Famous writers were unable to find outlets for their work; Richard Nixon became Vice-President largely based on his role in the Hiss case; and Senator Joe McCarthy rose from obscurity to becoming one of the most powerful men in America.

Was Alger Hiss really an agent of the Communist Party working on behalf of the Soviet Union as charged? Or was he an innocent victim of false charges and a misguided public looking for scapegoats for losses in the Cold War which included appeasement of the Soviets at Yalta, the "loss" of China to communism, and the firing of General Douglas MacArthur? Read the following chapter to familiarize yourself with the strange case of Alger Hiss, and prepare yourself to discuss the answer to this question.



**Alger Hiss with wife,  
Pricilla**

#### Hiss Accused

In August of 1948, Congress was getting ready to adjourn. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had been busy finding communists in government, but the public was losing interest, and President Truman was planning to ask Congress to discontinue the committee. However, the interest of committee members was aroused by *Time Magazine's* Whittaker Chambers' assertion that he had close contact with fellow communist party member Alger Hiss between 1934-37. Two days later, Hiss testified that he never even met Chambers. The stories were so strikingly different that Chambers was recalled by a sub-committee of HUAC headed by freshman Congressman Richard Nixon. On cross-examination, Chambers gave a detailed account of Hiss's personal life. This account included the shape of Hiss' house, the arrangement of his furniture,

the terms of endearment he used to address his wife, and even his excitement in finding a rare prothonotary warbler while bird watching along the Potomac River. Chambers even claimed that he had

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been a frequent guest in the Hiss household; that Hiss had given a car to a member of the Communist party; and that he had unsuccessfully tried to talk Hiss into quitting the Party.

Confronting this damaging testimony, Hiss came close to losing his composure. He claimed that most of the details of his personal life were publicly available, and many people knew of his bird watching habits. When pressed, Hiss admitted that he might have known Chambers under the name of George Crosley, and that he had given or sold his car to Crosley as part of a rental agreement. But Hiss continued to insist that he had no communist friends and that he never joined or worked for the party.

Chambers, now more confident, extended his charges against Alger Hiss. He said that Hiss was not only a member of the Communist Party, but had actually provided him with stolen documents from the US State Department. These documents, Chambers claimed, contained important American secrets and were passed on to Soviet officials. A typewriter belonging to Alger Hiss was supposedly used to type



**Congressman Nixon  
examining the  
famous pumpkin**

some of these documents, others were in Hiss's handwriting, and yet others copied on to microfilm. Pressed to corroborate this testimony, Chambers suddenly remembered that he had given some of the documents to a nephew living in Brooklyn, New York. Chambers went to Brooklyn where his nephew had stored them in an abandoned elevator shaft. He took them to his farm in Maryland where he kept them in his bedroom. Fearing that Hiss might send agents to find these incriminating documents, Chambers claimed he hid them in a hollowed out pumpkin on his farm. He turned them over to investigators led by Richard Nixon, who had thoughtfully brought a photographer along to get a picture of him examining the evidence.

With this sensational evidence in his hand, New York prosecutor Thomas Murphy convened a grand jury which indicted Hiss on two counts of perjury, one based on Hiss's claims he did not see Chambers after 1936, and the other that he lied about passing secret State Department documents to him. Because the statute of limitations had expired and the lack of eyewitnesses, Hiss could not be charged with treason.

At his trial, Hiss's lawyers charged the FBI with constructing the typewriter used to type the 'pumpkin papers', and brought forth dozens of character witnesses who testified in behalf of their client. The lawyers argued that this attack on Hiss was an attempt to discredit liberal Democrats. Hiss's defense team also found a witness to refute the only government informant other than Chambers who testified that Hiss was a member of the Communist Party. However, the defense failed to forcefully challenge changes in Chambers's testimony concerning when he (Chambers) left the Communist Party. These changes seemingly were made to coincide with the latest dates on the 'pumpkin papers.'

The prosecution, however, made an impression by producing the registration to the car that Hiss sold to William Rosen, an alleged communist, signed in Hiss's hand writing. The most damaging testimony against Hiss were the documents supposedly typed on Hiss's typewriter and the failure of Hiss's defense team to refute the FBI's expert witness that this indeed was the typewriter once owned by the Hisses. Hiss later claimed (and witnesses corroborated this claim) that the typewriter was not in his family's possession at the time the documents were typed. •

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- Whether the controversial papers actually contained important government secrets has not been established.

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Alger Hiss was found guilty of both charges in his second trial (the first had resulted in a hung jury). He spent 44 months in jail where he was a model prisoner. He never held another important job, was divorced from his wife, and spent the rest of his long life claiming his innocence. The Hiss trial is considered one of the most important of the 20th century, and Hiss' guilt or innocence is still being debated.

## Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Identify or define and briefly explain the relationship to the chapter of each of the following:

- |                            |                   |
|----------------------------|-------------------|
| a. importance of Hiss case | f. HUAC           |
| b. 2 charges against Hiss  | g. typewriter     |
| c. Whittaker Chambers      | h. pumpkin papers |
| d. prothonotary warbler    | i. Richard Nixon  |
| e. George Crosley          |                   |

2. Make a list in which you evaluate the charges against Hiss. Use the following form as a model:

Evidence damaging to Hiss	Reasons (if any) to question evidence	Evaluation of evidence

3. Do you think there was enough evidence to convict Alger Hiss of perjury and passing government secrets to communist agents? Explain why you think there was or was not.