

New York University, Center for the United States and the Cold War
Alger Hiss and History, Inaugural Conference, April 5, 2007
Victor Navasky, (Columbia University, Publisher Emeritus, The Nation)

NASH: Thank you, David. I'd like to introduce our Keynote Speaker, Victor Navasky.

Victor Navasky is publisher emeritus of The Nation, and now teaches journalism at the Columbia University School for Journalism. Victor?

VICTOR NAVASKY: Thank you. Good to be here. In 1951, Leslie Fiedler, the literary critic, wrote, "It is time, many of us feel, to forget the whole business. The prison doors have closed on Alger Hiss. Let us consider the question closed."

Twenty-seven years later, another literary critic, the distinguished and thoughtful cultural and political observer, Alfred Kazin, wrote on the occasion of the publication of Allen Weinstein's book, *PERJURY, THE HISS-CHAMBERS CASE* -- this is a quote from Kazin -- "It is impossible to imagine anything new in the case except an admission by Alger Hiss."

Fourteen years after that, in 1992, the Russian general, Dmitry A. Volkogonov, after ordering a search of a full range of official Russian government repositories with information about Soviet intelligence operations, including KGB files and military intelligence, or GRU files, told Alger Hiss's attorney, John Lowenthal, and the world, in a videotaped interview that Hiss had not been a spy. "If he was a spy, then I believe positively I would have found a reflection in various files."

"Alger Hiss was apparently a victim of the Cold War," he said.

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Volkogonov subsequently conceded under questioning first by Herb Romerstein, formerly a staff consultant to the House Un-American Activities Committee when he was in Washington at a press conference that he could not say with absolute certainty that some files had not been destroyed or that his search had been 100 percent exhausted. Of course, he didn't make the search himself. Primakov and a whole bunch of other people had examined those archives.

Ten years ago in 1996, the CIA and the NSA released 3,000 World War Two intelligence cables decrypted under the secret Venona Project. They included one cryptic reference to Hiss by name, but also a 1945 report about an agent code-named ALES, and it contained a footnote dated 20 years later saying that ALES was "probably Alger Hiss."

At the time, Time Magazine wrote that "the Venona message, Document Number 1822, seems to remove reasonable doubt about Alger Hiss's guilt."

This morning, Kai Bird and Svetlana Chervonnaya release a paper whose full text will appear in the American Scholar Magazine Online in the next week or so, which purports to document that Alger Hiss could not have been ALES.

Now I mention all of the above not to argue that Alger Hiss was or wasn't a spy but rather to underline the obvious. This is a case that will not die. It will not go away. The Cold War is over, but this among other Cold War ghosts lingers on. The question is why. It is

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perhaps the wrong question to put to you, to this audience, since you wouldn't be here if you didn't think the case still mattered.

In 1999, Jacob Weisberg wrote in *The New York Times Magazine*, and he put forth one possible explanation, not about the Hiss Case alone, but about Cold War political cases as a class. I'm now quoting from Jacob Weisberg: "These are not primarily arguments about historical fact at all. Espionage charges initiated by subterranean and frequently unreliable sources are a way of arguing about the past as if it were present, a continuation of ideological politics by other means among people who are -- charitably put -- obsessive.

"Listening in, you get a sense" -- this is Weisberg talking -- "you get a sense that these arguments are less a posthumous sorting-out of the Cold War than a sublimated continuation of it. The prevailing perspective remains that of the battlefield occupied by shellshocked soldiers who can't process the news that the War is over. It is in a way a metaphysical problem that afflicts the ex, pro, anti-, and anti-communists. What happens when the political struggle that defined your existence ceases to exist?"

This is Jacob Weisberg. By way of putting my own view of this conference in perspective, let me say, partly because I started with the impression, and that's all that it was, that Whittaker Chambers was not to be trusted and not always capable of distinguishing fact from fiction; and partly because I believed that the major political trials of the period were

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carried in the overheated atmosphere of the Cold War, I started with the impression that Hiss was indeed still entitled to the presumption of innocence.

I've read you Jacob Weisberg's account, and I want to now put to you that there are at least 10 other reasons to be here, apologies David Letterman, and I share them with you in full expectation that in the course of today's deliberations, the scholars, journalists, commentators and participants on panels and in the audience will dismiss some of them as frivolous, explore others in depth, and of course, offer alternatives of their own.

So first, to borrow a familiar phrase from Richard Nixon, let me make one thing perfectly clear, I am well-aware that there are those who believe that at least as far as the Alger Hiss Case goes, there really is nothing more to discuss, that the small band of true believers in Hiss's innocence are in denial. There is even a book out called *IN DENIAL: HISTORIANS, COMMUNISM, AND ESPIONAGE*, by John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, which argues that people like me who think the case against Alger Hiss has never really been proved, are simply in denial.

Well, I deny that I'm in denial.

And here's why. Unlike Allen Weinstein, Sam Tanenhaus, and the late Bill Reuben and others, I do not pretend to be a scholar of the case. These folks have spent their lives, a decent part of it, studying it.

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I have spent a lot of time reading about it, but I don't pretend to be a scholar in the case. But when I did sit down to review Weinstein's book, PERJURY, partly because I started with the impression of Alger Hiss's innocence, I was profoundly impressed with a half-dozen of his new research finds and sources, and it seemed to me after reading PERJURY, that if they were correctly quoted and in context, presumptions are there to be rebutted and I would have to abandon my presumption of innocence. So I sent advance galleys of the Weinstein book to seven of the most startling new sources to ask if he had reported what they had to say correctly and in context, and six of them got back to me and they each independently said the same thing: Yes, he had quoted them accurately, but he had done so to make it sound as if they were confirming that there had been espionage, and I'm not going to burden you this morning with the details of this exchange but the bottomline was, they all denied that anything they knew or said or believed confirmed the espionage part of the Chambers-Weinstein narrative.

Now Allen Weinstein's response to that was that they had recanted only because they disapproved of his conclusion that Hiss was indeed guilty of perjury. Perhaps Weinstein is right, although one of them sued and won a settlement from him, his publisher and THE NEW REPUBLIC where he had repeated his misinformation.

But my point this morning is not who was right or wrong between Allen Weinstein and those witnesses or me, it is not even that when he republished an updated PERJURY, he omitted the fact that six of his original sources denied that he got them right, nor is it that when Sam

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Tanenhaus, who's now the editor of the New York Times Book Review, wrote his interesting biography of Whittaker Chambers which relied heavily on Weinstein for many of his facts and assumptions, he, too, omitted the fact that Weinstein's key sources had recanted, or whatever you want to call it.

Rather my point this morning is that the omission of inconveniently exculpatory material in the Hiss Case seems to be something of a pattern among those who have no such inhibitions when it comes to sharing what appears to be on the surface incriminating material.

Those who share what they like to call the consensus and indeed, if you read the papers, for the last 10 years, that has been the consensus, will cite the famous footnote in the Venona cable, which I mentioned to you earlier, saying that the agent codenamed ALES was quote probably Alger Hiss. On its face, incriminating. But they omit that in another cable, this one the fragment that I mentioned and that is otherwise incoherent, Hiss is mentioned by name and yet in the literature of Venona if you mention someone by name, they are presumably not to be a spy because under tradecraft groundrules one mentions spies only by their codenames.

So let me just -- here.

They'll quote from the memoir of KGB officer Oleg Gordievsky, who said that Hiss was a spy -- incriminatory -- but they fail to quote another KGB officer, General Vladimir Pavlov who says in his memoir that Hiss was not a spy -- exculpatory -- and so forth.

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If I'm right, and of course, I may be wrong, but if I'm right, then one has to ask who is in denial? So that's Point One, and I apologize for injecting myself into it.

Point Two. Whittaker Chambers himself may have provided the best explanation for the enduring interest in this case when he called it an epitomizing one. As he wrote, "It epitomized the basic conflict and Alger Hiss and I were the archetypes. This is of course what gave the peculiar intensity to the struggle."

Here he was not talking about innocence or guilt. He was, I believe, talking about belief in God versus belief in man. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who accepted Chambers's basic account, nevertheless put it, Chambers's writings divided the world into what Schlesinger called "messianic Christian anticommunists" and "atheistic communists."

A more extreme version of this perspective on the case was provided by John Strachey writing in 1962, when he put the case in its most cosmic context. Chambers, he wrote, was part of the literature of reaction, "Not only against Communism, but against 500 years of rationalism and empiricism; against in short the Enlightenment."

One of the many of the paradoxes that persists in this case for me has to do with Chambers, and I regret that Sam Tanenhaus is not with us today to perhaps shed some light on it. Irving Howe, who believed that Hiss was probably guilty, reviewed WITNESS for THE NATION MAGAZINE in 1952, many years before I got there, and like Schlesinger and Strachey, he wrote that "The world, as Chambers sees it, is split between those who acknowledge

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the primacy of God and those who assert the primacy of man; from this fundamental division follows a struggle between morality and murder, with communism merely the final version of the rationalist heresy; and the one hope for the world is a return to Christian virtue, the ethic of mercy.” This is Howe summarizing the Chambers perspective.

My question is, how does one reconcile this world-view with Sam Tanenhaus’s explanation of one of the mysteries of the case -- which is why Chambers, after telling the FBI and numerous other agencies 16 times, mostly under oath, that Alger Hiss had been a Communist but was not involved in espionage changed his story in 1948? Tanenhaus provides a possible explanation of how that could be so. Hiss supporters say it is simply that he was lying, but Tanenhaus reports on Chambers’s behalf that the statute of limitations didn’t expire until 1948. Had Chambers told this story before that, he would have been vulnerable to imprisonment as someone who was taking part as a spy in the Cold War.

My question is a very simple one. Would the messianic Christian anticommunist Chambers, the man who saw what he termed “the tragedy of history” as a test of faith, who invoked the moral authority of a true counter-revolutionary, the prophet who exposed the hell of Stalinism, whose self-proclaimed heroes were Dante and Dostoevsky, would he really have put the statute of limitations and his mundane self-interest ahead of his deeper interest in salvation -- his own and mankind’s? Perhaps the panel on “Hiss in History” will deal with this.

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A third reason that the case retains interest for the survivors of the period, but also for those who would understand it whatever they may believe about Hiss's innocence or guilt, is that as Alistair Cooke noted at the time, not just Hiss, but a generation was on trial. Chambers himself wrote in witness "Alger Hiss is only one case that stands for the whole Communist penetration in government." And from the Democrats' point of view consider that the case was used at the time to smear FDR and the New Deal, as has already been mentioned. If Hiss was guilty then the New Deal was corrupt, the State Department had been subverted, Yalta was a sellout, the UN was a Communist plot, the possibilities of peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union were shattered, incipient Cold War repression became defensible.

Anyone who would understand the history of the New Deal, the so-called McCarthy era - - I say so-called because it began before McCarthy came on the scene and it survived after he drowned in alcohol and disappeared from the scene -- anyone who would understand the history of the New Deal and the McCarthy era and the post Cold War international order must come to terms with the Hiss case.

Fourth, as Kai Bird and Svetlana Chervonnaya point out in their fascinating paper, which you'll hear about later, the case had historical consequences. They begin by saying, "As the distinguished historian Walter Lafeber observed, it was the Hiss trial, among other events that triggered the McCarthy era. It also catapulted an obscure California Congressman, Richard M. Nixon, onto the national scene." Now I do not want to scoop Bird and Chernovonnaya here but

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if they are right, their paper is a comment not merely on “Who was Ales?,” an important question in its own right, because ultimately truth is what history is and ought to be about. But also for what it says about the history profession, about so many of today’s historians and how well or ill the system of opinion trusteeship under whose auspices the rest of us get our information, is functioning.

If Kai and Svetlana are right, these two superb, indefatigable investigators have put the consensus historians to shame, because for so many years they just accepted one hypothesis without bothering to investigate alternatives. This I suspect will be the subject of discussion here but also for many months and perhaps years to come. Who knows?

Fifth, of course, there is the irresistibly dramatic structure of the Hiss-Chambers case, not to mention the larger than life protagonists who inhabit the case. It’s hard for me to believe that aside from a teleplay or two, more has not been made in Hollywood of this spy story of how the lean, handsome golden boy from Harvard Law School, the New Deal hot dog with all the right connections -- clerked for Oliver Wendell Holmes, protégé of Felix Frankfurter, colleague, friend and valued associate of Dean Acheson, advisor to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, mentioned as possible secretary of state -- was brought down by the short, overweight, rumpled and deeply closeted Columbia dropout, the self-confessed spy-turncoat with rotting teeth and a gift for self-dramatization.

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At one point a Hollywood studio was rumored to have commissioned Gore Vidal to write a screenplay about the case. I think he actually did. The project was abandoned at about the time the latest so-called consensus emerged. Now, on the other hand, the right has long maintained that Hiss charmed and deceived the elite liberal media by demonizing and even gay-baiting Chambers. Either way, it seems to me that Hiss vs. Chambers is, if nothing else, the ultimate case study in the relationship of popular culture to history, the ways in which our belief systems are subject to manipulation even as they inform and are formed by our politics.

Sixth is the mystery which has hovered over the case ever since Hiss emerged from prison and spent the rest of his life trying to prove his innocence. For his supporters there was no mystery. He must have been telling the truth because as Philip Nobile reported it in HARPER'S in 1975, "Nothing else makes sense." Why would he waste his time doing that? But if he was telling a lie, why did he persist in telling that lie, compromising his friends, family and allies in the process? It is an issue worth airing because by avoiding it, each side to the dispute, as it were, thinks (and writes and talks as if) it occupies the moral high ground, making it that much more difficult to get at the underlying reality. For the right even to suggest that Hiss was innocent means not only you're in denial, they regard people who raise these questions with great condescension, and for the left, it's a battle that has this symbolic import going way beyond the facts of the case.

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Ron Rosenbaum, writing in 2001 in THE NEW YORK OBSERVER, put forth one theoretical answer as to why Hiss would spend his life doing this, and Ron believed, came to believe that Hiss was guilty. He said, if he was a mole (which Rosenbaum persuaded himself Hiss was), the same convictions that led him to deceive the people who were close to him when he was active “might just as well have led him to deceive those defending his innocence in ‘retirement.’” But Rosenbaum went further. He thinks Hiss’s supporters do him a disservice by believing him. Rosenbaum points out -- and he quotes Graham Greene on this point -- that when Kim Philby moved to Moscow, he could say “I did it and I’m glad!” Rosenbaum says Hiss deprived himself of that recognition, but his supporters needn’t. It’s a sentiment akin to that of Gary Wills, who also believes Hiss to be guilty and wrote, “I would not pay him the insult of believing him. It is only as a secret foe that he regains the integrity people have always sensed in him.”

Perhaps the most ambitious attempt to plumb Hiss’s psyche on this issue may be found in G. Edward White’s book, ALGER HISS’S LOOKING-GLASS WARS.

Mr. White’s thesis, if I understand him correctly, is that by appearing to pursue proof of his innocence, Hiss believed he would persuade his supporters that he was not the kind of person who could have been a traitor to his country. That way he could be -- this is a quote from White -- “an inspiration to his supporters, and a reminder of the excesses of the Cold War.” And he could be a Soviet agent too, since once an agent always an agent. “Those achievements taken

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together gave him a sense that his life had a completeness and a fundamental meaning,” writes White. It is a complex theory, which I hope Mr. White will elaborate when his turn comes later today because of all the issues buried in this case, none is more difficult and critical to disentangle than the relationship between personal psychology, morality and politics. If Hiss was telling a lie, was it an important or a trivial one (like Clinton’s denial that he had sex with an intern) is the question Mr. White raises.

Number seven: with the meltdown of the former Soviet union, one would have thought that the need for carrying on the symbolic politics of the Cold War had expired. Not so. As new Cold War archives came on the market, they have been exploited not merely to revisit old Cold War battles, but with an eye on contemporary politics. And that’s a point that Weisberg made, but in a different way. Thus George Will said of the new Yale University Press “annals of communism” series that the material shows that “the left was on the wrong side of history and deserves to be.” That’s George Will.

Even Nick von Hoffman, a left-libertarian maverick columnist wrote, In the aftermath of Venona, and the publication of a new, sympathetic biography of Joe McCarthy that “point by point McCarthy got it all wrong and yet he was closer to the truth than those who ridiculed him. McCarthy may have exaggerated the scope of the problem, but not by much.” All of which led Josh Micah Marshall in 1999, writing in THE AMERICAN PROSPECT, to detect what he called “a generalized red scare revisionism in which liberals, the Democratic Party, the left, the New

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Deal are all retroactively besmirched by an association with -- or at least gullibility about -- the Communist menace.”

If Marshal, who happens to believe that Hiss was guilty, was right, what we have here is more than a rehashing of Cold War battles. It is what he called the new McCarthyism that “seems to discredit even Cold War liberalism by revising history, but also to attack liberal internationalism in foreign policy today by using the tactics pioneered by the red baiters of half a century ago.”

The continuing power of the case, fifty years after the fact, was on display when Clinton’s nominee for the CIA, Anthony Lake, had to withdraw from contention not least because he said on “Meet the Press” that he found the evidence against Alger Hiss “inconclusive.”

Eighth and not unrelated, at a time when there is a tendency to demonize a new enemy other, the Muslim-as-terrorist, study of the Hiss case has the potential to help us understand this process. It has the potential to demythologize and demystify the enemy other of those years when to be liberal was to be a pinko was to be a Communist was to be a spy. If the Communist party was involved in both reform, which I believe it was (and there are books out for those of you who are not members of the party, Mark Naison’s, COMMUNISTS IN HARLEM DURING THE DEPRESSION is one of them) but also in espionage, it’s important to know in what proportions, as Ellen Schrecker’s writings make clear.

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When did belonging to a Marxist study group stop and belonging to a Communist cell begin, and did belonging to a Communist cell and/or “doing underground work” inevitably mean being part of the secret Soviet underground? Or the secret U.S. Communist Party underground. We know what we mean by espionage, but reading some of the Venona cables, which say things like so and so “definitely understands that he is working for us,” giving the impression that there are many people who are cooperating, whether it’s leaking or sharing unpublic information, or whatever, who don’t think of themselves as spies. One wonders whether there is such a thing as unwitting espionage?

I tried without success to get the late Victor Perlo and the late Harry Magdoff, both of whose names found their way onto various Venona lists of suspected spies, to tell their stories. Magdoff claimed innocence, Perlo sort of claimed innocence, but they both were disinclined to disrupt their end-of-the-last-century lives by once again getting in the papers and getting into a dispute. But the social history of life at the intersection of radical politics, Democratic politics and Communist party politics in those years, remains a missing piece of history, and such murkiness perpetuates misunderstanding. The study of the relationship of this case could help to clarify these critical matters.

A ninth reason that the case has not died is the possibility, the consensus notwithstanding, that what we have here is a monstrous, monumental miscarriage of justice. I don’t wish to get sentimental here but the other day I was talking with -- of all people -- Tony Hiss, Alger’s son,

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who you'll hear from later in the morning and he reminded me that "when we stop to think about it and stop to feel about it, we can sometimes acknowledge and sense the pain and shame that a miscarriage of justice is an unhealed wound, an injury that continues to hurt the victim and the victim's family and friends in a way that does not diminish throughout any of their lifetimes.

"But it's perhaps harder to see that the circle of the injured also takes in all the of the rest of us too. A miscarriage of justice is just that -- a miscarriage. A stillbirth, a piece of the truth that never made it into the light of day. Its absence from the world encourages dangerous and harmful illusions to lodge invisibly in our minds -- one of them being that our system of justice is more reliable than it actually is. This can fool us into thinking that our courts have the strength and resilience to withstand sudden episodes of fear, panic, and prejudice. A miscarriage of justice also weakens all of us in another, subtler way. If a wrongful conviction is the result of lies or trickery of some kind, until we learn to recognize the patterns of dissembling being used, we remain vulnerable to repeating our original mistake and to being tricked time and again by the same deception."

Tenth and finally -- John Kenneth Galbraith once told me, only say finally when you have about five minutes to go because it puts the audience at their ease -- but anyway, I have less than five minutes to go. Tenth and finally, I want to mention the blogosphere. Not as a reason that the case has survived, so much as by way of a cautionary note that a conference such as today's is important not least because real people talking and arguing with other real people in

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real time at a real place like the New York University Law School auditorium, can serve as a valuable corrective to the distortions that so quickly overwhelm cyber-space. Even before it got underway, this conference was attacked in the blogosphere -- so we are already a success -- but since we were attacked, among other reasons, for having me as the keynote speaker, allow me to apologize for being me.

However, even though I was not among the inviters, I might say that although I deeply regret that Weinstein and Tanenhaus were unable or unwilling to attend, I want to praise the center for holding the conference that we have. My own suspicion is that before the day is done, a variety of views on the matters I have inventoried will have been heard, but should it prove to be the case that those questioning the consensus outnumber those reflecting it, I think the political culture will survive this latest swing of the pendulum either way.

So I trust that today's proceedings will benefit from the civility the hosts have already displayed in making it possible, and I ask that you join me in thanking them for doing so.

Please. Thank you.