

New York University, Center for the United States and the Cold War
Alger Hiss and History, Inaugural Conference, April 5, 2007
Bruce Craig (University of Prince Edward Island)
“Alger Hiss Recent Explorations in Documenting the Public and Private Man”

Thank you. A quote. “This is the circus of Dr. Lao. We show you things that you don’t know. We spare no pains and we spare no dough, but we are going to give you one helluva show.”

Back in 1964, a movie came out called “The Seven Faces of Dr. Lao.” It’s about an elderly, enigmatic Chinese gentleman played by Tony Randall, who arrives in a sleepy Western town in Arizona. The plot revolves around the contest between a heroic newspaperman and a power-grabbing land baron, but as the story progresses, viewers come to realize that a crisis lies in the townfolks’s own humanity. What they are looking for is a sideshow spectacular but instead they find themselves immensely changed by their contact with the good Doctor and his circus. The townspeople begin to ask just who is this Dr. Lao.

Through the metamorphosis of Dr. Lao and his many faces -- seven to be exact -- the mythical became real. The Hiss-Chambers controversy and the effect that it has had on the public and the scholarly community is something not far removed from Dr. Lao’s circus. Alger Hiss, like the enigmatic Dr. Lao, is the man of many faces, the central figure who left an impact not on a town but rather on a generation. As the town’s people had come to terms with Dr. Lao, today at this conference, we seek to come to terms with Alger Hiss, the man. Depending on one’s political sympathies, the portrait of Alger is usually colored in one of two ways. Some paint him in red hues as one of the most treacherous men in history. They see a two-faced man, a sort of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality, pleasant and congenial on the surface, but as

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Richard Nixon once quipped, if people knew his true character, they would want him “boiled in oil.”

Others see him though in shades of not just red, but frankly, red, white and blue. They see the face of an American Dreyfus, a defamed martyr, the victim of the excesses of the McCarthy era. The man devoted to the cause of liberal New Deal Era social reform at home and internationalism abroad. The Alger I see, is a man of many faces as was Dr. Lao. Alger was a man whose compartmentalized life was part-Merlin and part-Pan. There’s a bit of Medusa in him as well, and yes, part-talking serpent. We do not all see the same face nor should we expect to.

Now many in this audience today are intimately familiar with the case and the controversy but what do we really know about the man?

While the documentation on the case and the controversy is huge, few have turned their attention on the man and still fewer have written about his impact on American Twentieth-Century history, absent of course the case and the controversy. In painting a portrait of Hiss, we do have Alger’s own RECOLLECTIONS OF A LIFE, a slim book that provides us with a useful, introspective memoir. There is of course Allen Weinstein’s PERJURY: THE HISS-CHAMBERS CASE, which provides a useful sketch of Hiss’s life and times drawn from archival sources and oral history, but the story essentially ends with the trial as does John Chabot Smith’s, ALGER HISS, THE TRUE STORY, certainly, though, a much more sympathetic

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portrait of the man than Weinstein's. For Alger's life after the trial, we look to Tony Hiss's *LAUGHING LAST*, and the more recent *THE VIEW FROM ALGER'S WINDOW*. For the psychological portrait, there is Meyer Zeligs's, *FRIENDSHIP AND FRATRICIDE*, and most recently, G. Edward White's, *ALGER HISS'S LOOKING-GLASS WARS*, the first and only recent book to put the spotlight on Hiss, the man.

Who then was Alger Hiss? As an historian and biographer, the search for the many faces of Alger always brings me back to the documentary record.

On fading newspaper photographs, we see his face. He is the man sitting behind President Roosevelt at Yalta. A few years later, he appears on the pages of *THE NEW YORK TIMES* as he hand-carries the just-signed United Nations Charter to deliver it personally to the President. Now for those unfamiliar with the man, Michael has asked me to provide at least a thumbnail sketch.

Alger was born on November 11th, 1904, and grew up in a quiet middle class neighborhood near Druid Hill Park in the Northwest part of Baltimore, Maryland. It was a city where Negroes were still referred as “darkies” and segregated white neighborhoods retained vestiges of the old Antebellum south. Hiss grew up in what he described, “a lively and cheerful household” but the air of domestic tranquility was shattered when his father, an executive in a large wholesale drygoods firm became overwhelmed by financial and family worries and committed suicide.

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In spite of his father’s premature death, Alger and his brothers Bosley and Donald led a sheltered but happy childhood. They went to public school. They attended the local Episcopal church and since the family only had moderate financial means, they worked hard to earn scholarships so that they could attend college. For his undergraduate studies, Alger was admitted to Baltimore’s own Johns Hopkins University. There, he met his future wife, Priscilla. He vied for her hand but lost the contest to Thayer Hobson, a graduate student at Yale. Together, they had a son, Timothy. Hiss rebounded and focused his attentions on his studies. After graduating from Johns Hopkins, Hiss entered the Harvard Law School where he became academically and socially prominent. He won election to the law review. He courted the friendship of Felix Frankfurter who, as Alger’s mentor, stood in awe of him. The Justice recognized what later he described as Hiss’s “absolute command and absolute grace.”

To top off his law school career, Hiss clerked for Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. He had every intention of joining the prestigious corporate law firm and after courting and marrying the by then divorced Priscilla Hobson, he did just that. They had a son, Tony. The couple settled in Cambridge, near Frankfurter’s and Alger’s other law school friends.

Now given the more radical interests and influences of his wife (who Alger later characterized as “having strong humanitarian interests”), while they lived in a comfortable Boston suburb, Hiss’s political beliefs shifted leftward. The couple moved to New York City and like many others of their generation who lived through the Depression era, by 1933, the

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Hiss's were appalled by the Hoovervilles and the ever-present soup kitchens. As restitution perhaps for their own comfortable lifestyle that included a live-in maid and childcare for Timothy, they did what they could to relieve the poor and worked to reform the economic system. To that end, Priscilla volunteered at the Salvation Army, and Alger, together with a group of likeminded attorneys -- men who Hiss later characterized as possessing strong liberal points of view -- formed the International Juridical Association, a legal organization, interested in Labor Law, cases involving civil liberties, and social reform.

Thus by 1934, when they moved Washington, DC, where Alger had accepted a position with Jerome Frank in the AAA (the Agricultural Adjustment Agency), both Alger and Priscilla had become radicalized, and it is coincidental with the move to Washington, DC, that there begins the ever-twisting tale of political and psychological intrigue of what has become known by historians as the Hiss-Chambers Controversy.

In Washington, Hiss's career took off. He was on loan to the Senate Committee to investigate the munitions industry, the Nye Committee. He was the man who exposed the war profiteering engaged by several large corporations and leading capitalists, including the powerhouse financier, Bernard Baruch, who I believe was the first man to openly assert that Hiss was a communist. In the autumn of 1936, Hiss went back to the Department of State. He served there as an advisor in the political relations for the State. He worked on Far Eastern matters, and

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then transferred to the division where post-War planning was being addressed, and throughout the duration of the war, he played an important role as we all know in post-War planning.

Now while policy subversion is the most notable sin of many accused Soviet espionage agents, Harry Dexter White for example, Hiss seems to have largely escaped these allegations. However because of his presence at Yalta, after his conviction and during the height of the McCarthy campaign, Hiss was accused of influencing a feeble and ill Franklin D. Roosevelt and thus, claim some, subverted American foreign policy to a pro-Soviet position. Now though thoughtful historians generally considered this particular allegation to be baseless, Hiss's impact on American foreign policy has very frankly never been examined.

Because of his stellar career at the State Department, Hiss was the perfect candidate to become the President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He served in that capacity of course until the full weight of the communist controversy necessitated his resignation, and for the rest of his life vindication became the near all-consuming passion until his death in 1996.

My interest in Alger dates back to 1989, when I became embroiled in a controversy leading to the designation of Whisker Chambers's Pipe Creek Farm as a National Historical Landmark. I publicly raised objections to the nomination -- purely on technical historic preservation reasons -- but nevertheless, I found my name on the frontpage of the WASHINGTON TIMES newspaper. This in turn led to a public debate on National Public

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Radio between the key person advancing the nomination on behalf of the White House, former Reagan speechwriter Anthony Dolan, and myself. This ended up being my initiation to learning something about the divisiveness of the case. Prior to his death in 1996, I did have the opportunity to interview Mr. Hiss on at least two occasions. The interviews were cordial and like dozens of other researchers who interviewed Hiss over the years, I found him to be pleasant and most willing to cooperate.

I recall ruffling his feathers only once when I asked him to explain his view about the allegation of Igor Gouzenko, the famed cipher clerk who defected to Canada in 1945, in which the Soviet defector told his interrogators that a friend, a Moscow-based code clerk by the name of Koulikov told Gouzenko that there was a certain “assistant secretary to the Secretary of the State who was implicated in Soviet espionage.” Now you’re going to be hearing from Amy Knight, who’s literally written the book on Gouzenko, irrespective of the veracity behind that charge -- Hiss was never an assistant secretary -- but nevertheless the allegation led to the FBI’s Director J. Edgar Hoover to conclude that Koulikov’s reference of course was to Alger Hiss. I recall how Hiss’s voice grew irritated after I asked him to comment on the allegation and he sharply dismissed it with the words to the effect of, “Oh, well, that just shows how far Whittaker Chambers’s stories were spread.”

Since then, I have pursued many aspects of the Hiss-Chambers controversy. One of the more interesting investigations I conducted was when I visited Hiss’s Volta Place residence

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which figured prominently in the trials shortly after an electrical fire nearly destroyed the house in July of 1988. There I was able to obtain samples of the wallpaper that was covered up under a door jamb for decades; the physical evidence provides documentation to the color and pattern of the wallpaper in the house in the late 1930s. This all sounds very technical, but it's a minor point, but one that points to witness credibility.

Most recently though I focus my attention on opening up and completing the historical record, the goal being to make it possible for all students of the man, the case, and the controversy, to have access to the complete documentary record.

Today, I'd like to discuss -- I think actually I'm going to talk about only one because of our desire to be able to have questions and answers, I want to talk with you a little about the HUAC records.

Back in 2001, I was executive director of a group called the National Coalition for History, which is the advocacy arm of history and archives in the U.S., and I coordinated the effort to open up the records of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Briefly, here's the story. The records of HUAC were under an unusual closure provision. Normally, House records are sealed for thirty years, but the HUAC records were not being treated in the same way. House rules called for them to remain closed for fifty years, and it was a provision that had been put in place by the democratic-controlled Congress when the committee disbanded. I've been told that the unusually long closure time was placed by the Democrats themselves

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since many of the members feared that HUAC records would reflect something on them and their youthful indiscretions -- specifically, a couple of members of Congress who had been members of the SDS, the Students for a Democratic Society.

The initial effort was made to unseal the records, was stalled when Representative Henry Hyde (who was chair of the Judiciary Committee) declined to respond to the History Coalition's requests. He asserted the committee was just too busy, frankly, with Mr. Clinton's impeachment to focus attention on the history community's desire to access a bunch of old records.

Well, persistence paid off. Once the committee chairmanship passed to Representative Sensenbrenner, another letter was sent off and again it looked like it was going to be a long case to gain access to the records. Thankfully though there were no objections by Democratic members. Apparently the former SDS members had left the committee, but I wasn't exactly sure what was going to happen with the Republican members and how they would react to the request. A fortuitous stroke of luck, though. It happened that during a meeting of the Annual Pumpkin Papers Irregulars -- -- the annual meeting of ultraconservatives that takes place every Halloween night in which they poke fun at the latest efforts to clear Alger's name and where they present -- usually to some Democrat, I might add -- the Annual Victor Navasky Award, for the most “treasonable act conducted by a public figure during the previous year.”

Now, how I got into this group is another story I won't burden you with, but if I recall correctly, it was during the annual update of the case that was being made by former HUAC

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staffer Herb Romerstein that he announced that I was seeking to open up the HUAC records.

Within minutes a business card of one of the attendees found its way to my table, and was placed next to my pumpkin pie that I had yet to bite into. The note read, “Call me, I’d like to help.” I turned it over, and it was Grover Norquist’s business card. I called Norquist the next day and, frankly, we conspired together. I don’t know if it was his weighing in that did the trick, but within a few months I received a letter that the committee had decided to act favorably upon the request, and in August of 2001, the records were unsealed. Today those records are housed in the National Archives at the Center of Legislative Archives in Washington, DC. It includes some 1200 linear feet of records, including four feet of material that the committee generated relating to the Hiss-Chambers controversy.

And with that, I think I’m going to stop there because I could tell you about the Grand Jury records, but that’s another whole long story, and we have limited amount of time and I know you want to hear from the two living documents.