

# The Hiss Case<sup>1</sup>

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This study looks at the case of Alger Hiss, which became a hotly debated topic across all levels of American society after it emerged in summer 1948. In particular, it was the first big post-war story which opened up the issue of a possible communist threat to the United States of America. In light of McCarthyism, which essentially took up the start of the 1950s, we need to examine this case taking account of the rising hysteria, and the question then directly arises of how far Alger Hiss's story was able to affect the very running of society. The trained lawyer and former federal employee was accused of membership of the Communist Party in front of the HUAC by Whittaker Chambers. This apparently banal beginning would lead to unforeseeable consequences for both protagonists. Furthermore, other parties became increasingly interested in the entire case, and their interest was certainly not merely in uncovering the truth. Members of the investigative committee were often focusing on their own political objectives and visibility, while the media wanted to get a scoop, and were eager to inform the public on current developments on an almost daily basis. This all meant that the case was an extremely fraught and closely watched one which really was able to deeply influence the further direction of society.

The objective of this study is to describe the core details of the case and identify the motivations of the different figures involved. Their actions certainly could have had a marked influence on the whole of society, and so the question arises of whether they really did, and whether any of them were aware of this fact at the time. In contrast to other authors who have looked at this case, it is not my objective to determine whether Alger Hiss was guilty or innocent. Instead, I want to portray the story as a conflict between two figures in which various circumstances led them to be standing against each other to stage a show in front of the whole of America which could lead to unforeseen consequences for everyone observing, even if from afar.

[Anti-communism; Alger Hiss; Whittaker Chambers; HUAC; Espionage]

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<sup>1</sup> The study was created within the SGS–2020–011 project, *Anticommunism in the United States of America after the Second World War*, undertaken at the Department of Historical Sciences of the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen.

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## Introduction

As the Second World War drew to a close, it was evident that the United States would now be taking its rightful place in world politics and not close itself off in isolation as had occurred after the First World War. But instead of politicians in Washington enjoying their position as a global hegemon, even before the din of war had come to an end, potential problems began to arise which would consume the world over the subsequent few decades. It very soon became apparent that collaboration with the Soviet Union in war had been more a union of convenience than anything more. Through conflict between these two superpowers, the world thus began to become a bipolar one, and this also had a negative impact within the United States of America, which also began to split in two. Society here, which otherwise was not particularly responsive to world events, got caught up in a whirlwind of hysteria and fear of the communist threat, promoted by demagogues such as the most renowned of them all, Senator Joseph McCarthy. But it didn't happen overnight. The ground was laid at the end of the 1940s when several events occurred which resonated with the public. One of these events was certainly the case of Alger Hiss, a well-educated lawyer who was accused of espionage for the USSR. The submitted study looks at this case and its individual protagonists, and their possible involvement in unleashing the anti-communist hysteria.

When it began, the story of Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers certainly did not seem to have the parameters of a dramatic piece of theatre which might play a major role in the history of the United States of America. On one side was a respected lawyer who had spent years in the services of the federal government, involved in mitigating the impact of the economic depression in the 1930s, and on the other was a communist defector and journalist whom nobody would have guessed could feature significantly in the history books. In the end, however, the case involving many people being accused of espionage became primarily focused on these two figures. At the same time, the entire case, which ended up in court, was to play an interesting role in the perception of the whole of American society, and it became a kind of vanguard for subsequent events. Here I am, of course, referring to McCarthyism, which had a profound impact on the first half of the 1950s in the USA.

Although traditionally citizens of the United States of America weren't interested in foreign politics, now events outside the country had evidently begun to project themselves into the mood within society. The Soviet Union, a former ally, had begun to act in a, to put it euphemistically,

rather ambitious manner, something which did not escape the attention of America's diplomats who did not hesitate to inform President Truman of the state of affairs. But it was not a bolt out of the blue: Winston Churchill had never had any illusions about Joseph Stalin's character, and as the global conflict ended, the previously somewhat idealistically inclined leaders of the USA gradually took up a similar position. By as early as February 1946, the USSR leader declared his support for an arms programme in anticipation of military conflict with the West, something many inevitably considered a declaration of war. By March, former Prime Minister of Great Britain, Winston Churchill, added his own grist to the mill in a famous speech in Fulton, and then from Moscow itself, American diplomat, George Kennan, referred to the nature of the Stalinist regime in his so-called Long Telegram. This reflected his experience that there would be no harmonious relationship between the two superpowers, because Stalin was just another in a series of cruel Russian rulers whose declarations of external security were just a cover for the shaky foundation of his own regime. Another adverse report came from across the ocean in Asia, where George Marshall instead declared the inevitable victory of the communists in China. For a change, Europe was now forced to begin to withdraw from its previously unshakeable place in the world, with its formerly powerful states no longer able to play a crucial role internationally, never mind in the fight against communism. The United States was now beginning to fully realise the state of affairs, as demonstrated in declaration of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. It wasn't until three years later, however, that Whittaker Chambers writing for Time magazine warned of this exact threat in his article *Ghosts on the Roof*, which actually aroused little interest when it came out.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, all these events must have persuaded even the greatest optimists that very shortly following the victory of Nazism there would be conflict with another ideology opposing American values. The question also arose of how much this state of affairs would impact domestic policy and the direction society would take.

Before the first true crisis of the Cold War broke out, the conflict began to be reflected within American politics. President Harry S Truman, who had taken office after the late Franklin D Roosevelt, had to respond quickly to the changing world, and he declared his doctrine, which

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<sup>3</sup> S. TENENHAUS, *An Un-American Life. The Case of Whittaker Chambers*, London 2007, pp. 192–193.

was indisputably focused against the spread of communism. He also expended efforts to continue to support European states affected by the war through financial injections. These and other measures represented a clear declaration of the focus of American policies, showing the entire world that Washington had no problems with adapting rapidly. But foreign policy, where problems could be easily recognised, was one thing, and the domestic situation was quite another. President Truman was not taking the danger of communism within his borders particularly seriously, and this was something his Republican opposition often used as an opportunity to go on the attack and accuse the head of state of failure to act against the possible domestic threat. As a result, before the election that was planned for 1948, Truman came up with his *Loyalty Program*, which was designed to take the wind from the sails of his doubters and score him political points, as well as victory in the election. Essentially this involved giving a test of loyalty to all two million government employees. The committee which was to assess each individual had the ability to decide on the basis of evidence (and sometimes accusations) whether there were *legitimate reasons* for determining a verdict of disloyalty, whatever such reasons were. Where this was the case, the individual in question would be unable to carry out his duties until he had been cleared, something that was often a drawn-out and arduous process. The whole programme, based on vague formulations, could thus easily be misused to discredit people who in reality had never even laid an eye on Marx's *Das Capital*.<sup>4</sup>

The atmosphere soon became heightened, and this was reflected in growing animosity towards communism. It also soon became increasingly evident that Soviet espionage within the territory of the United States was not just possible, but more likely a fact. It is hard to say now whether history might have taken a different course if one woman had not laid her mark in the course of history in 1945. Elizabeth Bentley had joined the Communist Party in the 1930s, where she would later fall in love with Soviet agent, Jacob Golos, who introduced her to the world of espionage. As he was himself later monitored by the authorities, Bentley gradually took on more and more tasks, finding out more about the espionage network within the USA. While she cannot be claimed to have been an ardent communist, she was likely willing to do anything for Golos. But in 1943, the love of her life died (a death contributed towards by pressure

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<sup>4</sup> T. MOGAN, *Reds. McCarthyism in Twentieth-Century America*, New York 2004, pp. 304–305.

from Soviet leaders and exhaustion), and Bentley found herself alone in the middle of a network of spies which was active and important to the Soviets.<sup>5</sup> Shortly after the death of her partner, she also began to become disillusioned by working in secret, and she gradually started considering leaving the Soviets. Her break was symbolically completed on 7 November 1945, when she turned up at FBI offices to tell her story. Because she had been involved in smuggling secret information from the American authorities for a number of years, as well as in management of the entire network of spies, her knowledge was extremely valuable. With hindsight, Bentley certainly became the most important witness in the fight against communism in the USA. In giving her testimony, she mentioned 150 names, some of whom were still being paid by the federal government after the war. Not all the 150 names were actually agents, of course, but they may have been sympathisers or helped in the execution of anti-state activities. This naturally resulted in verifications being made on all information, something that involved long, painstaking work which lasted whole months. The FBI soon realised that Bentley was not lying, with her information used, for example, to find an agent in a photography laboratory in the cellar of Gregory Silvermaster, who was the leader of one ring of spies. It also began to compare names with the testimony that another communist defector, Whittaker Chambers, had given before World War Two had broken out. At that time, however, the focus had been more on the fascist threat than on possible communist espionage, meaning that for a long time, Chambers' testimony had been simply ignored. The comparison showed that several people had been named by both witnesses, including lawyer, Alger Hiss, whose case would arouse the greatest sensation.<sup>6</sup>

What was even worse for the Soviet operation within the United States than Bentley making her statement to the FBI, however, was earlier in 1945 when Soviet cipher clerk in Canada, Igor Gouzenko, made similar testimony. This act also required a response from Canada's southern neighbour, where all interested parties immediately dug around for more information. By the end of the year, all major illegal activities undertaken in favour of the Soviets in the USA must have stopped, as all those involved were aware that they were on the verge of being revealed. Just

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 242–244.

<sup>6</sup> M. S. EVANS, *Blacklisted by History. The Untold Story of Senator Joe McCarthy and His Fight against America's Enemies*, New York 2007, pp. 123–125.

the fact that Gouzenko and Bentley had given testimony had dealt a great blow to the Soviet operation in the USA.<sup>7</sup>

The problem with the investigation into Bentley's testimony was that FBI was unable to collect enough evidence to charge specific people. There was a real danger that all the valuable material contained in Bentley's testimony would go to waste. But the investigators had one more card up their sleeve, and that was the Congress. Its investigative committee could take over the case, and with almost the same standing as a court it could begin a hearing with the persons in question, but without the same legal provisions as a court. This was how the case of Soviet espionage got to the House Un-American Activities Committee (or HUAC for short). In summer 1948, the first hearing began, without any major outcomes. Most of those summoned based on Elizabeth Bentley's testimony simply denied the accusation or pleaded the Fifth Amendment. What they needed was more than just one woman claiming to be familiar with the Soviet espionage network in the USA and the people operating within it. Whittaker Chambers proved to be the person they needed, and he was soon standing before the investigative committee.<sup>8</sup> He later recalled in his autobiography: "*One July morning, I drew the local paper out of the mail box and saw that Elizabeth Bentley was to testify in Washington. I guessed that she was the former underground worker. I showed the story to my wife. I said: 'I think that I may be called to testify too.' 'What will you do?' she asked. 'I shall testify.'*"<sup>9</sup> His testimony confirmed Bentley's statements, and in particular he named a number of the same people, including Alger Hiss. It is notable, however, that nothing suggested that it was his case that would stir up the waters of anti-Communist hysteria, since Bentley and Chambers also mentioned another well-known name, amongst others. Specifically, he mentioned Harry Dexter White, who was furthermore the highest ranking official they both referred to. He had the good fortune, however, if one could put it that way, of having died of a heart attack after his first testimony to the committee. As a result, all attention moved to Alger Hiss in particular.<sup>10</sup>

All publications referring to the Alger Hiss case have incorporated a comparison of the two figures who stood against each other, and it

<sup>7</sup> A. WEINSTEIN – A. VASSILIEV, *The Haunted Wood. Soviet Espionage in America – The Stalin Era*, New York, Toronto 2000, pp. 104–105.

<sup>8</sup> E. SCHRECKER – P. DEERY, *The Age of McCarthyism. A Brief History with Documents*, Boston 2017, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> W. CHAMBERS, *Svědék*, Praha 2005, pp. 484–485.

<sup>10</sup> SCHRECKER – DEERY, p. 30.

should be said not without reason. This is why we need to look a little more at both protagonists. Alger Hiss came from a good background and had enjoyed a career which commanded respect. As a young lawyer and Harvard graduate, he had added his name to the New Deal initiative, something people in his position often did, to help the United States work its way out of the severe economic crisis. Specifically, he was involved in administration of the AAA (Agricultural Adjustment Administration), where many passionate figures whose outlook inclined them towards communism worked in the early 1930s. Later, he worked at the Department of State, where his star rose to such an extent that he took part in the Yalta Conference in 1945. According to later accusations, however, Hiss essentially led a double life, having allegedly joined the Communist Party alongside his wife in the 1930s.<sup>11</sup>

His opposite number, Whittaker Chambers, was in contrast almost the exact opposite. Even just his appearance was shabby compared to the distinguished lawyer, and the comparison was no better when looking at his career. He had never completed university, for example, and while he was known as a talented writer, he had little prospects for a bright future, as his past was marked more by a bohemian way of life and tending towards radicalism. This was seen in his joining the Communist Party in the 1920s, which then became illegal in 1932, and he worked as a courier for Soviet spies getting secrets from Washington. It was this job that put him together with Hiss, with whom he was alleged to be friends. In 1938, he left the communists and espionage after becoming disillusioned following news of the Stalinist purges.<sup>12</sup> It was this evident difference in the two figures which to some extent contributed towards the fact that society was unable to come to an agreed position on the two rivals, something which inevitably led to the polarisation of society, which gradually led it into further troubles.

### Committee

On 3 August 1948, Whittaker Chambers appeared before the HUAC to tell his story and name those whom he had met during his years spent working illegally for the Soviet Union. As has been mentioned, amongst those names was Alger Hiss. In his book, Hiss describes when he found out about the whole affair: “I received this information about Chamber’s testimony

<sup>11</sup> R. M. FRIED, *Nightmare in Red. The McCarthy Era in Perspective*, New York 1990, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.



while I was at work in my office, from numerous telephone calls from reporters for the press services and for individual papers. The volume of inquiry by the press was a surprise to me, but I was still inclined to treat the charges as more of a nuisance than anything else."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Hiss felt that he needed to make a statement on the matter, and as such he contacted the HUAC, including through the media, with the following statement: "So far as I know, I have never laid eyes on Mr. Chambers. There is no basis whatever for the statements he had made about me to the Thomas Committee [on Un-American Activities]. I have sent a telegram to the chairman of the committee to this effect and requesting that I be allowed to appear before the committee and make the same statement formally and under oath."<sup>14</sup> Already, we clearly see here the mediatisation of the entire case, but this was only the beginning. It is easy to guess why Hiss took this act: he evidently felt that he would be able to exonerate himself in this way so that he need not fear publication of the case. By not being afraid to appear before journalists, he clearly wanted to demonstrate that he had nothing to hide. To some extent, taking this route certainly reveals his great self-confidence, as he undoubtedly believed that he would be able to get the public on his side. Through them, he would evidently be able to influence the HUAC too, whose public declarations and various "leaks" of information had demonstrated its intent to get public opinion on its side. According to this logic, public support might then also give Hiss the committee's support, its members being dependent on the votes of electors, whose eyes were fixed on the pages of the newspapers each day.

Many of his friends advised him not to appear in person before the committee, and even today there are passionate debates about what would have happened, or not happened, had he not done so. Most publications agree that if he had ignored the accusation, then it all may well have flown under the radar. In any event, he did turn up to a public hearing on 5 August, at which he categorically denied all accusations of having been a member of the Communist Party or any illegal group operating within the USA. He also declared that he knew of nobody by the name of Whittaker Chambers, something that may well have been true considering the use of code names. He was even shown a photograph of Chambers, but to this he asked for a personal meeting, as he was unable to say with certainty whether the two of them had met. In any case, his first appearance before the HUAC became renowned for his often cautious

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<sup>13</sup> A. HISS, *In the Court of Public Opinion*, London 1957, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *The New York Times*, August 4, 1948.



and evasive responses, something which mainly spoke to the fact that he was an experienced lawyer who was well aware of how to speak so as not to inflict damage on oneself. Symptomatic for him, for example, was use of the phrase, “if I remember well” etc. Nevertheless, there was still no indication that the entire matter should become anything other than another of the committee’s failed attempts at defending its existence to society.<sup>15</sup> Because why should a committee whose task was to look at “un-American activities” carry on when officially no such activities had taken place on US soil?

After the first hearing, few doubted that Hiss had defended himself well and that essentially there was no case to answer. Even journalists were of a similar opinion. In fact, journalist Mary Spargo warned committee member Richard Nixon that if they were unable to defend Chambers’ claim, then the HUAC as it was would be shut down. Even President Truman indirectly stood up for Hiss, perceiving the entire case as a Republican tool in the battle for power with the Democrats. Even Congress members believed at this juncture that the committee’s attention would not likely be focused on Chambers.<sup>16</sup> It seems that some committee members, headed by future the future US President, must have felt at this moment that they had a knife held at their necks. Nixon assessed that day eloquently: “*Hiss won the day completely. It would not be an exaggeration to say that probably 90 per cent of the reporters and most of the Committee members were convinced that a terrible mistake had been made.*”<sup>17</sup> Nobody had reason to believe at this juncture that the entire case would be anything other than a flash in the pan which would settle down very shortly. Hiss appeared credible and even the President stood up for him. In the eyes of the public and journalists, this must have left them with a fairly clear impression, but things were to become murkier.

Following the first couple of hearings, the HUAC really had nothing to show for itself, and as such committee members didn’t really know what to do next. It was nevertheless future US President, Richard Nixon, who convinced his other colleagues at a joint meeting that the committee should at least ascertain whether Alger Hiss knew Whittaker Chambers. The young senator from California took this matter in his own hands, becoming the main committee figure in the case. The real reason for his

<sup>15</sup> C. SHELTON, *Alger Hiss: Why He Chose Treason*, New York 2013, p. 177.

<sup>16</sup> A. WEINSTEIN, *Perjury. The Hiss-Chambers Case*, Stanford 2013, p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> J. BRADY, *America’s Drerifyus. The Case Nixon Rigged*, Newbold on Stour 2015, p. 49.

actions may not have been just a hunger for truth and then justice. Nixon's motives were also personal, to at least the same degree. He hadn't liked Alger Hiss during his first hearing, and he had apparently treated him as if he were superior. It should be noted here that while the future president was from a poor and far from idyllic background in California, Hiss was the personification of the cream of the East Coast of the United States in his career and his guise. Mutual jealousy, which grew into antipathy, may therefore have played a role.<sup>18</sup> In his memoirs, Nixon also explains his approach by stating that if the case had simply been dropped, it would have caused huge damage to the committee. If further investigation could instead verify Chambers's version, then the HUAC would be justified. In contrast, if it were ascertained that their witness really had lied, then they could endeavour to find out what motives had led him to do so, so in some way going towards rectifying their unfair attack on a figure like Alger Hiss.<sup>19</sup> And so a game began to play out with a number of sides who could not anticipate all the possible consequences. Chambers was confronting his past and the fact that he had already given testimony. Bentley was endeavouring to save herself while also settling a score with the communists whom she believed had at least contributed towards her great love's death. The journalists were instead after a scandal, and they basically didn't care who the good guy and the bad guy was in this drama. All they cared about was the number of papers they sold. At this juncture, it was thus essentially irrelevant whether Hiss was a spy, whether Chambers had lied, and whether the senators in the HUAC were actually doing anything or not. As such, Richard Nixon endeavoured to save his own reputation and that of the committee in which he sat and which his future career depended on. Finally, Alger Hiss merely wanted to defend himself in the way he considered most appropriate, instead of letting things play out and at most appealing the Fifth when giving testimony.<sup>20</sup>

In any case, the committee did not want to risk the two men meeting face to face at first, and instead several members, including Nixon, first met up again in secret on 7 August. Here, Chambers was invited to reveal the nature of his relationship with Hiss in as much detail as possible. Thus, Chambers had a great opportunity to get the HUAC on his side and gain

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<sup>18</sup> WEINSTEIN, pp. 26–27.

<sup>19</sup> R. M. NIXON, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, London 1978, p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> An amendment which, amongst other things, gives the individual the right to refuse to testify against him or herself.

the trust of its members. As such, he said that he only knew Alger under the alias of Carl, and further revealed the names and aliases of members of his household, insisting that he had collected Hiss's membership fees for the party and that he had stayed with him for some time in Washington. He further described Hiss's old Ford car which he alleged he gave to the entire organisation to make use of, as an ardent fellow party member. One interesting detail he gave, and all the more important for it, was Alger's hobby. He claimed Alger was a passionate amateur ornithologist, and one day he had allegedly spotted a particularly rare bird known as the prothonotary warbler. It was this apparently irrelevant information which helped to convince the committee members that their witness was telling the truth. The fact that Chambers was interviewed again and revealed several details from Hiss's personal life was later leaked to the public via the press, although the details remained a secret.<sup>21</sup> The word "leak" here is somewhat euphemistic, of course. The HUAC members had every reason to provide the information to journalists themselves, unofficially. This was certainly meant to demonstrate not just the committee's efforts, but also the fact that it was an important case that it was following and one which the public should be interested in. Thus, the senators wanted to make the claim to the public that they were the only ones who could find the truth in this maze of assumptions and half-truths. It is hard to imagine that the fate of both men and the impact of the case on them and society were being taken account of at that moment: there was certainly no indication of that.

Nevertheless, Nixon did visit Chambers a few more times before 13 August, and it appears that he did start to really believe that not only had Hiss lied, but that they had also been friends. And it was at this point that the future US President sensed that this was his moment – his battle to win – and he began to dedicate a huge amount of time to the case as a whole. He was also able to persuade other committee members of his position, and they also gradually began to trust Chambers more.<sup>22</sup> One of these meetings took place in the presence of journalist Bert Andrews, who came at Nixon's invitation and was known as a critic of the committee. According to Nixon's memoirs, Andrews questioned Chambers thoroughly and also came to believe that Chambers was telling the truth. The Pulitzer Prize winner even began to worry that Hiss might get away

<sup>21</sup> F. J. COOK, *The Unfinished Story of Alger Hiss*, New York 1958, pp. 7–8.

<sup>22</sup> WEINSTEIN, pp. 36–38.

with it. Nixon also described how excited about the case the former critic of the committee was after his interview.<sup>23</sup> The obvious question is why Nixon had turned at this moment and in this matter to someone outside the committee who a frequent critic of it was. Perhaps Nixon really was worried that if the case was not publicised to the greatest possible extent, then Hiss would come away unscathed, and Chambers would at best be declared a liar. It is hard to claim, however, that his only motive was a desire for truth. It is easy to imagine that if Nixon was able to convince someone with the authority of Andrews that the committee had a big case on its hands, then the HUAC's reputation would rapidly rise, and Nixon's reputation would rise with it.

In any case, Alger Hiss was not the only one caught up in the accusations. As has been suggested, the biggest fish in the entire case was Harry Dexter White, who faced the committee to give testimony on 13 August, the same day as Alger's brother, Donald Hiss. Unsurprisingly, they both denied any kind of connections to illegal activities supporting the Soviet Union or membership of the Communist Party. Other witnesses followed, all of whom pleaded the Fifth when asked if they had ever been communists.<sup>24</sup> This would certainly not have thrilled anybody in the committee, and nor was there any scoop for the journalists. It is no coincidence, then, that attention had to be refocused on the one person who had actually wanted to give any kind of explanation, specifically on Alger Hiss. There was basically nothing to latch on to for the other cases.

So, Hiss faced the committee again on 16 August, where he rather bluntly declared that his words should not be afforded the same weight as those spoken by a convicted traitor and communist conspirator. The committee logically began interrogating him on certain details from his private life to test whether Chambers had been speaking the truth in his interviews with committee members. The fact that Alger Hiss did not know exactly what Chambers had said meant that he was somewhat backed into a corner. Nevertheless, he did gradually confirm the information provided by the person who had accused him. He was also once again shown photographs of Chambers, and he told the committee that the mysterious man might be a certain George Crosley, a freelance reporter who had spoken to him several times when he had worked for the Nye Committee.

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<sup>23</sup> NIXON, pp. 57–58.

<sup>24</sup> H. ROMERSTEIN – E. BREINDEL, *The Venona Secrets. The Definitive Exposé of Soviet Espionage in America*, Washington 2014, p. 128.

The day ended with Hiss being promised that he would be able to meet the witness face-to-face on 25 August. But that night, Nixon decided not to draw things out and instead planned the meeting for the next day. He was convinced that Hiss was lying and wanted to ensure he did not have time to come up with new lies. This meeting did take place and it isn't hard to imagine how Alger Hiss must have felt. Furthermore, Harry Dexter White had died the previous day, and there was a report which came from someone in the committee in the Herald Tribune newspaper saying that Hiss had refused to undergo a lie-detector test. Nor had Hiss had any time to prepare for a meeting which might determine his fate. The meeting did not take long. Hiss identified Chambers as George Crosley and called upon him to repeat his accusation against him in public so that he was not protected by the committee and could later be charged with libel.<sup>25</sup> We can suppose that it was no coincidence that internal information turned up in the pages of the Herald Tribune. Bert Andrews was on the newspaper's payroll as the head of its Washington branch. Increasing media interest in the case was also reflected in the fact that a report of the meeting turned up on the front page of the New York Times on 18 August. This article cited the committee's main source as Richard Nixon, who did not hesitate in informing journalists of the investigation proceedings.<sup>26</sup> Nixon thus took on the role of one of the principal, or even the principal, media informants, giving him the opportunity to influence what people would read and how the entire case was perceived.

Another important piece of the drama took place on 25 August, when a further round of hearings was set. This time it was all public, with Chambers and Hiss taking part. It was very hot that day, and the room where it took place was bursting to the seams, mainly thanks to great media interest. From the outset, Hiss's antipathy towards the committee was manifest, and the antipathy went both ways. It was true that some committee members treated him a little as if he were guilty, while Hiss did himself no favours with his often-slippery answers, which may have seemed odd and suspicious to a casual observer. Things did not develop any better for the lawyer, as he was unable to find anybody who knew Whittaker Chambers as George Crosley. At the same time, attention began to focus on his old Ford, which he was alleged to have donated to

<sup>25</sup> W. GOODMAN, *The Committee. The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities*, London 1969, pp. 256–257.

<sup>26</sup> *The New York Times*, August 18, 1948.

the Party, and also on his apartments. This was of little help to him, as the committee was able to ascertain several inconsistencies which forced Hiss into a corner.<sup>27</sup> It is thus no surprise that the hearing left a bad taste in Alger Hiss's mouth: "*Though this was my last appearance, the Committee's pre-occupation with my affairs did not lessen in the succeeding months. On the contrary, the Committee increased its efforts to create an impression with the public that I had been inconsistent and contradictory while Chambers had been uniformly consistent and accurate. My testimony continued to be adversely characterized, and selected passages were taken out of context.*"<sup>28</sup> In any case, the committee members were very successful in painting Alger Hiss as a person who could not be trusted. What was important, however, was the fact that the hearing was public, and millions of Americans received fairly detailed information on what happened that day. The luckiest amongst them were even able to watch the hearing on television. A major change had occurred within a single month. A self-confident lawyer who resolutely rejected the accusation had suddenly, under a barrage of questioning, become a shaky witness unable to stand by his responses. Symptomatic of his testimony was Hiss's phrase, "according to the best of my recollection..." which one committee member claimed he used 194 times that day. Even so, he did in the end manage to stand up to Chambers, and call upon him to publicly repeat his accusation, putting him at risk of libel.<sup>29</sup> The hearing aroused massive interest. Alger Hiss's case took over the New York Times' front page, where it is no exaggeration to say it featured every day. People were able to read headlines such as: "Hiss, Chambers Meet Openly At House Spy Hearing Today"<sup>30</sup> and "Questioners Seem Unimpressed as Hiss Tries to Refute Chambers".<sup>31</sup> It is easy to imagine that the public could no longer perceive the entire investigation as a dispute which would blow over like the hurricane season. The fact that so much attention was paid to the case necessarily had an impact on the whole of society, which now also began seeking out more information.

Furthermore, the media was very willing to capture and nourish this public desire. Richard Nixon later recalled that immediately after the first hearing he and other committee members heard of rumours from journalists of three types: a) that Chambers had been hospitalised in

<sup>27</sup> A. COOKE, *A Generation on Trial. U.S.A vs. Alger Hiss*, Baltimore 1968, pp. 85–87.

<sup>28</sup> HISS, p. 149.

<sup>29</sup> COOK, p.14.

<sup>30</sup> *The New York Times*, August 25, 1948.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, August 26, 1948.

a mental institution; b) that he was probably insane; and c) that he was an occasional drunk. Nixon was given the job of finding out the origin of at least one of these rumours, and he found that it was being spread by one left-wing journalist. He considered it rather odd that somebody would simply want to discredit another person like that. Why would left-leaning people do such a thing if they were not afraid of Chambers? This added to Nixon's conviction that he should take an even greater interest in the entire case.<sup>32</sup> If this was indeed how it panned out, we can say with no exaggeration that the involvement of journalists in the case was fundamental from the outset, in that it helped to blow it up into a huge drama.

Whittaker Chambers decided to take up the gauntlet, and he accepted an invitation to the radio programme *Meet the Press*, where he was questioned by Edward Folliard of the *Washington Post*, amongst others. Folliard directly called on the programme guest to publicly repeat what he had said in front of the committee, which had been protected by law meaning he could not be tried in any way for what he said. Chambers did not hide behind anything and despite the warning that Hiss would sue him for libel, he repeated that he at the very least used to be a communist, and that he perhaps still was one. It is notable, however, that he refused to say whether his former friend had committed espionage. He evidently wanted to protect Hiss, because he said that the original purpose of the group, he was a member of was not espionage, but rather merely infiltration of government institutions so as to subsequently influence them.<sup>33</sup> It was roughly around this time that Chambers began to notice that the case was slowly but surely taking on a life of its own. Various new stories about both figures in the affair and their relationship began turning up in newspapers. At the same time, he looked back on the entire interview as rather confrontational and hostile towards him.<sup>34</sup> We do naturally need to take account of the fact here that in his book *Witness*, Chambers describes events from his own perspective and from a time when everything, so to speak, was over. We cannot therefore describe him as an impartial witness to events, but we do at least have access to his feelings and how he perceived the entire dramatic period. Here cannot

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<sup>32</sup> B. ANDREWS – P. ANDREWS, *A Tragedy of History. A Journalist's Confidential Role in the Hiss-Chambers Case*, Washington DC 1962, p. 58.

<sup>33</sup> ROMERSTEIN – BREINDEL, pp. 129–130.

<sup>34</sup> CHAMBERS, pp. 635–637.



fail to observe that he often saw himself merely as a victim in the course of events, and he saw almost all journalists as figures hungry for scandal with no interest in the truth.

We can certainly say that at this juncture, everyone involved had definitively crossed the Rubicon. The fact that Chambers was willing to expose himself to the risk of a lawsuit and stand up for his claims must have demonstrated to even the greatest sceptics that there may well have been a grain of truth in his words. Within less than a month on from 3 August, when Chambers had first appeared in front of the committee, the situation had begun to rapidly escalate. We should recall that after Hiss's first appearance, everybody was essentially convinced that there was no case to answer. A few weeks later, however, threats of lawsuits were brought hurled around.

For the moment, however, the HUAC was essentially ready. It had been shown that one of the two men had lied, and it was now up to the Department of Justice or the courts to decide whether anybody would be charged with perjury. As expected, with a slight delay Alger Hiss submitted an open letter to the HUAC in response to Chambers' radio appearance. Slowly but surely, the case was heading towards court, and it was mainly the former New Deal employee who needed to begin diligent preparations for the major upcoming trial. His strategy now was simply to try to discredit his rival as much as possible. This was to be achieved by finding any dirt at all, and so stories about Chambers' mental instability and homosexuality began to multiply. The objective was to shatter the image of Chambers as a truthful witness who had undergone a transformation taking him away from communism and back to the right camp. Hiss knew well that Chambers' position was certainly not unenviable and if the following months were mainly to be about which of the two of them was more credible, for the moment he was holding the shorter end of the stick.<sup>35</sup> It wasn't a criminal offence to have a mental health issue, of course, but if this could be proved for a witness then it would significantly reduce the value of his testimony. Instead of providing concrete evidence and proof of his own innocence, Hiss instead wanted to harm his opponent to such an extent that nobody could take him seriously.

Away from all the public attention, however, the Grand Jury in Baltimore had begun looking below the surface of the entire case to find out who to charge with perjury, if anyone at all. While Chambers ap-

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<sup>35</sup> WEINSTEIN, pp. 78–79.

peared more credible from the outside, the impartial jury had noticed that much remained unclear in his testimonies, and it was therefore not entirely evident whom a charge would be brought against in the end. Chambers himself must have been aware of this danger, and the surprising re-election of Harry S Truman as President did him no favours either. This all caused his already evident mental strain to increase even further, eventually leading to a failed attempt at suicide.<sup>36</sup> In his book, Chambers describes that it was during this period that he fell into apathy, which he describes as a “death of the will”. Very shortly afterwards, Hiss and his supporters managed to impart on the public the perception of Chambers as guilty for his past, whether alleged or real. The process had become a public one, and he did not have any tool to change that fact. He was also disappointed by society. He was disappointed because nobody had considered the entire case as he had, and he felt alone in a battle in which others were fighting, even though it was a battle for his life. Finally, Chambers evidently began to realise that he might well lose the case.<sup>37</sup>

### Turning point

In November, Whittaker Chambers finally provided evidence which, he hoped, would turn the case around. These documents, which were allegedly handwritten by Alger Hiss himself and contained information from the Department of State, were meant to be the ace up the sleeve of the lawyer’s opponents. It was also the first time that Chambers implied that Hiss had committed espionage. No mention had been made of this before.<sup>38</sup> But it would have been a great surprise if anybody had been spying in such a naïve way. Writing documents by hand was completely irrational and dangerous. The documents were completely unique in this regard, with nothing similar likely ever having happened in history.<sup>39</sup> Hiss himself upon examining the documents admitted that he might have written them himself and that they did come from the Department of State, but he claimed that someone must have stolen them from his desk and categorically denied ever having given them to Chambers to keep apparently as insurance against the Soviets.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> FRIED, p. 20.

<sup>37</sup> CHAMBERS, pp. 658–659.

<sup>38</sup> WEINSTEIN, pp. 186–187.

<sup>39</sup> J. BRADY, *Alger Hiss: Framed. A New Look at the Case that Made Nixon Famous*, New York 2017, p. 169.

<sup>40</sup> WEINSTEIN, p. 190.

These documents were potentially dangerous for Hiss, because if they were recognised as relevant, they would demonstrate two cases of perjury. The date on the documents clearly suggested that Hiss saw Chambers in 1938, while he had declared to the committee under oath that he had not seen him since 1937. Secondly, he would have lied because he had also declared that he had never given Chambers any materials to be forwarded to the Soviets. However, while this evidence may have seemed damning at first, no breakthrough occurred. There was nothing secret in the sheets of paper, and nor was there reason to think that the documents were meant for the USSR and therefore that any law had been broken. Nor was the HUAC able to submit anything to the jury which could result in possible charges against Hiss. On 1 December, the United Press even stated that everything was working out well for Hiss.<sup>41</sup> Nobody suspected that in less than twenty-four hours, the tables would be turned.

This is because Whittaker Chambers had not said his final word, and during the night of 2 December he took HUAC members to his farm to show them new evidence which would turn the entire case around. It must have been a great surprise for the investigators when Chambers showed them a hollowed-out pumpkin, inside which this evidence was contained. The media referred to this new evidence surprisingly quickly, and it was almost as if members of the investigative committee were trying to outdo each other in coming up with ever more shocking headlines for the newspapers. It became a big story, and newspapers around the entire country made sure that nobody in America could miss what had happened.<sup>42</sup> The New York Times, for example, described it as follows: “*The House Committee in Un-American Activities declared tonight that it had ‘definite proof of one of the most extensive espionage rings in the history of the United States’ and that it possessed ‘microfilm copies of documents of tremendous importance’ which had been removed from the State Department for transmission to ‘Russian Communist agents’.*”<sup>43</sup> Once again, with the exception of the committee it was journalists who were first to find out about new facts in the case. This just affirms what has been said before, specifically that the case was taking on a life of its own. But can we blame the media, when the journalists were evidently only doing exactly what others wanted? One cannot help thinking that at this juncture, the newspapers and radio stations were an

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<sup>41</sup> BRADY, *Alger Hiss: Framed*, pp. 171–172.

<sup>42</sup> BRADY, *America’s Dreyfus*, pp. 182–183.

<sup>43</sup> *The New York Times*, December 4, 1948.

integral part of the drama to the same degree as the two main figures in it. Nor could one imagine that there would suddenly be no more media interest. There was no turning back. It is also true that the only one who wanted to turn back at that moment was Whittaker Chambers, who was clearly not enjoying the publicity.

So, what was inside that infamous pumpkin? First it contained microfilm rolls with images of a secret nature from the Department of State and Department of Navy, plus direct transcriptions of others. Chambers claimed that he had received them in 1938 from Hiss and others who worked for the Soviet Union.<sup>44</sup> The tables had turned once again, and a newly confident Nixon was even able to claim that the prosecutor wanted to destroy the entire case. The explosive nature of these new and shocking reports was even able to cover up the fact that Chambers had evidently contradicted himself, thus committing perjury. He had declared, for example, that Hiss had not committed espionage, something which now was evidently untrue. It had also been untrue when he had stated that he had no more evidence to provide. These differences in testimonies could still be explained, however. Chambers finally claimed that Hiss had been his colleague and friend, and it was therefore logical that he had not wanted to hurt him any more than he already had been. However, it was still all the stranger that according to his previous testimony he had broken with communism in 1937, but these “Pumpkin Papers” were dated between January and April of the subsequent year. Only after this did he modify his claim, but in any case, all these inconsistencies were completely overshadowed by the sensation aroused by Hiss’s now highly probably espionage for the USSR. Now Nixon and his colleagues were able to hand over the whole case to the New York Federal Court, which had previously rejected it.<sup>45</sup> It was now definitive. The entire matter would have to be dealt with before the court.

So, the tables had turned again, and suddenly it was not so much about the relationship between the two people, but rather whether one of them had committed espionage. At the end of 1948, even those newspapers which had previously been more sympathetic towards Hiss began to slowly distance themselves from him. At the same time, the Washington

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<sup>44</sup> The Pumpkin Papers: Microfilm Evidence Used in *United States v. Alger Hiss*, 1948–1951. National Archives, available also online. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/75492883> (visited September 15, 2021).

<sup>45</sup> COOK, pp. 18–19.

Post, for example, expressed its marked concern over the Truman administration's approach to the whole case.<sup>46</sup> These developments were certainly more advantageous to Chambers, as attention was no longer focused mainly on his former life, as it had been before. But it wasn't the end of the story for him either. As has been noted, his testimonies had included several inconsistencies, mainly in terms of the timeline he had outlined during the hearings. He explains this in his book by saying that unfortunately he did not at the time, nor while writing his book, have access to documents from the time when he was carrying out the espionage, and as such had been forced to rely on his memory, and that was why dates did not always line up.<sup>47</sup> This was one more reason why it was difficult, or even impossible, to use Chambers' words as the cornerstone of the entire case, and it is clear that in his book he also wanted to defend himself completely to the public, and perhaps explain everything in the best way he could.

Many people must have wondered why Whittaker Chambers was coming up with this ace up his sleeve almost half a year after the whole case had begun. He himself justified this by saying that it was in autumn that he began to think that if he did not get the big guns out, then Hiss would choose to destroy not just Chambers, but also his wife Esther. It should be remembered here that alongside investigating Hiss's case, the Baltimore jury was also investigating the charge which had been brought against Chambers. Without the documents from the pumpkin, Chambers could lose this dispute, opening the way to his prosecution by the Department of Justice for perjury.<sup>48</sup> Bert Andrews, the journalist mentioned previously, went back to this point and basically wondered why neither he nor Nixon had asked Chambers directly whether he had any evidence that he could produce. Andrews added that he believed that if they had done so, Chambers would have provided them with it.<sup>49</sup> This gives new perspective to the problem, because it is true that nobody did ask Chambers about documents until autumn 1948, and it is still very possible that he himself did not want to add fuel to the fire and hurt someone whom he had previously called a friend.

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<sup>46</sup> SHELTON, p. 187.

<sup>47</sup> CHAMBERS, p. 323.

<sup>48</sup> SHELTON, p. 187.

<sup>49</sup> ANDREWS – ANDREWS, p. 75.

On 16 December 1948, Alger Hiss was officially charged with perjury and a round of court hearings could begin in earnest, which was to continue to over half a year.<sup>50</sup> Immediately, speculation was rife over how Chambers got the “Pumpkin Papers”. On the other hand, his reputation to some degree meant the public had reason to doubt him, and it is no surprise that there were ideas that the documents had been stolen from the office without Hiss’s knowledge. Very soon the race began to verify the authenticity of the documents and show who wrote them and on what. It soon emerged that Alger Hiss’s old Woodstock brand typewriter bearing the serial number N230099 had been used. The actual machine was then found, and analysis of it by experts confirmed that it was this specific typewriter which was used to produce the material.<sup>51</sup>

Most of the time between Hiss being charged and the end of the first trial in July 1949 was taken up with preparations. The accused’s team again tried mainly to discredit his opponent in various ways. Following several postponements caused by other cases linked to possible espionage emerging, the trial officially began on 1 June. It is remarkable, however, that the media and the public following them had not lost even a little interest in the whole case after such a long period of time, in fact quite the opposite.<sup>52</sup> This was mainly because eight major newspapers were based in New York alone, where the show itself played out, and on top of that there were numerous other papers across the entire United States. On top of that there were the radio stations and the increasingly popular television. All these media platforms came up with new reports on an almost daily basis which featured either the case itself directly, or some revelation related to the communist threat. On the first day of the trial, most people in the courtroom were in fact journalists.<sup>53</sup> Not only they, but also the public, must have been disappointed by the result of this first chapter: because anyone even just a little curious about the case hoped to get a clear answer to the question of whether Alger Hiss was a spy, i.e. whether he lied and was therefore guilty of perjury, and this they did not get. The trial ended without a verdict, and it was evident that another would follow.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> ROMERSTEIN – BREINDEL, p. 130.

<sup>51</sup> FRIED, pp. 20–21.

<sup>52</sup> TENENHAUS, pp. 345–346.

<sup>53</sup> BRADY, *Alger Hiss: Framed*, pp. 215–216.

<sup>54</sup> COOK, p. 20.

Alger Hiss's second trial began on 17 November 1949, and it was exceptional not just for being twice as long as the previous one, but also because it was the first federal trial in which the testimony of a psychiatrist was used to discredit a witness. This related, of course to Chambers.<sup>55</sup> This fact, however, did not shuffle the deck. The defence rather naively submitted supposed evidence of Chambers' treacherous nature. Unsurprisingly, the case revolved around the documents, microfilms, and incriminated Woodstock typewriter. It was eventually this evidence which tipped the scales, as it demonstrated that Hiss had given the documents to Chambers and that they had seen each other after 1937, thus meeting the two counts of perjury. In January 1950, Alger Hiss was found guilty, although things did not end there. His defence team claimed that the whole case had been fabricated. Various versions of events claimed, for example, that the FBI had created the Pumpkin Papers, or even that it had produced the famous typewriter. The problem with all these and other theories, however, was that to be correct, you needed to use quite a lot of imagination.<sup>56</sup> Hiss was at least lucky that he could not be sentenced for espionage due to limits on the age of pieces of evidence. Even so, he received five years' imprisonment, and we can note that while the conviction really wasn't for anything other than perjury, overall, the judgement was perceived as confirmation of his betrayal.<sup>57</sup> At the end of the year, Hiss and his team issued an appeal, but this was rejected, and the Supreme Court refused to examine the matter in early 1951.<sup>58</sup>

### Aftermath

Even in the period just after the verdict was pronounced, it was evident that the case would have ramifications for society. In 1950, for example, author Diana Thrilling predicted that it hadn't ended with Alger Hiss, and that the case as a whole would prompt the search for others who were flirting with communism. She also feared that a period of hysteria was coming which might hurt many innocent people.<sup>59</sup> Subsequent developments would show that these fears were not unfounded. It turned out that people generally tend to believe big revelations, and ones of

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<sup>55</sup> SHELTON, p. 191.

<sup>56</sup> FRIED, p. 21.

<sup>57</sup> For example: *The New York Times*, January 22, 1950.

<sup>58</sup> SHELTON, p. 193.

<sup>59</sup> D. THRILLING, A Memorandum on the Hiss Case, in: P. A. SWAN (ed.), *Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, and the Schism in the American Soul*, Wilmington 2003, pp. 47–48.



almost scandalous character. This could be said of the case described here, and it is no wonder then that the case immediately became a big deal throughout the entire society. People also appreciate big personal stories, and one which involved a former Soviet spy who had then found the right path was truly unique. But the sad truth remains that there were those who exploited the wave of anti-communism for their own benefit and came up with stories which had very little to do with the truth.<sup>60</sup> Last but not least, it should be mentioned that within the USA, the entire case was compared to the Dreyfus affair. This is because it also resulted in nationwide distrust in the justice system, since it featured high ranking and influential people, including President Truman.<sup>61</sup>

It is of interest that the entire case began essentially as just a conflict between two people, but it grew into something far bigger. Circumstances meant that both men were forced to almost go for each other's throat in the desire to prove their truth, and this led to huge public interest, which naturally led to two camps supporting one or the other.<sup>62</sup> It should be noted, however, that if it had been an isolated case it would hardly have generated such a spike of interest from the public. Similar stories, if on a smaller scale, increasingly began to turn up. As has been noted, Alger Hiss had not been the only person to be investigated by the HUAC for the accusation of belonging to the Communist Party, and this was still the tip of the iceberg. At the same time, many fanatics began swarming around Chambers and Hiss, quick to align themselves to one or the other party and fiercely defend their position. This was aided by several other facts. The case as a whole was an extremely tangled and mysterious one, and it wasn't easy to determine where the truth lay. There was also the evident ideological aspect, with New Deal supporters, for example, on the side of Hiss, linking his innocence to the fate and perception of Roosevelt's whole programme. Both factions which now opposed each other were sufficiently large that the discussion spilled over into the rest of society.<sup>63</sup> Nor should we neglect the role of the media in the case. This was significant, and one of the crucial factors. Individual journalists were not hesitant to

<sup>60</sup> K. MARTIN, *The Witness*, in: P. A. SWAN (ed.), *Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, and the Schism in the American Soul*, Wilmington 2003, pp. 101–102.

<sup>61</sup> R. WEST, *Whittaker Chambers*, in: P. A. SWAN (ed.), *Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, and the Schism in the American Soul*, Wilmington 2003, p. 112.

<sup>62</sup> A. KOESTLER, *The Complex Issue of the Ex-Communists*, in: P. A. SWAN (ed.), *Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, and the Schism in the American Soul*, Wilmington 2003, p. 51.

<sup>63</sup> WEST, pp. 107–108.

churn out information, even at times when it was not clear how relevant it was. This certainly led not just to those directly involved in the case being influenced, but also society as a whole, which to some extent embraced it as its own.<sup>64</sup> This latter point is very significant, because it is difficult to imagine that Richard Nixon, for example, would have expended so much effort and time to a case which did not resonate with society and which he could not use to win popularity and thus political points.

Whittaker Chambers himself later complained that most people interested in the case did not express interest in him as a person and were rather pursuing their own goals. Especially regarding journalists, he described how they constantly asked him irrelevant questions to add as much fuel to the fire as possible and giving the case even more public attention. He must have appreciated more those who at least wanted to get to the bottom of the whole affair.<sup>65</sup>

Another example which shows that the truth was perhaps only of secondary importance in the whole case was the hearing in front of the grand jury on 13 December 1948. That day, it was Richard Nixon's turn to be interviewed, as a representative of the HUAC and amongst other matters to hand over all relevant evidence, including the contents of Chambers' pumpkin. In his answers, Nixon drew attention to the fact that the Department of Justice had begun its work poorly and wondered why somebody from the department had told journalists that the committee had not wanted to hand over evidence, something he claimed was untrue.<sup>66</sup> This is again illustrative of the fact that Hiss's case had become a proxy battleground for various political subjects. Here, the media played the role of the stage, which they happily constructed each day. This approach unintentionally opened the doors to the heated anti-communism of subsequent years. The fact that the legal and ideological battle of two men became a public affair proved to set a dangerous precedence.

In any case, anti-communism in the United States was slowly beginning to take on a life of its own. At the end of the 1940s and early 1950s, assured reports on the discovery of a new spy centre in the USA appeared all the time, and the conviction of Alger Hiss, and later the Rosenbergs, demonstrated that they were not the mere fabrications of political factions. The

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>65</sup> CHAMBERS, p. 640.

<sup>66</sup> *U.S. v. Alger Hiss, R Nixon*, December 12, 1948, NAID: 202288424, National Archives in New York, Record Group 118: Records of U.S. Attorneys, pp. 1–2.

Rosenbergs were a couple whose conviction for espionage regarding nuclear weapons cost them their lives. It didn't take much imagination to believe that the communist threat was a real one looking at these cases. This was also confirmed, as we only now know, by the Venona project, which was being run at the time and which helped America to decipher a large amount of Soviet secret messages. The problem here, however, was that it was a secret project and only a select few knew of its existence. As such, the public instead had to trust the testimony of witnesses, etc., which unfortunately often merely resulted in increased mistrust of the Department of Justice and other judicial bodies. Yet had the project's findings been released at the time, society would have known beyond all doubt that Chambers' claims were true, and furthermore nobody would have blamed the court for the execution of the Rosenbergs.<sup>67</sup>

Hiss himself and the people around him, however, were unwilling to accept the verdict even years after the whole case had ended. Over time, many different theories were produced by his advocates, who came up with various often crazy theories on how Chambers had, for example, falsified evidence later used in court. Hiss's defence often focused in particular on the fact that he was a victim of the anti-communist atmosphere. Other arguments were since when comparing the two figures, Hiss was much more credible than Chambers. Also often noted, including by Hiss's son in his memoirs, is the fact that in the Cold War atmosphere, government agencies were prepared to do almost anything in pursuit of their belief in Soviet infiltration within the United States of America. According to this theory, Alger Hiss served as an artificially constructed example designed to show everybody that the threat was not just realistic, but also factual. These are the two strongest arguments in two quite influential books, *Laughing Last* and *Alger Hiss: the True Story*. Unfortunately, influenced by the American debacle in Vietnam and the revelations that the FBI and its head J Edgar Hoover had not always acted correctly, and finally the Watergate affair, many people later began to sympathise with Hiss more again, and these books gained considerable popularity, despite not presenting any new evidence.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> J. E. HAYNES – H. KLEHR, *Venona. Decoding Soviet Espionage in America*, Yale 2000, pp. 14–16.

<sup>68</sup> G. E. WHITE, *Alger Hiss's Looking-Glass Wars. The Covert Life of a Soviet Spy*, New York 2004, pp. 165–167.

As has been indicated, Alger Hiss's connections to the Soviets were later confirmed almost definitively. Other evidence turned up in addition to the Venona project after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Specifically, this involved two figures, who demonstrably had access to crucial Soviet archives. One of them was Alexander Vassiliev, who took advantage of the brief period of openness of the new Russian regime to investigate crucial documents comprising over a thousand pages of notes containing details of secret Soviet operations. Hiss appeared in these notes in a number of places under the code name Ales. His brother Donald is amongst other names mentioned alongside him.<sup>69</sup> His name is also mentioned by a second source, Vasili Mitrokhin, who was an archivist for the KGB for many years and who made notes on a lot of material which went through his hands. He subsequently escaped to the United Kingdom in 1992 and published his notes.<sup>70</sup> The only issue preventing a definitive sentence on Hiss is that unfortunately neither of these sources can be verified with absolute certainty. This is because access to the particular archives is no longer possible, and there is not much prospect that this might change in the foreseeable future. This means that we cannot compare the two men's notes with the originals.<sup>71</sup>

In contrast, demagogues got the opportunity to shine in the spotlight, as most successfully demonstrated by Joseph McCarthy, after whom the entire infamous period of anti-communist hysteria is named. Because clear evidence of espionage was not made public, the Wisconsin senator and people like him were able to claim practically anything they wanted, mixing up generally true information with fabricated information. If the Venona project had been made public, various unfounded speculation would not have been focused on, because the true extent of the conspir-

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<sup>69</sup> For example: "Vassiliev White Notebook #3," 2009, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Alexander Vassiliev Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.; "Vassiliev Yellow Notebook #2," 2009, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Alexander Vassiliev Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.; "Vassiliev Black Notebook," 2009, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Alexander Vassiliev Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>70</sup> Hiss is mentioned several times as a Soviet spy. For example: CH. ANDREW – V. MITROCHIN, *Neznámé špionážní operace KGB. Mitrochinův archiv*, Český Těšín 2001, pp. 123–124, 126, 151–152.

<sup>71</sup> "Introduction, Alexander Vassiliev's Notebooks: Provenance and Documentation of Soviet Intelligence Activities in the United States," 2009, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Alexander Vassiliev Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

acy would have been known. At the same time, people like Chambers and Bentley would not have been subjected to accusations of lying, with unjust accusations being quickly being resolved. It also would have been fully demonstrated that the testimonies of the two mentioned key witnesses had resulted in the extended Soviet espionage network becoming hollowed out, and unviable in the years to come.<sup>72</sup> But they could not let the Soviets know, or even just suspect, that the Americans were reading their messages, and so the Venona project was not made public. As a result, the United States had to go through a miserable time in the early 1950s, and one which undoubtedly casts a shadow on the working of the much vaunted and beloved American democracy.

### Conclusion

The end of the 1940s in the United States of America was marked by the beginning of the Cold War and a political battle which brought the fight against communist as one of its core aspects to the domestic stage. Cases began to see the light of day which would likely otherwise never have stood up to the spotlight on their own. Many journalists had now come to the realisation that they may be something that would resonate with society. This attention brought with it an opportunity for politicians to achieve greater popularity, and for newspapers to sell more copies. Both protagonists, Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers, found themselves facing each other in a game which neither of them wanted to play. The accusation of committing perjury could only be fought through the complete discrediting and destruction of the opposing party. This conflict, while superficially personal, nevertheless mostly also played out in the pages of the newspapers, on the airwaves and in front of the cameras. This led to significant interest from the public, which received reports on new information almost every day. This only boosted the increasing feeling that the communist threat was not just possible, but real. Furthermore, they were following a case which involved a well-educated lawyer who had spent many years in senior posts in the federal administration. It is no wonder, then, that Hiss's final conviction only made the idea of the threat all the more apparent. Thus, fertile ground had been laid for anti-communist hysteria, and the question only remained of whether the whole situation would be exploited for personal advantage, and by whom.

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<sup>72</sup> MOGAN, pp. 292–293.

