

Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, and the Schism in the American Soul

I N T R O D U C T I O N by Wilfred McClay

For many readers, particularly those under the age of twenty-five or so, an encounter with the contents of this book may feel rather like the discovery of a time capsule, filled with the brilliant fragments and curious remains of a singular world that has all but vanished. This will seem a surprising assertion to those who were mature and politically aware adults in the early years of the Cold War, when the Hiss-Chambers case was literally inescapable, and when every sentient person was expected to have an opinion about the furiously contested question of Alger Hiss's guilt or innocence. Yet the memory of those turbulent times has faded, and so too, perhaps, has the historical awareness and imagination of those who would preserve their memory. Those of us who make a living teaching American history to young people know all too well that it is becoming increasingly difficult to get them to grasp what the Cold War was even about—its high stakes, its issues, its hatreds and pathologies, its immense psychological intensity.

This is not an entirely unfortunate state of affairs. Indeed, it is probably one of the inevitable wages of victory. Once-fearsome dangers come to be retrospectively downsized, and even pitied, once they have been vanquished. And immunity from a certain kind of idealism can also provide immunity from a certain kind of corruption. But something is inevitably lost, too, as our sense of the Cold War fades into clichéd obscurity. A sense of gratitude, for one thing, gratitude to those who struggled and prevailed. And, even more fundamentally, a sense of what the fighting was all about. For better or worse, today's young people, whose principal examples of ideological passion come from the hapless hippie retreats of the anti-globalization movement, or the murderous nihilism of Timothy McVeigh and al-Qaeda, cannot quite conceive of what might have motivated intelligent and highly educated Western men and women to embrace the Communist cause with a fervor that can only be called religious—or to resist it with a fervor of equivalent power. It all seems so bombastic, so terribly overwrought, overblown, and uncool, in the eyes of a generation accustomed to breathe a more relaxed moral atmosphere, a generation more comfortable (at least on its uneasy surface) with the self-defensive pose of irony and parody, rather than the more robust and dramatic impulse toward heroism and idealism. How can such a generation, a generation most decidedly not on trial, begin to comprehend what Chambers meant when he wrote that "life is pain," and "each of us hangs always upon the cross of himself"? What will keep them from saying of Chambers, as one of my students did, that "the dude needed to chill"?

This book cannot pretend to be a remedy to that problem, but it can be a beginning. It doesn't propose to give a full account of the Cold War. But as a way of jumping in, and sampling the reactions of intellectuals to the Cold War in the writ-small form of their unfolding reactions to the Hiss-Chambers case, it succeeds admirably well. Those who take the plunge into these pages will find themselves pulled irresistibly into the whirl of a heated debate, or set of debates, that has coursed around and through the past half-century of American history. The ideological element in the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union is here miniaturized and personalized in the improbable encounter of these two strange and enigmatic men, and in the endless debates that their encounter left in its wake. It was a case of genuine world-historical importance; but it also was an intensely personal psychological drama. As these essays show, the Hiss-Chambers case quickly became one of those iconic moments of symbolic

politics, like Jackson's Bank War or Bryan's "free silver" campaign or the Sacco-Vanzetti case, that endure and come to define the landscape of American history—events which may or may not be important in their own right, but which are chiefly significant for the way they reveal and embody the grand social forces and larger meanings that stand behind them, straining for expression. As such, the conflict between Hiss and Chambers was not merely a cynosure of history, as the self-dramatizing Chambers was so eager to portray it. It also was a puzzle, even to the convinced. It posed a near-endless set of riddles, whose precise answers remain to this day a subject of endless dispute.

Therefore it was not a coincidence, one might say, that the case has proved the source of some extraordinarily inspired and stimulating prose. How could it not be? Psychological complexities (and historical cynosures) draw talented writers the way mountains draw climbers. Chief of those prose works is Chambers's own masterpiece *Witness*, which even Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who differed from Chambers in so many ways, rightly credited as one of the greatest of American autobiographies. No one has done a better job of conveying the psychological and moral appeal of Communism, and the metaphysical stakes involved in accepting or rejecting it. *Witness* forms the object, direct or indirect, of a great many of the essays reprinted herein. Those who have not read it before, or have not reread it for many decades, will feel compelled to do so, and make up their minds for themselves what manner of man Chambers was, and how prophetic his vision may have proved to be.

Even so, in many respects these essays give one a more adequate historical introduction to the era, and provide a valuable framework for thinking about Chambers's book. For one thing, they give one a better sense of the extent of the "uproar" (Hilton Kramer's word) that the publication of *Witness* caused, and the diversity of reactions it produced, then and now. One runs the whole gamut here, from the dismissive personal assault of Kingsley Martin to the stiffly reserved "yes, but" of Diana Trilling to the tender recollections of William F. Buckley, Jr. These essays offer a kaleidoscopic overview of the historical situation, fragments of a large and complex story that one has to piece together for oneself, like the perspectives of a hundred partial witnesses, in order to gain some independent sense of the truth of the matter.

More importantly, readers of these essays will find themselves tantalized by the case's unresolved mysteries, which run through these pages like haunting Wagnerian leitmotifs. Even those who are firmly convinced, as the overwhelming body of evidence by now clearly indicates they ought to be, of Alger Hiss's guilt, will find themselves bothered by certain enduring questions. At their core, nearly all of these questions involve mysteries of the human psyche, mysteries that revolve around the interplay between loyalty and truth-telling.

To be sure, there are elements in the drama that, though they struck many contemporary observers forcibly, seem far less significant now. For example, there is the vivid class contrast between the protagonists—the handsome, elegant, and impeccably pedigreed Hiss against the disheveled and unprepossessing Chambers, with his ever-remarked-upon bad teeth. Chambers himself commented on the bad casting choices that history seemed to have made in this case. But the casting seems less suspect today, when the term "the best and the brightest" can hardly be uttered without overtones of sarcasm, and when the role of accredited elites in American life seems more morally problematic than ever.

But the psychological mysteries are, if anything, more unfathomable to our confessional age. Chief among these is the matter of Alger Hiss's demeanor, an issue that comes up again and again in these pages. How is one to account for his equipoise and his silence, by which is meant his dogged refusal to confess, or provide even so much as a scintilla of corroboration for the charges against him? Was outward serenity a sign of his innocence, that he seemed so unruffled, so completely remorseless and unbowed, because his conscience was so completely clear? Or was it paradoxically a sign of his guilt, that he never behaved as one would expect a man who had been so comprehensively wronged—that he was in fact secretly satisfied with what he had done, that he had been loyal to the only "truth" that matters, and that his martyrdom only added to his sense of smug moral superiority? Neither explanation, if truth be told, seems entirely satisfactory.

How, too, to account for the passionate and enduring loyalty shown to Hiss by his followers? Of especially perplexing interest is what Leslie Fiedler calls "the half-deliberate blindness of so many decent people." (21) The problem invites—indeed insists upon—a psychological explanation. Was there simply too much at stake—politically, intellectually, emotionally—for Hiss's guilt to be an admissible thought? Was there, as Sidney Hook claimed, "no arguing with symbolic allegiances"? Was it so important to defeat the Right that it could not be allowed a victory, even when the Left was clearly at fault? Was the disagreeable shiftiness of Chambers, and the seeming venality of Hiss's other foes (such as Richard Nixon) to be taken to be sufficient evidence of Hiss's righteousness? Were Hiss's alleged crimes to be understood as acts that, to a committed person of the left, were comparatively trivial, particularly compared to the patent monstrousness of the right-wing foe? Was it the case, then, that it didn't really matter whether or not he was a spy—just as it didn't really matter whether or not Bill Clinton had sex with an intern, and if asked about it, he was entitled to lie? Or is it possible that they were, and are, honestly and rationally convinced of Hiss's innocence, partly swayed by Hiss's unflappable demeanor? No one explanation seems to dispel the mystery. As was demonstrated by the O.J. Simpson case—another of the American "dervish trials" that Rebecca West so aptly describes herein—there will always be a constituency of those convinced by a man who stubbornly refuses to admit his guilt, particularly if there is a "symbolic allegiance" that can be played upon.

Some of the essays have worn the passage of time better than others. Leslie Fiedler's "Hiss, Chambers, and the Age of Innocence" is as fresh as if it were written yesterday, and it reminds us of what a powerful and imaginative literary and cultural critic he could be. The same can be said of the nearly forgotten Granville Hicks, whose generous examination of *Witness* is full of sympathetic insight, and much superior to the formulaic put-down of Irving Howe. Yet both Hicks and Howe, and nearly all the critics herein, seem to agree in one respect: that Chambers's book, even if it is to be accounted a magnificent achievement, goes too far in asserting that the Cold War was ultimately a theological struggle, against those who have perfected "the vision of man without God," and who see "man's mind displacing God as the creative intelligence of the world." Even Hicks, who openly admired Chambers, even considered him a "great man," nevertheless felt it necessary to say emphatically that "I reject Whittaker Chambers's conclusions," so far as the ultimate meaning of the Communist experiment was concerned.

Were they right to do so? Until recently, it might have seemed that they were. Yet, as Hilton Kramer's superb concluding essay hints, the cultural upheaval of

the Sixties reintroduced the problem of faith in a form that the liberal mind found much harder to answer. And the same question, of the primacy of man or God, now poses itself to us in an entirely new form, with the advent of biotechnologies that, literally, place in human hands the power to make over the human condition.

Suddenly Chambers's rhetoric does not seem so extreme. When he spoke of "the vision of man's liberated mind, by the sole force of its rational intelligence, redirecting man's destiny and reorganizing man's life and the world," (59) he was speaking specifically of Communism. But he was also, perhaps without having known or intended it, addressing himself to something like the very prospect we now face, not because of some foreign threat, but because of the flourishing of certain aspects of our own victorious civilization. Even if he did not know specifically what was to come, he clearly understood that Communism was not something alien to the history of the modern West, but represented the purest and most logically consistent expression, in political and economic terms, of one of the most powerful and distinctive strains in that Western history. Communism was, he argued, merely "the next logical step which three hundred years of rationalism hesitated to take, and said what millions of modern minds think, but do not care or dare to say: If man's mind is the decisive force in the world, what need is there for God? Henceforth man's mind is man's fate."

Such a statement may well have seemed overdrawn a half-century ago. We will see if it seems less so in the half-century to come.