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February 29, 2004

'Alger Hiss's Looking-Glass Wars': An Impenetrable Lie

By MAX FRANKEL

ALGER HISS'S LOOKING-GLASS WARS
The Covert Life of a Soviet Spy.
By G. Edward White.
Illustrated. 297 pp. New York: Oxford University Press. $30.

If you are too young to care much about Alger Hiss, move on. Turn away also if you recall the case and still believe Hiss never fed secrets to Soviet agents. But if you accept Hiss's guilt, as most historians now do, you will profit from G. Edward White's supplementary speculations about why, after prison, that serene and charming man sacrificed his marriage, exploited a son's love and abused the trust of fervent supporters to wage a 42-year struggle for a vindication that could never be honestly gained.

White is a legal scholar at the University of Virginia, but in "Alger Hiss's Looking-Glass Wars" he is not just parsing legal evidence. Inspired by a chance family connection to Hiss, he felt a need to ruminate on two enduring mysteries: why Hiss persisted in his lying and why he managed to fool so many Americans for so long. White's answers, in a useful supplement to the vast Hiss literature, are plausible but beyond proof.

We will need novelists to recreate the angry idealism of the Depression years that led so many Americans to feel a kinship with Communists. A decade later, in the alarming first years of the cold war, even inoffensive "fellow travelers" came to be viciously hunted as traitors, and so the successful prosecution of Hiss greatly fanned the hysteria. In the ensuing partisan wars, believing Hiss guilty or innocent was likely to depend more on a cultural choice than a factual assessment. And Hiss, the elegant diplomat who had sat behind President Franklin Roosevelt at his Yalta meeting with Stalin and managed the conferences that created the United Nations, played the victim brilliantly.

From the moment in 1948 when his once warm friend Whittaker Chambers called him a Communist before a politically hungry House Committee on Un-American Activities, Hiss bet his life on what White calls a "reputational defense." The accused was a suave, handsome and highly credentialed government official; the accuser a fat, rumpled ex-Communist with bad teeth and a gnarled personality. When Hiss haughtily dared Chambers to repeat his charge in a legally unprotected setting, even the committee feared it had made a grievous error.

But when Chambers promptly complied, Hiss was compelled to sue for libel, forcing the accuser to present evidence. Belatedly, Chambers confessed to spying, which he had previously denied, and produced copies of documents that he had stashed away 10 years earlier to protect himself against retribution by Stalin's agents. The documents had provably crossed Hiss's desk at the State Department and been copied on Hiss's typewriter, by his wife, Priscilla.

The reputational defense managed to divide one jury (8-4 for conviction) but the evidence prevailed at a second perjury trial. Only preposterous conspiracy theories could sustain Hiss's claim that "forgery by typewriter" had done him in. Yet such theories took wing over half a century, steered by Hiss, his loyal son, Tony, and ardent supporters, some of whom were undeterred even by damning discoveries in Soviet communications. Hiss sold himself to gullible college audiences, survived the scrutiny of skeptical journalists and even the dispositive research of the most thorough investigation, "Perjury," by Allen Weinstein.

By the time of his death in 1996, Hiss had regained much of his footing, his government pension and even his license to practice law in Massachusetts. As White demonstrates, he acquired credibility as his pursuers lost theirs: Joseph McCarthy, Vietnam and Watergate proved the government capable of vicious lying and exposed the corruption of Hiss's initial prosecutors, most notably a young congressman, Richard M. Nixon.

White witnessed the success of Hiss's campaign at close quarters. His father-in-law, John F. Davis, had been Hiss's first counsel and assisted at both trials. A learned, independent man, Davis ended his career as clerk of the Supreme Court and died in 2000 still convinced that Hiss, given his evident good character and achievements, had no motive to spy for the Soviets and lie about it.

Why then did he?, the son-in-law was moved to ask.

A simple answer that White fails to explore is that Hiss, having once before eluded an F.B.I. inquiry, too hastily committed himself to denial. Never suspecting that Chambers possessed proof of their spying, he set out to face him down with an elitist back of the hand and simply became trapped. But White thinks calculation was always at work.

One available strategy would have been for Hiss to confess a youthful infatuation with Communism, to name a few names and to live happily after as president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. White thinks that Hiss's fierce loyalty -- to his convictions and his cultivated image of probity -- made that course unattractive. Continued deception, he believes, had a positive appeal.

But why, in prison and after, did the deception continue? Hiss rejected his wife's desire that they disappear under new names. When the Soviet Union finally collapsed, he even asked the Russians to testify that he was ''never a paid, contracted agent'' -- a sly bid indeed for one who was never paid. And he hit the jackpot: a blanket clearance from a confused Moscow historian that pumped new air into the campaign.

Hiss's ''recklessness,'' White concludes, ''was connected to his idealism, to his fanatical devotion to his goals and to his distinctive mix of ingenuousness and deceptiveness. When those characteristics are combined with Hiss's instinctive altruism, the high priority he placed on loyalty, his single-mindedness and self-control, and his strong faith in his own competence, the portrait of a person ideally suited for the life of a secret agent emerges.''

If Hiss had disappeared after 44 months in prison, White continues, ''he would have been just one other undercover agent who had lied, betrayed his country and gotten caught. . . . With vindication, the grace with which he had responded to these tribulations would give him an aura of nobility. He could be an inspiration to his supporters, and a reminder of the excesses of the cold war. And he could be a Soviet agent too. Those achievements, taken together, gave him a sense that his life had a completeness and a fundamental meaning. It became a beautifully integrated whole.''

So, in an odd way, we are asked to admire Hiss not for his forbearance but for his colossal and magnificent chicaneries. Bring on the novelists.

Max Frankel's ''High Noon in the Cold War: Kennedy, Khrushchev and the Cuban Missile Crisis'' will appear in the fall.

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