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Alger Hiss

Alger Hiss personified the fear of communist subversion at the heart of U.S. government that so dramatically marked the late 1940s and 1950s. Born to a middle-class Baltimore family on November 11, 1904, Hiss enjoyed a distinguished career in government until he was accused of spying for the Soviet Union by *Time* magazine editor and self-confessed spy Whittaker Chambers. Hiss served forty-four months in prison on charges of perjury and emerged a symbol of betrayal to some and an innocent victim of anticommunist hysteria to others. He died on November 15, 1996, still declaring his innocence.. However, documents released from U.S. and Soviet intelligence archives confirm his identity as a Soviet agent.

Hiss attended Johns Hopkins University and Harvard studying under Felix Frankfurter, later one of the architects of the New Deal, and serving a year as a law clerk to Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. On December 11, 1929, Hiss married Priscilla Fansler, a writer and art historian who introduced him to radical politics. In 1933, Hiss moved to Washington, D.C., taking a job in the Agriculture Department and joining a Marxist study group run by longtime Communist Harold Ware. By 1934, he had joined the Communist Party and began passing on government documents. After Ware's death in 1935, Hiss became part of an espionage network run by J. Peters, a Hungarian national and head of the Communist Party's secret apparatus.

Hiss worked for several government agencies, gaining a post at the State Department in 1936, all the while supplying documents for microfilming to J. Peters's courier Whittaker Chambers. Chambers turned the copies over to Soviet Military Intelligence (GRU). In 1938, Chambers defected from the underground, carrying with him a "life preserver" of purloined documents. Hiss continued his double life, becoming an assistant to Secretary of State Edward Stettinius and attending the Yalta Conference, a meeting between President Franklin Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and General Secretary Joseph Stalin on the shape of the postwar world.

In 1948, Chambers testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) naming Hiss, now president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, as a Soviet agent. Hiss denied the charges and denied having ever known Chambers. Chambers led investigators to his Maryland farm, where he reached into a pumpkin and dramatically produced documents that Hiss had given him years before. HUAC investigators, including California Congressman Richard Nixon, uncovered additional proof that Hiss had lied by demonstrating that Hiss and Chambers had indeed known each other in the 1930s. Convicted on perjury charges, Hiss surrendered to federal authorities on March 22, 1951. Released from Lewisburg penitentiary in 1954, Hiss was reduced to working as stationery salesman. By the late 1960s, however, changes in public opinion and the ambiguous nature of the evidence against Hiss combined to rehabilitate his reputation. Declarations of belief in his innocence became common among intellectuals and Hiss was frequently invited to speak on college campuses throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

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