# Alger Hiss in McCarthyism & Red Scare (from Schmoop—a non-academic source)

Alger Hiss (1904-1996) was a high-ranking official in the State Department of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Hiss participated in the critical Yalta Conference at the end of [World War II](http://www.shmoop.com/intro/history/us/world-war-ii.html) and also played an important role in helping to organize the United Nations. In one of the most notorious espionage trials of the twentieth century, he was later accused of being a Soviet spy.

In 1948, an ex-Communist named Whittaker Chambers accused Hiss of being a member of the Communist Party and a Soviet spy. Hiss, called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, denied all charges. When Chambers produced evidence suggesting Hiss was lying, Hiss was convicted of perjury and sentenced to four years in prison. Though he insisted until his dying day that he was innocent, recently disclosed Soviet records suggest that Hiss was, in fact, a Soviet agent.

Legacy of the Alger Hiss Case (https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/history.html)

The Hiss case has maintained a persistent, restless, troubling presence in modern American history, straddling past and present as a piece of unfinished business. Some people today remember the Hiss case and its swirling charges of treason, lies, and Soviet espionage as a watershed event in post-World War II America that dramatically changed the course of thousands of American lives and the ways in which additional millions of Americans thought about the world. Other people are not quite sure if they have ever heard of Alger Hiss. For still others - some of them Hiss supporters; some of them detractors - the Hiss case has not yet receded into history, and, more than a decade after the end of the Cold War, remains a living, unresolved, and now 21st-century event that arouses intense interest, stirs passionate debate, and exerts a continuing influence on national policy.

As a historical subject, the Hiss case is a fast-receding, mid-2Oth-century federal criminal case - a perjury indictment known officially as *The United States of America v. Alger Hiss* - that made front-page headlines year after year in the late 1940s and early 195Os: Newspapers of the time routinely called it "the trial of the century." Richard M. Nixon, then an unknown, first-term Congressman from California, became nationally famous for his pursuit of Alger Hiss, and 20 years later, in 1968, was elected president. Ronald Reagan, because of the Hiss case, turned his back on New Deal liberalism, embraced conservative views, and, after entering politics, became President in 1980.

The Hiss case helped launch the 1950s McCarthy period, a decade of fear and distrust. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's anti-communist crusade, during which 10,000 Americans lost their jobs, began less than three weeks after Alger Hiss's conviction in 1950. The Hiss case became as a mirror in which America saw disquieting reflections of itself during the early years of the Cold War. The British journalist, Alistair Cooke, who in 1950 published the first book about the trials of Alger Hiss, called it "A Generation on Trial." "The impact of the Hiss case on the movement of anti-communism to the center of the political stage," the historian James V. Compton wrote in 1973, "can scarcely be exaggerated."

The crux of the debate was clear: If Alger Hiss - who throughout his life steadfastly maintained his innocence - were guilty as charged, and passed government documents to the Soviet Union when he worked for the United States State Department in the 1930s, this would show that President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal had been infiltrated and compromised by Communist spies. If Hiss were innocent, his conviction had been a historic miscarriage of justice.

That debate continues. A recent ProQuest database search through New York University Libraries' main Web site listed more than 350 American newspaper and magazine articles about Alger Hiss or some aspect of the Hiss case that were published during 1999 and 2000. In 1997, the Hiss case became an issue in Senate confirmation hearings over President Clinton's selection of Anthony Lake to be Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Lake had said on *Meet the Press* that he was not entirely convinced of Alger Hiss's guilt. During the hearings, Senator Jon Kyl (R-AZ) stated that "I would find it very difficult to support a nominee who did not believe that Alger Hiss was a spy"; Lake later withdrew his nomination.

A year before, in 1996, former Senator George McGovern, the 1972 Democratic nominee for the presidency (against Richard Nixon), told a meeting of the American Historical Association that "I've always believed that Hiss was a victim of the 'Red Scare' and of Nixon's political rapacity. It is a national outrage that this essentially decent man went to prison as a consequence of the demagoguery of Nixon and the ignominious House Committee on Un-American Activities."

Alger Hiss, who lived for 47 years after his conviction, devoted those years to a quest for vindication. (He died in 1996 at the age of 92.) Along the way, he won several legal proceedings. His government pension was restored to him in 1972, and he was readmitted to the bar in Massachusetts in 1974 ([Timeline](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/timeline.html)). But although he brought his own case back to court in 1978, after securing the release of tens of thousands of pages of material from his FBI files ([Courtroom](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/court.html)), he was never able to have his conviction overturned. Whittaker Chambers, Hiss's accuser, who died in 1961 at the age of 61, received posthumous honors from the Reagan administration: President Reagan awarded him the Medal of Freedom in 1984, and his Westminster, Maryland farm where he had once concealed the "Pumpkin Papers" ([The Pumpkin Papers and the Baltimore Documents](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/pumpkin.html)) was declared a national historic landmark in 1988. Every Halloween, Chambers' supporters gather in a Washington, D.C. Hotel or a ceremonial dinner meeting of the "Pumpkin Papers Irregulars," which is addressed by a prominent conservative (in 2000, it was Kenneth Starr, the former special prosecutor).

Since Hiss's 1950 conviction, more than two dozen books have examined the case ([Bookshelf](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/bib.html) and [Book Reviews](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/review.html)); at least four more are in preparation. Many of the published books support part or all of Hiss's testimony; on the other hand, two of the most influential, Allen Weinstein's "Perjury" and Sam Tanenhaus's "Whittaker Chambers: A Biography," have been highly critical of Hiss. Continuing interest in the Hiss case has been sustained by the appearance of these and other books, such as Anthony Summers' and Robyn Swan's "The Arrogance of Power: The Secret World of Richard Nixon." Reviewing this book for the *Chicago Tribune*, John W. Dean, who served as counsel to the president during the Nixon administration, wrote that "The authors have reopened the debate on whether Hiss was framed."

Further interest in the Hiss case has also been stimulated by a series of recent and well-publicized developments:

•In the early 1990s, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Alger Hiss appealed to the post-Communist Russian government to search their records for any evidence that could throw light on his case ([Volkogonov on the Hiss Case](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/volk.html)).

•In the mid-1990s, the partial release of Cold War files in both Russia and the U.S. sparked heatedly renewed debate among historians and journalists both about Hiss himself and about the extent to which Soviet intelligence had penetrated American government during the early years of the Cold War. ([Venona and the Russian Files](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/venona.html)).

•In a landmark 1999 ruling, a federal judge ordered the release of thousands of pages of grand jury testimony from the Hiss case. Judge Peter K. Leisure agreed with the contention put forward by historians and archivists, who had petitioned for the release of the documents that some federal cases are of such overriding historical importance that they need to be made public, despite the continuing presumption that in most cases secrecy protects the public's rights ([The Grand Jury Minutes](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/grandjry.html)).

•In the fall of 2001, the House of Representatives released all executive session testimony and investigators' notes from the long-defunct House Committee on Un-American Activities, including 1948 material that dates to the very first days of the Hiss case ([The Latest Evidence](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/latest.html)).

The search for the truth continues - and will necessarily extend into the future for some time to come. But Hiss supporters and Hiss detractors acknowledge that certain aspects cannot hope to be fully resolved until a full array of Cold War documents held in both Russia and the U.S. are made public ([How You Can Help](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/help.html)).

Under these circumstances, it's clear that "The Alger Hiss Story" Web site, even as it receives frequent and regular updates ([The Latest Evidence](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/latest.html) and [What's New On The Site](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/new.html)) and incorporates comments and suggestions from its readers ([Your Comments](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/comment.html) and [We Remember Alger](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/friends.html)), has to think of itself as an interim document. It can, nevertheless, seek to perform several important, basic services for researchers, students, and their instructors ([About This Site](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/aboutus.html) and [For the Teacher](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/teacher.html)).

Previously, the whole evolving thrust of the defense's arguments have only been available to students and researchers with the time and opportunity to travel to Cambridge, Massachusetts where the Hiss case files are housed at the Harvard Law School library. Or, in the case of the recently released grand jury minutes, they must go to New York City or Washington. D.C. where the National Archives has made boxes of photocopies of these records available for public inspection. Also, the public papers of many of the figures who played prominent or supporting parts in the Hiss case are housed in research libraries across the country.

With the opening of "The Alger Hiss Story" everyone around the world with Internet access can log onto this new portal for immediate access to primary information about Alger Hiss, the Hiss case and related subjects, including parallel developments during the early Cold War years. Postings and links make available new scholarship, newly released official documents and archival material, such as trial testimony, court and government records, and commentary, that is maintained by many libraries and online repositories.

In addition, this Web site will present a complete summary of the charges against Alger Hiss and a comprehensive look at the case for the defense. These documents will be supplemented by a wide-ranging look at the public life and career of Alger Hiss ([Who was Alger Hiss?](https://files.nyu.edu/th15/public/who.html)), and will include the first assembling of his own writings, both published and private; transcripts of his interviews and the comments of his friends and contemporaries. It is hoped that by making this material available, the reader can evaluate Hiss's goals, accomplishments and his character.

The Trials of Alger Hiss: A Commentary
by Doug Linder (2003)

No criminal case had a more far-reaching effects on modern American politics than the [Alger Hiss-Whittaker Chambers spy case](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/hisschronology.html) which held Americans spellbound in the middle of the twentieth-century.  The case catapulted an obscure California congressman named Richard Nixon to national fame, set the stage for Senator Joseph McCarthy's notorious Communist-hunting, and marked the beginning of a conservative intellectual and political movement that would one day put Ronald Reagan in the White House.

Even without its important influence on American political debate, the trials of Alger Hiss for perjury have the makings of a great drama.  They featured two men who could hardly be more different, sharing only impressive intelligence. Alger Hiss was a tall, handsome Harvard-trained lawyer with an impeccable pedigree. Whittaker Chambers was a short, stocky, and rumpled Columbia drop-out and confessed former Communist from a poor and troubled Philadelphia family. Time and time again the two men would tell congressional committees, trial juries, and a reading public flatly contradictory stories about Hiss's allegiances during the period from 1933 to 1938.  Hiss, according to Chambers, was a dedicated Communist engaged in espionage, even while working at the highest levels of the United States government.  Hiss told a very different story, claiming unflinching loyalty and denying even membership in the Communist Party.  One man was lying, one was telling the truth.

In the summer of 1948, Chambers's story rang true to one very important young man: Congressman Richard Nixon, a member of the House un-American Activities Committee, then an often-ridiculed political backwater.

The House un-American Activities Committee Hearings of 1948

Whittaker Chambers did not want to testify before the House un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in August 1948, but saw it as his patriotic duty.  In his 1952 autobiography, *Witness*, Chambers wrote, "I prayed that, if it were God's will, I might be spared that ordeal."  At the same time, he sensed that testifying about his past role as a Communist agent was the the event for which "my whole life had been lived."  Chambers believed that "the danger to the nation from Communism had now grown acute," threatening his country's very existence.

On August 3, in the hearing room of the Ways and Means Committee, forty-seven-year-old Chambers told Committee members that he left the Communist Party in 1938, and the next year--"two days after Hitler and Stalin signed their pact"--he "went to Washington and reported to authorities what I knew about the infiltration of the United States Government by Communists."  Remarkably, little was done to follow up on Chambers's reports of extensive Communist infiltration.  Chambers identified for the Committee persons who he had nine years before reported as being active in the Communist underground:

The head of the underground organization at the time was I knew it was Nathan Witt, an attorney for the National Labor Relations Board.  Later, John Abt became the leader.  Lee Pressman was also a member of this group, as was Alger Hiss, who, as a member of the State Department, later organized the conference at Dumbarton Oaks, San Francisco, and the United States side of the Yalta Conference.

Questioned by Committee Investigator Robert Stripling about his association with Alger Hiss, then President of the Carnegie Endowment and a well-respected national figure, Chambers described a close friendship that included time in the Hiss home with Alger and his wife, Priscilla.  Chambers told of a final meeting at the Hiss home when he tried to convince Alger Hiss to leave the party.  Chambers testified, "He cried when we separated, when I left him, but he absolutely refused to break....I was very fond of Mr. Hiss."  Congressman Mundt asked Chambers what reasons Hiss gave for refusing to break with the Communists.  "His reasons were the party line," replied Chambers.

In response to Chambers's accusations, which were given large play in the media, Alger Hiss sent a telegram to HUAC's chairman, J. Parnell Thomas, categorically denying the charges.  Hiss's telegram said,

I DO NOT KNOW MR. CHAMBERS AND, SO FAR AS I AM AWARE, HAVE NEVER LAID EYES ON HIM.  THERE IS NO BASIS FOR THE STATEMENTS ABOUT ME MADE TO YOUR COMMITTEE....I WOULD FURTHER APPRECIATE THE OPPORTUNITY OF APPEARING BEFORE YOUR COMMITTEE...

Hiss's wish for an opportunity to appear before HUAC was granted. [On August 5](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/8-5testimony.html), before a packed house, Hiss calmly and confidently told Committee members, "I am not and never have been a member of the Communist Party."  He repeated the statement in his telegram that he had "never laid eyes on" Chambers, and added "I would like to have the opportunity to do so."  Hiss's performance was impressive enough convince most members of the Committee that the investigation should be dropped.  President Truman called the Capitol Hill spy inquiry "a red herring."  HUAC was under fire.

One member of the Committee, however, wanted to press on with the investigation.  Congressmen Richard Nixon found Hiss "condescending" and "insulting in the extreme."  To many observers, it was Hiss's Eastern Ivy League pedigree and style that offended Nixon, a Whittier College graduate and the product of working-class parents.  With some reluctance, the Committee voted to make Nixon chair of a subcommittee that would seek to determine who was lying, Hiss or Chambers, at least on the question of whether they knew each other.

[On August 7](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/8-7testimony%5B1%5D.htm), Nixon's subcommittee met Chambers at the Federal Court House in New York City to pursue its investigation into the confessed spy's association with Alger Hiss.  Nixon asked many questions designed to determine whether he knew the things about Hiss that he should "if he knew him...as well as he claimed."  Chambers had most of the answers on such subjects as nicknames, habits, pets, vacations, mannerisms, and descriptions of floor plans and furniture.  On the question of whether Hiss had any hobbies, Chambers gave an answer that would soon haunt Hiss:

Yes, he did.  They both [Alger and Priscilla Hiss] had the same hobby--amateur ornithologists, bird observers.  They used to get up early in the morning and go to Glen Echo, out the canal, to observe birds.  I recall once they saw, to their great excitement, a prothonotary warbler.

Hiss faced more hostile questioning from the Committee in executive session on [August 16](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/8-16testimony.html).  Stripling pointedly observed that either Chambers has "made a study of your life in great detail or he knows you."  After being shown two photographs of Chambers, Chairman Thomas asked Hiss whether he still maintained that he did not recognize the man who claimed to have spent a week in his house. Hiss answered, "I do not recognize him from that picture...I want to hear the man's voice."  After a morning recess, Hiss announced that he now believed that his accuser might be a man he knew in the mid-1930s as "George Crosley," a free-lance writer who he said sought out information about Hiss's work on a congressional committee dealing with the munitions industry.  Crosley's most memorable feature, according to Hiss, was "very bad teeth."

A turning point in the investigation came when Richard Nixon asked, "What hobby, if any do you have, Mr. Hiss?"  Hiss answered that his hobbies were "tennis and amateur ornithology."  Congressman John McDowell jumped in: "Did you ever see a [prothonotary warbler](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/warbler200.jpg)?"  Hiss fell into the trap, responding, "I have--right here on the Potomac.  Do you know that place?"  In discussions after the hearing, Committee members indicated they were now convinced Hiss was lying, based in large part on the response about the warbler.  It seemed to Stripling and others very unlikely that Chambers could have known about such a detail through a general study of Hiss's life.  It had to be firsthand knowledge.

At an [August 17 HUAC hearing](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/8-17testimony.html), Hiss met his accuser. Nixon asked both Chambers and Hiss to stand.  Then he said to Hiss, "I ask you now if you have ever known that man before?"  Turning to Chambers, Hiss (who had minutes before asked Chambers to open his mouth so that he could look at his teeth) asked, "Are you George Crosley?"  Chambers replied, "Not to my knowledge.  You are Alger Hiss, I believe."  Hiss told the Committee Chambers was probably the man he knew as Crosley, but proceeded to ask some questions of Chambers designed, he said, to remove his remaining doubts.  Finally, after a series of questions that mostly backfired, Hiss announced, "I am now perfectly prepared to identify this man as George Crosley."  After a number of tough questions from the Committee to Hiss, the tense session ended with Chairman Thomas saying, "That is all.  Thank you very much."  Hiss replied testily, "*I don't reciprocate*."

On [August 25](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/8-25testimony.html), for the first time in history, television cameras were present for a congressional hearing.  The Committee was well armed, and confronted Hiss with a host of questions about an alleged lease of Hiss's apartment to Chambers and a simultaneous transfer to Chambers of Hiss's old 1929 Ford. Congressman Hebert, reflecting the Committee's skepticism of Hiss's answers, wondered aloud about a person of Hiss's "intellect...who gives to casual people his apartment [and] who tosses in an automobile."  In the afternoon session, [Chambers called Hiss](http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/hissvideo.html) a "devoted and at the time a rather romantic Communist" who now "represents the concealed enemy against which we are all fighting, and I am fighting."

On August 27, HUAC published a report in which it called Hiss's testimony "vague and evasive."  As for the testimony of Chambers, the Committee called it "forthright and emphatic."  In response, Hiss published a fourteen-page letter attacking HUAC for "using the great powers and prestige of the United States Congress to help sworn traitors to besmirch any American they may pick upon."

The Pumpkin Papers

On October 8, Hiss filed a slander suit against Chambers, based on his accusation on *Meet the Press* that Hiss "was a Communist and may be now."  Hiss's attorneys began a widespread investigation into the background of Chambers in hopes of destroying his credibility.  The investigation included exploration of whether Chambers had ever been treated for mental illness or entered into homosexual relationships.  (In fact, Chambers had engaged in a number of homosexual affairs in the mid-1930s, but defense attorneys were unable to ferret out this piece of information which might have been useful in establishing a motive for Chambers's alleged lies.)

In the middle of a deposition of Chambers in preparation for the slander suit, Hiss's attorney, William Marbury, requested that Chambers produce "any correspondence, either typewritten or in handwriting from any member of the Hiss family."  Shortly after that request, Chambers visited the Baltimore home of his nephew's mother where, he said, he reached into a dumbwaiter shaft in the bathroom and pulled out a large, [weathered envelope](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/envelope.jpg).  The envelope contained four notes handwritten by Alger Hiss, sixty-five typewritten documents (copies of State Department documents, all dated between January and April, 1938) and five strips of 35 mm film.  The documents, if genuine, were strong evidence not only that Hiss knew Chambers long after mid 1936, when Hiss claimed to have last seen "Crosley," but also that Hiss engaged in espionage.

Chambers turned over the documents to his lawyers, keeping the film.  When Marbury resumed his deposition of Chambers, Hiss's bewildered attorney found himself presented with a packet of documents that not only blew his client's slander suit out of the water, but placed Hiss in serious danger of a criminal indictment.

The revelation of the Baltimore papers also stunned HUAC members and investigators.  Chambers explained his delay in producing the incriminating documents as an effort to spare an old friend from more trouble than necessary.  The investigation accompanying Hiss's slander suit, however, convinced Chambers that "Hiss was determined to destroy me--and my wife if possible," making disclosure seem the better course.  Chambers also may have recognized that if he lost in the slander case, he might well have faced a Justice Department prosecution.

There was still one more big shoe to drop.  Chambers placed the film (two strips developed and three undeveloped) taken from the Baltimore home into a hollowed-out pumpkin, then placed the pumpkin back in a pumpkin patch on his Maryland farm.  On the evening of December 2, 1948, Chambers accompanied two HUAC investigators to his farm, then led him to the patch holding the hollowed-out pumpkin.  The film would prove later to include photographs of State and Navy Department documents.  Over the ensuing months of the Hiss-Chambers controversy, the press--enjoying the alliteration--would generally refer to the entire set of documents and photographs taken from Baltimore as "[the pumpkin papers](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/pumpkinp.html)."  The following day, Hiss released a statement promising his "full cooperation to the Department of Justice and to the grand jury in a further investigation of this matter."

The debate had shifted.  The question of whether Hiss knew Chambers better than he admitted, or even whether he was a Communist, now seemed relatively inconsequential.  The question now was whether Alger Hiss, high State Department official, was a Soviet agent.  Fortunately for Hiss, the statute of limitations for espionage was five years, and the incriminating evidence all concerned documents passed over a decade earlier.  The statute of limitations was not an issue, however, on the question of whether Alger Hiss committed perjury.

The First Perjury Trial

Forty-four-year-old Alger Hiss, wearing a gray herringbone suit, blue tie, and a brimmed brown hat, entered the Federal Courthouse in Manhattan on May 31, 1949  for the first day of his trial for perjury.  Hiss faced two counts, both stemming from testimony before a federal grand jury the previous December.  Hiss was charged with lying when he testified that he never gave any documents to Whittaker Chambers and when he claimed never to have seen Chambers after January 1, 1937.

In his opening statement, [Assistant U. S. Attorney Thomas Murphy](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/murphy.jpg) told the twelve-person, middle-class jury, selected after questioning by [Judge Samuel H. Kaufman](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/kaufman.jpg), "If you don't believe Chambers, then we have no case."  Murphy said the prosecution had no "photographs of the man lying," but would instead "corroborate Chambers's testimony by the typewriting and the handwriting."  He predicted that after the evidence is presented the jury "will be convinced as I am that he is telling the truth."

Defense attorney [Lloyd Paul Stryker](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/stryker.jpg), in his opening statement, said his client welcomed the "quiet and fair court of justice" after "the days of the Klieg lights, the television, and all the paraphernalia, the propaganda which surrounded the beginning of this story."  Stryker said that the trial would show the contrast between his client, without a "blot or blemish on him," and Chambers, "a voluntary conspirator against the land that I love and you love."

Whittaker Chambers was, of course, the prosecution's central witness.  Chambers testified that Hiss began passing him State Department documents in early 1937.  He described Soviet agent Colonel Boris Bykov's recommended espionage procedures, followed by Hiss, that included bringing files home nightly and retyping them.  Chambers identified the famous documents, both the typewritten and those in Hiss's own hand, and said that they had been given to him by Hiss in his Washington home.

On cross-examination, Stryker tried to highlight defects in Chambers's character.  He asked about a play, written by Chambers as a student at Columbia in 1924, that Stryker called "an offensive treatment of Christ."  He asked whether he ever lived in a "dive" in New Orleans with a prostitute named "One-Eyed Annie." (Chambers denied the charge.) He demanded to know whether Chambers was "for some fourteen years an enemy and traitor of the United States of America?"  Chambers answered, "That is right."  Styker pressed Chambers on why he hadn't, knowing what he claimed to know, warned the President or anybody before 1948 that Hiss should not be trusted in the important positions that he held.  Styker suggested that the timing of Chambers's charge was an attempt to help the Republican Party's campaign against Truman.

Chambers's wife, [Esther, followed Whittaker to the stand](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/hisstrialtranscripts.html#Esther%20Chambers%20%28first).  She told jurors of  the close relationship that she and her husband enjoyed for several years with Alger and Priscilla Hiss--a relationship that she said extended well beyond the January 1, 1937 date that Hiss had told the grand jury was his last meeting with Chambers.  She described the Hiss's visit to their Baltimore apartment in December 1937 to celebrate the Hiss's wedding anniversary.  The Hiss's, Esther Chambers testified, "brought a bottle of champagne."

Following the testimony from the Chambers came a series of witnesses who tied Alger Hiss to the typewritten State Department documents introduced by the government.  Nathan Levine described the visit of Chambers to his mother's home to retrieve the envelope bearing documents from a dumbwaiter shaft.  HUAC investigator Donald Appel told the jurors of the visit to the Chambers farm to retrieve "the pumpkin papers."  State Department records expert Walter Anderson explained the significance of each of the typewritten papers and handwritten notes alleged to have come from Hiss.  Eunice Lincoln, a secretary in Hiss's office, testified that Hiss often took departmental documents home to work on.  The most critical testimony tying Hiss to the typed copies of State Department documents came from FBI laboratory expert Ramos C. Feehan.  Feehan told jurors that letters known to have been typed by the Hiss in 1936 and 1937 ("Hiss standards") were typed on the same Woodstock typewriter as the sixty-five papers found in the Baltimore dumbwaiter shaft.  He based his conclusion on similarities between certain letters, such as the lowercase "g," on both sets of papers.

The defense, through its witnesses, tried to persuade jurors of three things:  first, that Hiss's reputation was so good as to make his alleged espionage activity almost unthinkable; second, that Chambers was mentally unstable and should not be believed and, third, that Hiss's Woodstock typewriter had been given to a household employee sometime before 1938, making it impossible for either Alger or Priscilla Hiss to have typed the Baltimore documents.

Three members of the Catlatt family testified that the Woodstock typewriter on which the Baltimore papers were allegedly typed was in fact in their possession, not the Hiss's, in early 1938.  Claudia Catlatt thought she received the machine in mid-1936. Mike Catlatt recalled that the typewriter "was broke...the keys would jam up on you," but on cross-examination could not remember getting the machine repaired or when the family got it from the Hiss's.  Perry Catlatt placed the time of the gift of the typewriter as December 1937 and recalled taking it soon thereafter to a "repair shop at K Street just off Connecticut Avenue."  Prosecutor Murphy effectively undermined Perry Catlatt's credibility when he asked on cross, "Supposing I tell you that the Woodstock repair shop at Connecticut and K did not come into existence until September of 1938?"

Rarely has a defense team ever assembled so impressive a batch of character witnesses as appeared on behalf of Alger Hiss.  The list included two U. S. Supreme Court justices, a former Solicitor General, and both former (John W. Davis) and future (Adlai Stevenson) Democratic presidential nominees.  Justice Felix Frankfurter described Hiss's reputation as "excellent."  Justice Stanley Reed said of Hiss's reputation, "I have never heard it questioned until these matters came up."

On June 23, Alger Hiss took the stand.  He admitted writing the four handwritten notes produced by Chambers, but denied any connection with the microfilm found in Chambers's pumpkin or any role in the typing of the sixty-five State Department documents.  He also insisted--as he had told the grand jury in December--that he had not met Chambers on any occasion after January 1, 1937. As for the Woodstock typewriter, Hiss's "best recollection" was that he gave it to the Catlatts "in the fall of 1937."  On cross-examination, Murphy focused on bringing out numerous inconsistencies between Hiss's trial testimony and his earlier statements.

The [testimony of Priscilla Hiss](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/hisstrialtranscripts.html#Priscilla) did more harm than good to the defense case.  She admitted typing the four "Hiss standards" used for comparison purposes by the FBI with the Baltimore documents.  After Priscilla denied that she was a member of the Socialist Party in 1932, Murphy pulled out a voter-roll page that showed her Socialist registration.  She struggled to explain her statement to the grand jury that the typewriter "may" have been given to the Catlatt's as late as 1943.

Stryker spared nothing in his attack on Whittaker Chambers in his summation to the jury.  He called Chambers "an enemy of the Republic, a blasphemer of Christ, a disbeliever in God, with no respect for matrimony or motherhood."  Hiss, on the other hand, was "an honest...and falsely accused gentleman."  He closed by expressing confidence that for his client, Alger Hiss, "this long nightmare is drawing to a close."

Murphy told the jurors that their duty was clear.  The evidence left "only one inference" that could be drawn: "that the defendant, that smart, intelligent, American-born man gave [the secret State Department document] to Chambers."  He ended his summation by asking the jurors to "come back and put the lie in that man's face."

On July 6, 1949, the case went to the jury.  Late the next afternoon, the jury sent a note saying it "is unable to agree at a verdict."  Judge Kaufman urged the jury to make one final effort to reach a conclusion, but within hours the jury again reported itself hopelessly deadlocked.  Judge Kaufman reluctantly declared a mistrial.  Quizzed about the deliberations, jurors revealed that the final vote stood eight for conviction, four for acquittal.  The four jurors in the minority believed that someone other that Alger or Priscilla Hiss typed the documents on [Woodstock N230099](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/typewriter.jpg).

The Second Perjury Trial

The months between the end of the first Hiss trial and the start of the second had been eventful.  The Soviet Union had exploded an atomic bomb.  The Red Army of Mao Tse-tung had succeeded in driving the forces of Chiang Kai-shek to the island of Formosa.  The NATO treaty had been approved.  And, perhaps most ominously for Alger Hiss, polls showed public attitudes shifting towards harsher treatment of U. S. Communists.

The second trial began with a somewhat changed cast.  Murphy was back as prosecutor, but Claude Cross now led the Hiss defense.  Kaufman, criticized for his pro-defense rulings in the first trial, had been replaced on the bench Henry W. Goddard.

The prosecution produced one major new witness, who Kaufman had barred from testifying in the first trial.  Hede Massing, a former Soviet agent, testified that he met Alger Hiss at a Communist cell meeting in a private home in 1935.  Massing said she recalled arguing with Hiss over whether Noel Field, a State Department spy, should work with her group or with his.

Julian Wadleigh, a bit player in the first trial, became the target of a heavy cross-examination by the Cross in the second trial.  Cross suggested that  it was Wadleigh (a confessed espionage agent) and not Hiss, who supplied the typewritten documents to Chambers--after perhaps having stolen them from a State Department office.  There were, however, major problems with this suggestion.  First, the defense theory required Wadleigh to also have stolen--on four separate occasions--Hiss's handwritten notes.  Second, the theory meant that Wadleigh, after having stolen the documents from the State Department, would have had to successfully return them to their proper place..

The defense case in the second trial placed heavy reliance on the [testimony of its expert psychiatrist, Dr. Carl A. Binger](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/hisstrialtranscripts.html#Dr.%20Carl%20A.).  On direct-examination, Dr. Binger (based on his reading of Chambers's writings and his observation of his trial testimony) called Chambers a "psychopathic personality" and "a pathological liar."  However, in one of the most famous and devastating cross-examinations in courtroom history, Murphy destroyed Binger's credibility.  One commentator said admiringly, "Mr. Murphy just wanted plain answers to plain questions--about the most alarming assignment anyone would wish on a psychiatrist."  Murphy, through his questions, suggested that the label "psychopathic personality" was useless and empty catch-all of a lot of symptoms.  Noting, for example, that Binger had concluded that the tendency of Chambers to look up at the ceiling from the witness chair was a symptom of a psychopathic personality, Murphy asked what should be made of the fact that Murphy's assistant prosecutor had counted Binger eyeing the ceiling fifty times in less than an hour of his own testimony.  Murphy asked about another alleged symptom of Chambers's psychopathic personality: his "untidiness" and lack of concern about his appearance.  Murphy wondered whether other famous persons well-known for untidiness or haphazard dress, such as Albert Einstein, Bing Crosby, and Thomas Edison, were, therefore, psychopaths?  Murphy countered Binger's argument that the equivocations of Chambers during his testimony was a sign of a psychopathic personality by quizzing the doctor about what conclusion one should draw from 158 equivocations by Alger Hiss in *his* 550 pages of testimony. Murphy also attacked Binger's conclusion that hiding microfilm in a pumpkin was indicative of a psychopathic personality.  Murphy asked whether that meant other famous hidings, including "the mother of Moses hiding the little child in the bulrushes," was symptomatic of a serious personality disorder?

With more witnesses and more latitude allowed for questioning, the second trial took three weeks longer than the first.  In his summation, Cross conceded that the stolen documents had been typed on the Woodstock once owned by Hiss, but told jurors that "it is not the question of what typewriter was used, but who the typist was."  Cross suggested that somehow Chambers or a confederate might have gotten hands on the typewriter after it left the possession of the Hiss's and typed the documents in an effort to frame Alger.  Murphy, in closing for the prosecution, stressed the mountain of "immutable" evidence suggesting a close relationship once existed between Chambers and Hiss.  Murphy told jurors that the Chambers-Hiss friendship and the typed and handwritten documents proved Hiss a "traitor" who "was in love with their philosophy, not ours."

The jury returned its verdict on the afternoon of January 20, 1950: "We find the defendant guilty on the first count and guilty on the second."  Alger Hiss, who had "high hopes" for an acquittal, sat quietly with his wife as Judge Goddard thanked the jury for their "just verdict."  Five days later, the judge imposed the maximum sentence of five years.  Before he did so, Hiss made a brief statement in which he expressed confidence "that  in the future the full facts of how Whittaker Chambers was able to carry out forgery by typewriter will be disclosed."

Trial Aftermath

On December 7, 1950, the [Second Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed Hiss's conviction](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/hissappellate.html).  Three months later, by a vote of four to two, the Supreme Court declined to review the case.  (Justices Black and Douglas voted to grant cert.  Justices Frankfurter, Reed, and Clark all voted to disqualify themselves, based on connections either to Hiss or the case.)  Days after the Supreme Court's decision, Hiss began his five-year sentence for perjury at Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary in Pennsylvania.  He served forty-four months before being released for good behavior.

The Hiss case set in a motion a chain of events that would forever change American politics.  Joseph McCarthy, a little known senator form Wisconsin, seized on the Hiss conviction to charge that the Department of State was "thoroughly infested" with Communists.  Soon he would begin divisive hearings--the controversial "witch-hunt."  (Chambers disassociated himself with McCathy's crusade, saying "For the Right to tie itself in any way to Senator McCarthy is suicide.  He is a raven of disaster.") [Richard Nixon's sudden fame from his role in the Hiss-Chambers](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/nixononhisscase.html) attention led the 1952 Republican nominee for President, General Dwight Eisenhower, to select him as his running mate.  Most significantly, Chambers fanned the anti-Communist embers that within a decade evolved into a grassroots conservative movement in the Republican Party that, in 1964, produced the nomination of Barry Goldwater and, in 1980, the election of Ronald Reagan.  It is often forgotten what Lionell Trilling observed about political thought in America before the Hiss case: "in the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition."

The lasting influence of Whittaker Chambers on American politics came not just from the hearings and the subsequent perjury trial.  In 1952, Chambers published a remarkable [autobiography, *Witness*](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/chambersletter.html), that even so different a person as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. would call one of the greatest of all American autobiographies.  Sidney Hook, reviewing *Witness* in the *New York Times* wrote, "It throws more light on the conspiratorial and religious character of modern Communism, on the tangled complex of motives which led men and women of goodwill to immolate themselves on the altar of a fancied historical necessity, than all of the hundred great books of the past combined."  Ronald Reagan credited Chambers's book as leading to his own transformation from a New Deal Democrat to a conservative Republican.  Throughout his political career, Reagan made repeated references to Chambers in his speeches.  Reagan said Chambers sparked "the counterrevolution of the intellectuals" and that Chambers's story "represents a generation's disenchantment with statism and its return to eternal truths and fundamental values."  On March 26, 1984, Chambers  (who died in 1961) posthumously received from President Reagan the nation's highest honor, the Medal of Freedom.

Alger Hiss, in the forty-six years he lived after his perjury conviction, never departed from his claim of innocence.  Even after the release in the mid-1990s of the [Venona cables, intercepted communications from Soviet agents](http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/hiss/hissvenona.html) in the United States to Moscow that seem to identify Hiss ("ALES") as a Soviet agent who continued to support the Communism cause through his work at the 1945 Yalta Conference, many of Hiss's supporters remained unpersuaded of his guilt. Writing in the *New York Observer* in 2001, Ron Rosenbaum offered a theory for what  Leslie Fiedler called "the half-deliberate blindness of so many decent people."  Rosenbaum noted that Hiss's supporters often cite as a reason for their belief in his innocence the very fact that Hiss continued to insist upon his innocence and encourage "generations of researchers, volunteers, and true believers...to devote a good part of their lives to him and his cause."  Rosenbaum offered this summary of their central argument:  "You don't think that he would have gotten all these people to work on the case if he *wasn't* innocent?"  Rosenbaum's own explanation for Hiss's refusal to admit guilt was quite different.  Rosenbaum saw Hiss as "proud" of having maintained his innocence, even if it meant "stringing along his well-meaning defenders," because he still believed the cover-up of his work for the Soviets was "a principled necessity."

## Communism and National Security: The Menace Emerges--by Ellen Schrecker

from chapter 3 of *THE AGE OF MCCARTHYISM: A BRIEF HISTORY WITH DOCUMENTS* (Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1994)

The restored tolerance for American communism that grew out of the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union did not long survive the victory over Hitler in the spring of 1945. Though there was an ostensible revival of the Popular Front collaboration between Communists and liberals during the war, it was a temporary and essentially superficial phenomenon. The party's patriotism did little to overcome the hostility of its traditional enemies or make it any more popular with the general public. And once World War II ended and the cold war began, the Communist party again came under attack.

This time, however, because of the struggle against the Soviet Union, anticommunism moved to the ideological center of American politics. The cold war transformed domestic communism from a matter of political opinion to one of national security. As the United States' hostility toward the Soviet Union intensified, members of the Communist party came increasingly to be viewed as potential enemy agents. Since that perception was to provide the justification for so much that happened during the McCarthy period, it is important to examine its development in some detail.

The cold war began even before the fighting stopped. At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Roosevelt had tried to negotiate an amicable postwar settlement with Stalin, but after FDR's death in April, American policymakers became concerned about the Soviet Union's obvious attempt to dominate the areas of Eastern Europe that its army controlled. As crisis followed crisis over the next few years, the world hovered on the verge of war. Each emergency heightened the tension. First came disagreements over the composition of the Polish government in 1945, then Soviet pressure on Turkey and Iran in 1946, the Greek Civil War in 1947, the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia and blockade of Berlin in 1948, the Communist takeover in China and the Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949, and, finally, the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. At first Truman and his advisers vacillated between hoping to conciliate the Soviets and trying to strong-arm them, but by the beginning of 1946 most of the nation's policymakers had come to see the Soviet Union as a hostile power committed to a program of worldwide expansion that only the United States was strong enough to resist. This may not have been the case. Though there is no question about the horrendous repression Stalin imposed on his own people, his foreign policy may well have been motivated by a desire for security rather than conquest. Whether or not it was, American policymakers never tried to find out, assuming on the basis of the Nazi experience that totalitarian states by definition threatened the stability of the international system.

Similar assumptions pervaded the growing consensus about the dangers of American communism. Part myth and part reality, the notion that domestic Communists threatened national security was based on a primarily ideological conception of the nature of the Communist movement. The sense of urgency that surrounded the issue of communism came from the government's attempt to mobilize public opinion for the cold war. But the content, the way in which the Communist threat was defined, owed much to formulations that the anti-Communist network had pushed for years. J. Edgar Hoover's 1947 testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, is an example of this type of thinking, of the vision of communism that came to shape most people's perceptions of the Red Menace. It conformed to the similarly demonized view of the Soviet Union held by the Truman administration and its supporters. Though distorted in many ways, the perception of an internal Communist threat had just enough plausibility to be convincing--especially to the vast majority of Americans who had no direct contact with the party or its members. Above all, it legitimated the McCarthy era repression by dehumanizing American Communists and transforming them into ideological outlaws who deserved whatever they got.

Communist party members were believed to be part of a secret conspiracy, fanatics who would automatically do whatever Stalin told them to do. Though a wildly exaggerated caricature, the image did have some basis in reality. After all, the American Communist party was a highly disciplined organization that did have a connection to the Soviet Union. Whether or not it actually got orders from Moscow, its leaders certainly tried to ensure that the party's policies would be in accord with those of the Kremlin, at least on major issues. It was thus possible to view the congruence between the party's line and the Soviet Union's positions as evidence of dictation.

The notion that individual Communists were under Moscow's control had less basis in reality. True, some party members did display a Stalinist rigidity, following every zig and zag of the party line with unquestioning devotion. And many Communists did behave in what could be seen as a conspiratorial fashion, especially when they tried to conceal their Political affiliation. Nonetheless, most party members were neither so rigid nor so secretive. They did not see themselves as soldiers in Stalin's army, but as American radicals committed to a program of social and political change that would eventually produce what they hoped would be a better society. Even at its peak, the Communist party had a high turnover rate; and by the early 1950s, most of the people who had once been in the party had quit, proving that they were hardly the ideological zombies they were commonly portrayed as. Nonetheless, the assumption that all Communists followed the party line all the time was to structure and justify the political repression of the McCarthy period.

Just as there was a kernel of plausibility in the demonized image of the American Communist, so too was it conceivable that individual Communists, acting as subversives, spies, and saboteurs, could threaten American security. Protecting the nation from these alleged dangers was to become the primary justification for much of what happened during the McCarthy period. The dangers were enormously exaggerated, but they were not wholly fictitious.

Ironically, even though the party's leaders were to go to jail in the 1950s because they had supposedly advocated the violent overthrow of the American government, no one in any position of responsibility seriously worried that the party would mount a successful revolution. A far more tangible danger was the possibility that individual Communists in sensitive positions could subtly influence the nation's foreign policy or undermine its ability to defend itself. There was no evidence that this had happened. But conspiracy theories blossomed, circulated primarily by Republican politicians and their allies who wanted to discredit the Democratic party and the New Deal. Most of these theories involved charges that Communists had infiltrated the State Department, where they induced FDR to give Poland to Stalin at the Yalta Conference in 1945 and then betrayed China to the Communists. Though these allegations had no basis in reality, there were enough tidbits of circumstantial evidence for people like Joe McCarthy to build their careers (and ruin those of others) by creating apparently convincing scenarios.

Communist spies were, however, a genuine threat. Though never powerful enough to influence government policy, individual Communists could easily have stolen secrets--and some of them did. The notorious spy cases of the early cold war bolstered the contention that, as J. Edgar Hoover maintained, "every American Communist was, and is, potentially an espionage agent of the Soviet Union." The ramifications of these cases were considerable, even though exactly what Elizabeth Bentley, Alger Hiss, or Julius and Ethel Rosenberg did or did not do may never be known. Nonetheless, there is enough evidence, mainly from people who either confessed or were caught in the act, to make it clear that some American, British, and Canadian citizens in or near the Communist party did spy for the Soviet Union and did so for political reasons. Most of them were active during World War II at a time when Russia and the United States were on the same side, and they apparently believed that they were helping the Allied cause It is unlikely that the Soviet Union recruited spies from the party during the cold war once communism had become anathematized and the government had eliminated its left-wing employees.

Though the threat of espionage gained national attention, sabotage was the prime concern of policymakers. They feared that Communist-led unions might go on strike or otherwise impede the operations of the nation's vital defense industries. Here, too, the fear was wildly exaggerated. But there were Just enough elements of reality to give it plausibility. Although a party-dominated union like the Fur and Leather Workers posed little threat to national security, the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE) and the various maritime unions were more strategically positioned. During the Nazi-Soviet Pact period, Communist labor leaders had been involved in several highly publicized strikes in the nation's defense industries. Part of a nationwide organizing drive mounted by unions of all political persuasions, the work stoppages were triggered by economic grievances, not a desire to impede the nation's war effort. Nonetheless, because Communists had been active, these strikes were cited during the early years of the cold war as evidence that the party had tried to sabotage American rearmament. The possibility of similar job actions in the event of a conflict with the Soviet Union could easily justify cracking down on the left-led unions.

"The Legacy of McCarthyism"--by Ellen Schrecker

*from* Schrecker, Ellen. *The Age of McCarthyism*. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Marvin's Press, 1994. (pp. 92-94)

In the late 1950s a group of graduate students at the University of Chicago wanted to have a coffee vending machine installed outside the Physics Department for the convenience of people who worked there late at night. They started to circulate a petition to the Buildings and Grounds Department, but their colleagues refused to sign. They did not want to be associated with the allegedly radical students whose names were already on the document.

This incident and it is not unique exemplifies the kind of timidity that came to be seen, even at the time, as the most damaging consequence of the anti-Communist furor. Since political activities could get you in trouble, prudent folk avoided them. Instead, to the despair of intellectuals, middle- class Americans became social conformists. A silent generation of students populated the nation's campuses, while their professors shrank from teaching anything that might be construed as controversial. "The Black Silence of Fear" that Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas deplores in Document 22 seemingly blanketed the nation, and meaningful political dissent had all but withered away.

Was McCarthyism to blame? Obviously the congressional hearings, loyalty programs, and blacklists affected the lives of the men and women caught up in them. But beyond that, it is hard to tell. The statistics are imprecise. Ten thousand people may have lost their jobs. Is that few or many? It may well be useful to reflect on an earlier debate among historians about the application of sanctionsin this case the apparently low number of whippings administered under slaveryto realize that it may not be necessary to whip many slaves to keep the rest of the plantation in line.

Quantification aside, it may be helpful to look at the specific sectors of American society that McCarthyism touched. Such an appraisal, tentative though it must be, may offer some insight into the extent of the damage and into the ways in which the anti-Communist crusade influenced American society, politics, and culture. We should keep in mind, however, that McCarthyism's main impact may well have been in what did not happen rather than in what didthe social reforms that were never adopted, the diplomatic initiatives that were not pursued, the workers who were not organized into unions, the books that were not written, and the movies that were never filmed.

The most obvious casualty was the American left. The institutional toll is clear. The Communist party, already damaged by internal problems, dwindled into insignificance and all the organizations associated with it disappeared. The destruction of the front groups and the left-led unions may well have had a more deleterious impact on American politics than the decline of the party itself. With their demise, the nation lost the institutional network that had created a public space where serious alternatives to the status quo could be presented. Moreover, with the disappearance of a vigorous movement on their left, moderate reform groups were more exposed to right-wing attacks and thus rendered less effective.

In the realm of social policy, for example, McCarthyism may have aborted much-needed reforms. As the nation's politics swung to the right after World War II, the federal government abandoned the unfinished agenda of the New Deal. Measures like national health insurance, a social reform embraced by the rest of the industrialized world, simply fell by the wayside. The left liberal political coalition that might have supported health reforms and similar projects was torn apart by the anti-Communist crusade. Moderates feared being identified with anything that seemed too radical, and people to the left of them were either unheard or under attack. McCarthyism further contributed to the attenuation of the reform impulse by helping to divert the attention of the labor movement, the strongest institution within the old New Deal coalition, from external organizing to internal politicking.

The impact of the McCarthy era was equally apparent in international affairs. Opposition to the cold war had been so thoroughly identified with communism that it was no longer possible to challenge the basic assumptions of American foreign policy without incurring suspicions of disloyalty. As a result, from the defeat of third-party presidential candidate Henry Wallace in the fall of 1948 until the early 1960s, effective public criticism of America's role in the world was essentially nonexistent. Within the government, the insecurities that McCarthyism inflicted on the State Department lingered for years, especially with regard to East Asia. Thus, for example, the campaign against the "loss" of China left such long-lasting scars that American policymakers feared to acknowledge the official existence of the People's Republic of China until Richard Nixon, who was uniquely impervious to charges of being soft on communism, did so as president in 1971. And it was in part to avoid a replay of the loss-of-China scenario that Nixon's Democratic predecessors, Kennedy and Johnson, dragged the United States so deeply into the quagmire of Vietnam.

The nation's cultural and intellectual life suffered as well. While there were other reasons that TV offered a bland menu of quiz shows and westerns during the late 1950s, McCarthy-era anxieties clearly played a role. Similarly, the blacklist contributed to the reluctance of the film industry to grapple with controversial social or political issues. In the intellectual world, cold war liberals also avoided controversy. They celebrated the "end of ideology," claiming that the United States' uniquely pragmatic approach to politics made the problems that had once concerned left- wing ideologists irrelevant. Consensus historians pushed that formulation into the past and described a nation that had supposedly never experienced serious internal conflict. It took the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War to end this complacency and bring reality back in.

Ironically, just as these social commentators were lauding the resilience of American democracy, the anti-Communist crusade was undermining it. The political repression of the McCarthy era fostered the growth of the national security state and facilitated its expansion into the rest of civil society. On the pretext of protecting the nation from Communist infiltration, federal agents attacked individual rights and extended state power into movie studios, universities, labor unions, and many other ostensibly independent institutions. The near universal deference to the federal government's formulation of the Communist threat abetted the process and muted opposition to what was going on.

Moreover, even after the anti-Communist furor receded, the antidemocratic practices associated with it continued. We can trace the legacy of McCarthyism in the FBI's secret COINTELPRO program of harassing political dissenters in the 1960s and 1970s, the Watergate-related felonies of the Nixon White House in the 1970s, and the Iran-Contra scandals in the 1980s. The pervasiveness of such wrongdoing reveals how seriously the nation's defenses against official illegalities had eroded in the face of claims that national security took precedence over ordinary law. McCarthyism alone did not cause these outrages; but the assault on democracy that began during the 1940s and 1950s with the collaboration of private institutions and public agencies in suppressing the alleged threat of domestic communism was an important early contribution.

Naming Names: The Social Costs of McCarthyism--by Victor Navasky

(New York: Viking Press, 1980)

The social costs of what came to be called McCarthyism have yet to be computed. By conferring its prestige on the red hunt, the state did more than bring misery to the lives of hundreds of thousands of Communists, former Communists, fellow travelers, and unlucky liberals. It weakened American culture and it weakened itself.

Unlike the Palmer Raids of the early 1920s, which were violent hit-and-run affairs that had no long-term effect, the vigilante spirit McCarthy represented still lives on in legislation accepted as a part of the American political way. The morale of the United States' newly reliable and devoted civil service was savagely undermined in the 1950s, and the purge of the Foreign Service contributed to our disastrous miscalculations in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and the consequent human wreckage. The congressional investigations of the 1940s and 1950s fueled the anti-Communist hysteria which eventually led to the investment of thousands of billions of dollars in a nuclear arsenal, with risks that boggle the minds of even those who specialize in "thinking about the unthinkable." Unable to tolerate a little subversion (however one defines it) if that is the price of freedom, dignity, and experimentation--we lost our edge, our distinctiveness. McCarthyism decimated its alleged target--the American Communist Party, whose membership fell from about seventy-five thousand just after World War II to less than ten thousand in 1957 (probably a high percentage of these lost were FBI informants) but the real casualties of that assault were the walking wounded of the liberal left and the already impaired momentum of the New Deal. No wonder a new generation of radical idealists came up through the peace and civil-rights movements rather than the Democratic Party.

The damage was compounded by the state's chosen instruments of destruction, the professional informers--those ex-Communists whom the sociologist Edward Shils described in 1956 as a host of frustrated, previously anonymous failures, whose "fantasies of destroying American society and harming their fellow citizens, having fallen out with their equally villainous comrades, now provide a steady stream of information and misinformation about the extent to which Communists, as coherent and stable in character as themselves, penetrated and plotted to subvert American institutions." Specific error can harm individuals, but the institutionalization of misinformation by way of the informer system may have contributed to the falsification of history. "As a rule, our memories romanticize the past," wrote Arthur Koestler. "But when one has renounced a creed or been betrayed by a friend, the opposite mechanism sets to work. In the light of that later knowledge, the original experience loses its innocence, becomes tainted and rancid in recollection.... Those who were caught in the great illusion of our time, and have lived through its moral and intellectual debauch, either give themselves up to a new addiction of the opposite type, or are condemned to pay with a life-long hangover."

Our lawmakers relied on, our media magnified, and our internal-security bureaucracy exploited and reinforced the images of Communism unleashed by the most sensational and therefore often least reliable of the ex-Communists. (Thoughtful if embittered men like Koestler were heeded in the academy but passed over in the popular press in favor of the Crouches, Cvetics, and Matusows.) Americans' political perspective was therefore distorted, their ability to distinguish myth from fact fatally compromised.

It is no easier to measure the impact of McCarthyism on culture than on politics, although emblems of the terror were ever on display. In the literary community, for example, generally thought to be more permissive than the mass media (a book can be produced for less than a fraction of what it costs to make a movie or a television show, and is harder to picket), the distinguished editor-in-chief of the distinguished publisher Little, Brown & Co. was forced to resign because he refused to repudiate his progressive politics and he became unemployable. Such liberal publications as the *New York Post* and the *New Republic* refused to accept ads for the transcript of the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Albert Maltz's short story "The Happiest Man on Earth," which had won the O'Henry Memorial Short Story Award in 1938 and been republished seventy-six times in magazines, newspapers, and anthologies, didn't get reprinted again from the time he entered prison in 1950 until 1963. Ring Lardner, Jr., had to go to England to find a publisher for his critically acclaimed novel *The Ecstasy of Owen Muir* didn't find a major publisher here until the 1960s, when it was reissued as part of a series of "classics" by New American Library.) The FBI had a permanent motion-picture crew stationed across the street from the Four Continents Bookstore in New York, which specialized in literature sympathetic to the Soviet Union's brand of Marxism. Mow to measure a thousand such pollutions of the cultural environment?

Sylvia Jarrico, former wife of the blacklisted Paul Jarrico, who was fired from her job as an editor with *Hollywood Quarterly* because she refused to sign the University of California loyalty oath, says simply, "We lived with the constant sense of being hunted." There is no knowing what intellectual losses were suffered by the widespread insistence on loyalty oaths, but George Stewart, reporting on the impact of the loyalty oath, wrote that his colleagues exhibited "worry depression, fatigue, fear, insomnia, drinking, headaches, indigestion, failure to function well, worsening of relations to colleagues, suspicion, distrust, loss of self­respect." In May 1952 The *New York Times* reported intimidation of librarians across the nation by Legionnaires, by Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution, by Minutemen in Texas and California. School texts showing city slums, UNESCO material, all books by such threats to the free world as Howard Fast were purged from school libraries. Even the world of sports was not immune to the terror and the absurd assumptions it bred. The sportscaster Bill Stern observed over the Mutual Broadcasting System as late as October 6, 1958, that the lack of interest in "big time" football at New York University, Chicago, Harvard, and City College "is due to the widespread acceptance of Communism at the universities."

Paul Tillett, the Princeton political scientist, in a study of McCarthyism. concluded:

While it would be difficult to prove and probably inaccurate to say that loyalty purges as they affected Hollywood and television and the other performing arts created the vast wasteland that is American popular entertainment, the anti-Communist hysteria in cultural matters does put the quietus effectively on one branch of the argument for commercialism in culture. The repression of Communists--near, crypto and won't tell varieties--destroyed the notion that commercialism was a more effective guarantee of diversity than state-owned and -directed cultural enterprise.

When the question was raised, the moguls of Hollywood and Madison Avenue came to heel at the behest of a congressional committee without formal authority over them as meekly as the most obedient member of the Soviet cultural committees under Stalin and Khrushchev.

It is simplistic to single out the blacklist, as its victims did at the time, as sole cause of the decline of American movies in the 1950s. Too many other factors complicated the picture and the pictures: the European market, which until then had subsisted on a diet of American films, had begun to discover its own filmmakers, so American films lost some of their overseas market; after World War II, general economic conditions in the film business had deteriorated; and the Supreme Court's ruling in 1948 that many distribution and exhibition practices were illegal meant that studios no longer had guaranteed distribution for their product. "The situation in which it was impossible to make a flop turned completely around," recalls Michael Gordon, who remembers a cost-cutting meeting at Universal where it was explained that all but two of the studio's twenty-four films were in the red. Then there was the installation of the coaxial for television in the late 1940s, which brought with it the first network television on a nationwide basis. Dalton Trumbo told me, "Even though we attributed the great box‑office decline, which began in 1948 and reached its nadir in 1952, to lack of us, that wasn't true. It was the rise of television." And, to make matters more difficult, the currency freeze in Great Britain, France, Italy, and West Germany under which a studio could spend credits in these countries but not take all of its earnings out of them eliminated the margin of profit on most films; this contributed to a sense of alarm.

We do not, of course, know what we have lost in the way of movies unmade, ideas unhatched, scripts not written, talent undeveloped, careers abandoned, consciousnesses unrevised. And we cannot verify the belief of the screenwriter Paul Jarrico, who saw "a direct relation between the blacklist and the increasing emphasis of the Hollywood film on pro-war and antihuman themes. We have seen more and more pictures of violence-for-the-sake-of-violence, more and more unmotivated brutality on the screen as the blacklist grew." (One difficulty with his argument is that after the blacklist died the violence continued to escalate.)

Was the blacklist, as John Howard Lawson and others contended, a form of thought-control? Did it succeed, as Mark Jacobson, writing in the mid-1970s, claimed, in smashing "the hopes of the New York crowd for a cinema of ideas in this country"? The screenwriter Ian McClellan Hunter said yes: "We really felt that sooner or later the Louis B. Mayers and the other studio people would die off and we would be able to make more provocative films.... The blacklist stopped us right in our tracks." Perhaps in the absence of the blacklist the political culture of the 1930s and 1940s would have given birth to a newly experimental cinema in the 1950s. Perhaps *Salt of the Earth* (1954), product of the blacklist underground, which, whatever its limitations, anticipated both the feminist and independent film-producing movements by more than a decade (not to mention its premature concern for the Chicano), is but a crude specimen of what might have been. Or perhaps not. The point is that we will never know. We will also never know how many of the taboos that have beset commercial television in the United States since the late 1940s--when its habits, values, assumptions, and basic perspective on the world were being shaped--were determined by the blacklist atmosphere.

For a while it was fashionable to downgrade the talent of the blacklistees. Murray Kempton wrote an entertaining chapter in *Part of Our Time* (1955) listing the trash films that some of these people had committed. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., argued that they tithed by night to make up for their hackery by day. But as we have already seen the blacklistees won too many delayed awards to be collectively discounted as hacks. Michael Wilson was right when he observed that a majority of them were younger writers who were just beginning to come into their own, as the subsequent careers of men like Lardner and Salt would seem to prove. "As to other of the so-called no-talent writers, well, it's true their talents do get rusty after fifteen years without employment, and if they've turned to other ways of life and other kinds of jobs, it doesn't mean they never had talent, it means that they never had a chance to develop or prove it."

It is one of the minor ironies of the period that while HUAC found little evidence of Communist influence in films, Dorothy Jones, in her study for the Fund for the Republic, found considerable evidence of the impact of HUAC. From 1950 to 1952 there were fewer social-theme movies like the earlier *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *Crossfire* (1947), and *Naked City* (1948), and more "pure entertainment," war movies, and antiCommunist films, the latter including such duds as *The Conspirator* (1950), *Peking Express* (1951), and *Red Planet Mars* (1952). (In 1952 alone, thirteen antiCommunist films were released.) "Probably never before in the history of Hollywood," wrote Jones, "had such a large number of films been produced which the industry itself doubted would prove really profitable at the box office. During the years 1947-52 only one major studio, Universal International, did not make any socalled antiCommunist films.

A short-lived publication sponsored by blacklistees and their friends, Hollywood Review (1955), took the trouble to try to trace the blacklist's effect on film content. An interesting article by Adrian Scott, one of the Hollywood Ten, reveals the methodological problems of such an enterprise. First, he listed distinguished films made by writers and directors who then were blacklisted: *Watch on the Rhine, Our Vines Have Tender Grapes, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, Here Comes Mr. Jordan, The Naked City, Action in the North Atlantic, The Talk of the Town, and Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*.

Scott then compared the contemporary work of nonblacklisted writers and directors with their earlier films. He contrasted John Ford's early films such as *The Informer* (1935), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), and *How Green Was My Valley* (1941) with his more recent *The Quiet Man* (1952)--"stereotyped Irish quaintness"--and *The Long Gray Line* (1954)--"sentimentalized West Point." William Dieterle's early "tributes to the capacity of the human intellect"--films on *Pasteur, Zola*, and *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940)--found no counterpart in *Elephant Walk* (1954), a romantic drama about white plantation owners. Scott juxtaposed William Wyler's *The Little Foxes* (1941) with his "watered down" *Carrie* (1951). He contrasted *Dead End* (1937) with *Detective Story* (1951)--the earlier film presenting "juvenile delinquency as a social problem requiring a social solution," while the later "dealt with police brutality wholly in terms of the personality of an individual ... without relation to social responsibility in how he wields his authority." Nunnally Johnson's screenplay for *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) far overshadowed his later *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953) or How to Be Very, Very Popular (1955). Scott also argued that the industry had ended a cycle of films about American race relations (*Home of the Brave, Intruder in the Dust*) which might have led to a new consciousness. Instead it inaugurated a campaign to glorify the businessman (Executive Suite, Sabrina, Patterns).

The change in the political climate could be seen, Scott wrote, in a content-analysis of the films of Elia Kazan. *Boomerang, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and Gentleman's Agreement were "excellent liberal films" contrasted with *Viva Zapata* ("theme: power corrupts revolutionaries"), *On the Waterfront* ("theme: courageous stool pigeon frees sheeplike long-shoremen from tyranny of corrupt union") and *East of Eden* ("theme: good is really evil and evil really good in this hopeless, meaningless world).

Scott did not pretend to analyze the antiCommunist films--which were for the most part low-budget items made by second-rate talent. Looking at the best Hollywood had to offer, he concluded: "Few if any of the films made by these men and their colleagues since 1947 have dramatized the humanist, democratic, and antifascist values that illuminated their work in the Roosevelt era. Their talents remain, but the ideas to which they applied their talents have been eroded and forbidden." Thus "the blacklisting of other men was in reality the blacklisting of the liberals' own ideas."'

Although Scott's somewhat mechanistic, ideologically culture-bound political aesthetic consigned clearly superior films like *Waterfront* and arguably superior ones like *Eden* to critical purgatory because he did not like their values, his catalogue if not his analysis usefully suggests the magnitude of our loss.

Even if it were possible to disentangle the effects of the various elements in the McCarthy period--the informer system, Hollywood division, the blacklist system, the congressional investigations, the larger repression, the international cold war--the prospect of quantifying the social cost of any one of them is overwhelming. Nevertheless, since institutions were transformed, content influenced, individuals injured, and vast public and private resources expended, it seems important to try separately to trace the effect of the informer alone, without whom the blacklist and many other aspects of the purge would not have been possible. To single out the informer is not to minimize the significance of the investigating committees themselves and the entire internal-security bureaucracy as causal agents of repression; it is merely to affirm that without the informer--who was seen as the proximate cause of evil by many of the most visible victims--Hollywood's overnight disintegration could not have happened in quite the way it did.

The Greek word "stigma" originally referred to a bodily sign to indicate the bearer was "a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places." In this definition lies a clue to the nature of the treble damages inflicted by the informer--on his intended victims, on the collectivity, on himself.