

The Forties: THE PUMPKIN PAPERS and "A Generation on Trial"

A photojournalist who covered one of the most spectacular espionage cases of the Forties reflects on the strange significance of those events today.

By Ollie Atkins

Last year an attorney named Alger Hiss was quietly readmitted to the bar. He is seventy years old, but this fact is significant only to those who can remember that in 1948 his name was the focus of the most sensational spy story of the era. It had all of the elements of a fiction thriller written by an author possessed of one mad literary flaw: his plot revolved upon a preposterous device, a secret film hidden in a pumpkin. On this hung the vindication or destruction of the character of a man in high government service. Yet this low comedy relief was the stuff of true life tragedy, involving a confrontation of the two greatest nations on earth.

The story is not retold here with a view to any misguided nostalgia concerning this somewhat sordid case. What makes it timely and meaningful today is that our country is under severe stress in matters of security and espionage, and that is precisely what the Pumpkin Papers trial was all about. And, what is even more astounding is the fact that Alger Hiss is now practicing law in the courts of the same nation which convicted him for perjury in a case specifically intended to

prove espionage on his part as a communist agent.

To those of us old enough to remember the time, the story begins with a clouding of what the precise relationship had become between two staunch allies of World War II, Russia and the United States. Young and questioning people, liberal and creative folk, especially, were unsettled over the war, which like all wars had cost so much and seemingly solved so little. The basic truths of right and wrong were elusive. It was an era of restlessness and search. Ideologies and counterideologies were freely exchanged at parties. Underground the hard and brutal espionage machines had long been at their silent work. Some men of goodwill were troubled and aimless: there were other men who knew precisely what their goals were. Still others, some in very high places, had good reason to conceal or make light of their actions of a decade earlier.

Two such men collided in a confrontation which shook the nation. Today it reads like a TV serial—a complex fabric woven by idiots. The plot involved our national safety. It also brought together

inextricably the lives of two entirely different American men, both of them talented and gifted. Ultimately they came face to face in a court of law, with the eyes of the world on them, and the conflicting stories they told were shocking, frightening, and yet pathetic.

The name of one was Alger Hiss, once an official in the State Department, a member of President Franklin Roosevelt's inner circle, the President's confidant at the Yalta Conference, one of the chief architects of the United Nations charter and the Secretary General of the United Nations organizational conference.

It would be difficult to find a more impeccable background than that of Hiss. He was a graduate of Johns Hopkins University and Harvard Law School, both with highest honors. He was on the board of the *Harvard Law Review*. He was chosen as a young man to be secretary to the renowned Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. Alger Hiss was urbane and flawless in dress. His bearing exuded sobriety, confidence, dedication and aplomb. Not a hair on his head was out of place. There was no ounce of flab on his body. One look was enough to assure anyone that Alger was the essence of the *crème de la crème*—the very best the elite eastern establishment could produce. Fortunately we were to have a young man of such quality to help guide the affairs of state. And to gild this pure white lily, Alger Hiss was an expert (if amateur) birdwatcher. He could talk with eloquence and enthusiasm about the rare prothonotary warbler, a shy creature with exquisite gold and yellow markings which was a sometime habitue of the swamps of Virginia. No one who really likes birds can intend ill for his fellowman.

The other man, Whittaker Chambers, was something else. He was fat and pudgy and wore hopelessly rumpled suits.

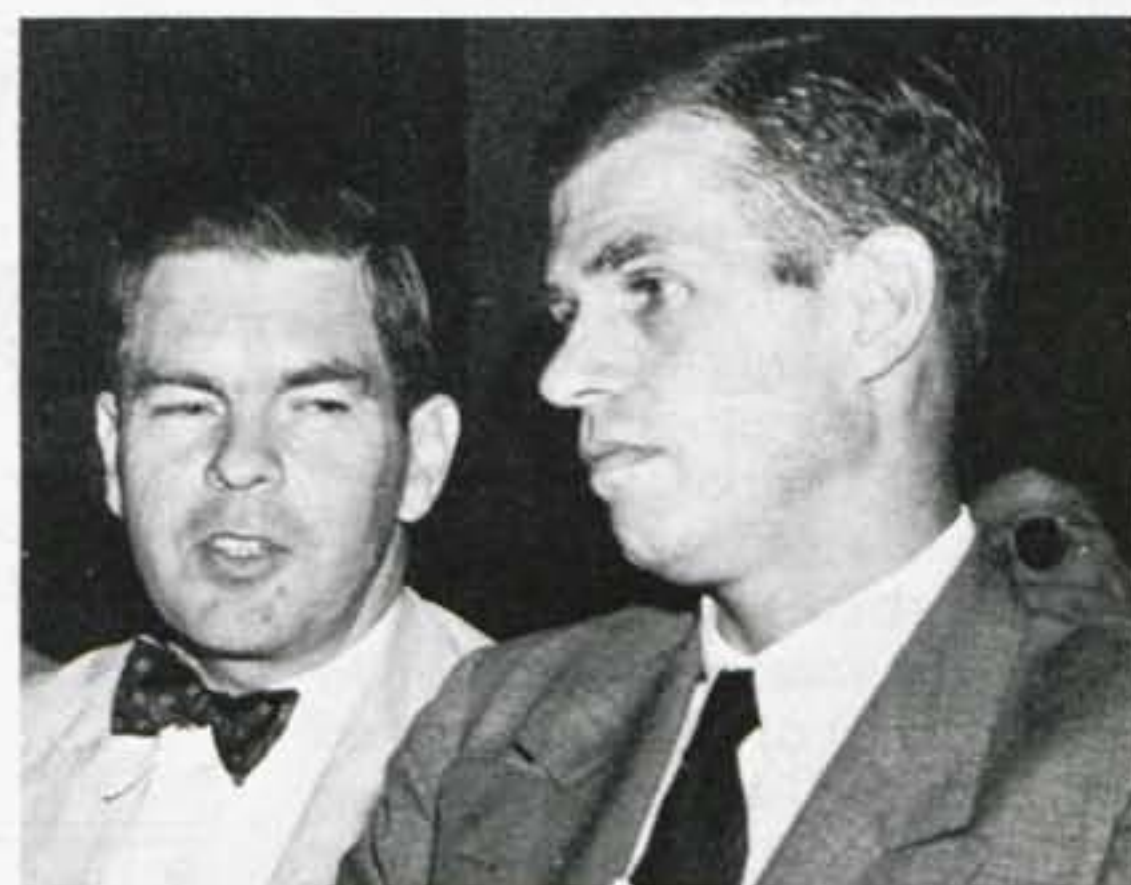


The bugaboo was everywhere. Here, the first witness is sworn at a House Un-American Activities Committee hearing dealing with Communist influence in Hollywood. Rep. Richard M. Nixon sits to Rep. J. Parnell Thomas's left. Left of center, the author, a Post photographer readies his Speed Graphic.



Whittaker Chambers produced sixty-five documents that had been filched from the State Department. This one was dated February 15, 1938.

(Left) Alger Hiss today. He has outlived many of his opponents. (Below) Hiss with his lawyer William L. Marbury at the time of the trial.



Squeaky Fromme would have been jealous or at least ecstatic about his background. As a young disenchanted intellectual he had broken with society in the 1920's. He had been expelled from college and lied to get back in. He had lived in hovels, consorted with prostitutes, gone for years dirty and unwashed without owning a suit. He had adopted at least a half dozen aliases. He had owned a falsified passport using the stolen name of a baby deceased at birth. He had been an editor of the *Daily Worker*. He had filled out scores of fraudulent government papers. In the 1920's he had been a card-carrying communist. In the 1930's he joined the communist underground, an arm of the Soviet intelligence network. In this role he scurried with secrets from government functionaries in Washington to his contacts in New York. Then, said Chambers (and we have no reason to doubt), he broke with the party, hid for a while and joined the staff of *Time* magazine. *Time* either liked or forgave him his credentials; within a scant nine years he was a senior editor with a salary of \$30,000 (more than that of a U. S.

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The Witness himself, Whittaker Chambers, testifies. Funny, straightforward, he made his crimes against the state seem half those of Hiss.

Pumpkin

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Senator at the time). Such a man was Whittaker Chambers. He had graduated from the unkempt, unwashed to the ruffled suit. He spoke the truth, no doubt, when he candidly told of the lies he had lived and the lies he had formerly told. A pesky question kept coming up, though; was he telling the truth when he said he had stopped lying?

Chambers was also a clever man. One of the cleverest things he did was to save some of the stolen government papers he was supposed to deliver to New York. Some of them, it was proved beyond a doubt, were typed on a typewriter owned, or once owned, by the impeccable Alger Hiss.

In 1948 the House Committee on Un-American Activities found Whittaker Chambers and asked him to testify. He wasn't hard to find. Chambers had been trying to tell his story for some time. He had repeatedly approached the State Department about it. Chambers testified because he felt it was his duty. He offered a list of names of other Communist Party members who were part of this espionage ring. At the end of the list was the name of Alger Hiss.

Chambers claimed that Hiss in the late 1930's had smuggled documents out of the State Department and given them to Chambers. Hiss emphatically denied this and said he had never known a man named Whittaker Chambers.

Hiss was eventually convicted of perjury. He had denied that he was a member of the spy ring controlled by Chambers. But it was certainly difficult to imagine how he could have claimed that he never knew Chambers when ensconced in the Hiss home was an expensive Oriental rug which Chambers had bought for Mr. Alger Hiss as a gift with communist money. One thing was clear: Chambers could prove he had bought the rug and now Hiss had it. And then there was that typewriter. Secret documents had been typed on it which Sumner Welles, an Under Secretary of State of earlier times, testified were highly secret and comprised the State Depart-

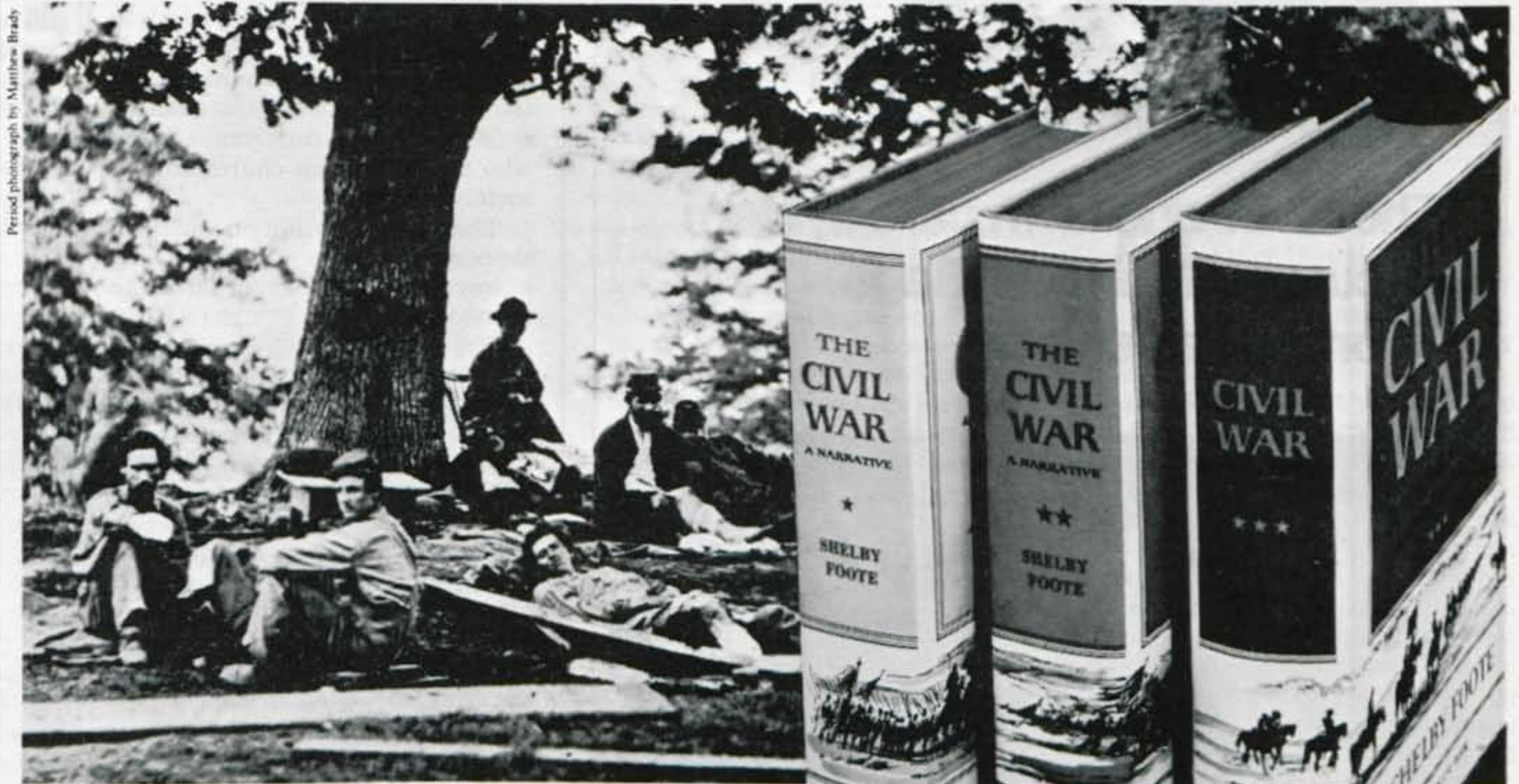
ment's codes. These documents had come into the hands of Chambers, an admitted communist spy. Priscilla Hiss had used that same typewriter for some of her personal correspondence, which was also turned in as evidence.

Alger Hiss could not be convicted in 1948 for espionage committed in 1937; the statute of limitations had run out. But the House Committee on Un-American Activities could question him. Indeed he requested them to, so he could rebut Cham-

bers. Inexorably events marched forward. Hiss brought libel suit against Chambers. The FBI investigated. Then a grand jury indicted Hiss for perjury. Somewhere Hiss had sworn he had not delivered documents to

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100 years later, the wounds still bleed.



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He left the sentence unfinished, seeming thus to have put the war behind him; for he smiled as he spoke his last words... "Let us cross the river," he said, "and rest under the shade of the trees."

—Volume II, Fredericksburg to Meridian.

And here a nameless foot soldier defies an order, during the Confederate retreat from Nashville:

"You go to hell—I've been there," the man replied, and kept on trudging southward in the rain. None among them had any way of knowing that the war's last great battle had been fought. All they knew was they wanted no more of it...

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Chambers or seen him after 1937. There was strong evidence to the contrary. Thus, after two trials (the first with a hung jury) Hiss stood convicted of perjury.

To the public Hiss was tried not for perjury but for espionage. Indeed any sensible man reading the case today would come to the same conclusion. Hiss was in effect tried and convicted in 1949 for a crime committed circa 1937. The sympathies of enlightened (and naive) Americans toward the Soviet Union had changed thrice from 1938 to 1949; once when Hitler and Stalin had ruthlessly joined hands to rape Poland, once again when Hitler attacked Russia, and finally when in postwar years the iron curtain fell across the face of Europe. Hiss was, for practical purposes, convicted for a 1937 deed by a jury and American public with 1949 values. Thus Hiss was tried and convicted for doing something in 1937 which his accuser Chambers freely and cheerfully admitted he too had done. In truth the two opposites had worked in apparent concert.

The conflict began in committee hearing rooms and federal court-houses. It would dominate the newspapers for two years, sandwiched between the Berlin Airlift and the Korean War. It was more than a long barrage of testimony. It was the meeting of the ideology of the gloomy Thirties and postwar American moralism. It wasn't just Alger Hiss on trial; according to British journalist Alistair Cooke, it was "a generation on trial."

This writer was a working news photographer during the drawn-out investigation involving both Chambers and Hiss. The hearings were major news events month after month. I covered most of these and even trod in the pumpkin field after that dramatic event was disclosed. So, here is a very brief summary of this historical spy case.

While a student at Columbia University in 1925, Chambers became a communist. "It was shortly after the war," he said later. "Germany was in chaos, and partly occupied; northern France and parts of Belgium were smashed to pieces. It seemed to me that a crisis had been reached in Western civilization which the society was not able to solve by the usual means. I then began to look around for the unusual means. I first studied British Fabian socialism, but rejected it as unworkable in practice. I came to the writings of Marx and Lenin. They seemed to me to explain the nature of the crisis and what to do about it."

Many other Americans were turning to communism in the face of the crises of the late Twenties and early Thirties. But it wasn't until Chambers had been a member of the Communist Party for seven years that he discovered the party maintained a variety of hidden, conspiratorial organizations called, collectively,

the Underground or the Apparatus.

Chambers learned of the Underground in 1932, when he was asked to join. Before this time, he had used his abilities as a writer and an editor of *The Daily Worker*, the party's official publication. Now he spent his time in a world of microfilm and invisible ink. There were mysterious rendezvous in restaurants and movie theaters. Soon Chambers realized he was not working for the American Communist Party anymore; he was actually in the employ of the Soviet Underground and the Comintern. He was in fact an agent for a foreign country.

In 1934, Chambers was transferred to Washington, D.C. and was assigned to the "Ware Group," one of the most successful espionage forces in American history. One of the leaders of that group, according to Chambers, was Alger Hiss.

Chambers met Hiss in his first days in Washington. Chambers was known simply by the alias "Carl." The two men became friends, and when Chambers set up his outpost in the top half of the Women's Christian Temperance Union Building in Baltimore, Hiss and his wife Priscilla were frequent visitors. When the Hisses moved from one house to another, the Chamberses accepted Hiss's offer and occupied their old apartment until the lease ran out. The relationship was both a professional one—the espionage matters

between Hiss and "Carl"—and a personal one—the mutual affection of the Hiss and Chambers families.

When Hiss was appointed to a post in the State Department by the Assistant Secretary of State, he began to work even more closely with Chambers. Hiss nightly obtained confidential government documents which he either retyped or gave to Chambers to be photographed. Chambers, in turn, handed most of the typed copies and photocopies over to his superiors in the Underground.

In 1938, Chambers broke with communism. He deserted his party simply by refusing to keep an appointment with General Bykov, a Russian who had come to America to oversee the espionage operations. Chambers bought a gun and secretly moved his family to an obscure location. After a short time Chambers mustered up his courage and came out of hiding, living and working under his own name. "I left the Communist Party to fight it," he wrote.

Though Chambers began "fighting it" almost immediately after leaving the party, it wasn't until 1948 that people began to listen to him. By that time, they were eager.

On August 3, 1948, Chambers testified under subpoena before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Chambers had decided, though, to tell the committee only of his former associates' membership

in the Communist Party, leaving out the details of the espionage operation. One of the men he named was Alger Hiss.

When Hiss was called to testify before the committee in executive session, he denied all of Chambers's allegations and denied that he'd ever known anyone by that name.

Hiss, who had been unable to identify Chambers from photographs, finally recognized Chambers as George Crosley, a free-lance writer. He still denied all of Chambers's charges and when Chambers repeated those charges on a network broadcast of "Meet the Press," Hiss filed suit.

Chambers now went further than just stating that Hiss was a communist. He now charged that Hiss had been engaged in espionage operations, for a considerable period of time.

Hiss had steadfastly maintained that he never knew "a man called Whittaker Chambers." It was not until Hiss had sued Chambers for libel that the famous "Pumpkin Papers" came to light, and Hiss was finally trapped. Like many other journalistic labels the "Pumpkin Papers" included more than what was inside the pumpkin. Actually two rolls of exposed film and one roll of blank film were hidden in the pumpkin by Chambers, who feared communist agents might get them. The total papers included the film which consisted of microfilm copies of State Department documents, official records typed on the Woodstock typewriter owned by Hiss and a few other duplicates of governmental records, many in Hiss's own handwriting. Hiss had given these to Chambers, who should have passed them along to his Soviet agents—Chambers had hedged his bet and secreted some of the material away for protection.

I was not around, of course, when Benedict Arnold was doing his dirty work for the British, but I well recall he is still the most famous of American spies. What the history books will say about the Chambers-Hiss case remains to be seen. McCarthyism and overzealous congressional investigations of the era will get a big play. The fact that irrefutable evidence shows there was a time when an espionage ring directed by a foreign power flourished in America will do well to rate a footnote in history. It was a famous case twenty-five years ago.

Many prominent political figures were involved. Young Representative Richard Nixon (Republican, California) led the battle against Hiss from his post on the House Un-American Activities Committee. President Harry Truman called the whole thing a "red herring." The effort to pin down Hiss as a spy was a major news story month after month. However, with newspapers such as the *Washington Post* supporting Hiss, many people were not quite

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The Perfect Squelch

Soon after the spring term began, the new young teacher realized that the principal had unloaded the school's most unruly problem children on her. Being new, she hesitated to complain.

Then came the day when the principal smugly informed several important visitors to the school that she had some of the nicest pupils there—"all fine, normal youngsters."

"Is that so?" one of the visitors casually asked the teacher.

"Well, not quite," she replied with a smile. "Two are abnormal—they have good manners."

Lloyd E. Graham

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sure whether it was Hiss or Chambers who was the culprit. The facts were simple; both were culprits. One had cheerfully confessed and implicated the other. The statute of limitations had run out for both for the crime of espionage.

Through long hearings, Hiss proved to be a brilliantly slippery witness. He was well spoken and acted properly indignant when accused. He received generally favorable press as well as the strong endorsement of Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who announced, "I do not intend to turn my back on Alger Hiss." Add to this Truman's "red herring" remark and very unusual appearances of Supreme Court Associate Justices Felix Frankfurter and Stanley Reed who were Hiss's character witnesses, and Hiss became in the minds of many a man with credentials beyond reproach. At times, the tables seemed turned against Chambers, what with all the notables and influential members of the press siding with Hiss. Eventually convicted, Hiss was sentenced to five years in prison.

Whittaker Chambers had resigned from his post as Senior Editor of *Time* during the hearings and trials. In 1952 he published his autobiography, *Witness* (it was serialized in the *Post*). He died in 1961.

Alger Hiss served forty-four months of his five-year term, and since has held a number of jobs (including that of a clerk in a New York stationery shop).

It was the persistence of the House Un-American Activities Committee, the mistake Hiss himself made in suing Chambers for libel, and the evidence of the "Pumpkin Papers" which finally led to the conviction of Mr. Hiss by the New York Federal Court jury.

Now, the frail seventy-year-old man has been readmitted to the Massachusetts bar so that he can practice law in that state. Years ago, although Congress had passed a special law to prevent his getting a pension for his eleven years at the State Department, he won his pension remuneration by a court order. Last fall, Hiss appeared at the Washington Press Club and reported he was studying old FBI files searching for evidence which might lead to his complete vindication.

The trial, those many years ago, is linked to the present not only by the rising tide of concern over espionage activities, but also by the fact that the Hiss-Chambers affair, for the first time, dramatized the power of television as a stage for national events. Television fulfilled its role as the electronic reporter, developing a new kind of history—the history of immediacy. But the photographs taken at the scene also have their place on the record. Thanks to them, the years roll back and time stands still, and the strange case of the Pumpkin Papers comes center stage once again. ☐

Olympics

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red track with the white line. A hundred-and-odd thousand people crowded into the stands. And as my eyes looked upward, I noticed the flags of every nation represented there at the Olympic Games underneath that German blue sky. Now, my attention was diverted from that beautiful picture, because the whistle had been blown and we were to assemble around the starter to receive our final instructions for this historic event. After our instructions had been given every man went to his mark and adjusted hands and feet. Every muscle in his body was strained. And suddenly the gun went off. The athletes ran neck and neck for some yards, but our Ralph Metcalfe of Marquette University led the field at the fifty-yard mark. From then, the seventy to the ninety, Ralph and

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Patrick Ryan

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good parent's duty to encourage his child's creative endeavor."

"Then let Dr. Spock eat your Bloomsbury butterfly buns. Mr. Gayelord Hauser won't let me touch rich, starchy food."

"These aren't rich. I forgot the butter again. Be a normal father for once. Eat one of my buns!"

"And don't you shout at me. I don't want one of your blasted buns!"

"Mother!" she yells to summon reinforcements. "He's started swearing at my Bloomsbury butterfly buns. How am I ever going to pass my exams if my own family won't eat a thing I cook for them?"

At which point, tearful bawling sets in and she hefts her concrete butterflies so threateningly that I become fearful that further refusal may send me after St. Stephen into martyrdom by stoning. So I bow to the inedible and bite into a Bloomsbury butterfly bun. The tap of her tears turns off and sunshine takes over.

"Do you like it?"

"Smashing," I reply, referring to its effect on my teeth, and pouching most of the provender in either cheek like a prudent hamster.

"Then have another. I've got plenty."

Write on your doors the saying wise and old,
"Be bold!" and everywhere—
"Be bold;
Be not too bold!" Yet better
the excess
Than the defect;
better the more than less;
Better like Hector
in the field to die.
Than like a perfumed
Paris turn and fly.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Outflanked, I meekly take another cake and crunch it down to esophagus size, and my stomach greets the gift with duodenal tomahawks and intestinal earthquakes. My gastric acid pumps had to work at such unprecedented pressure to dissolve those buns that, when next I visited the doctor, he pronounced that I had so much acid in my abdomen that if he could only get a couple of electrodes down there, I could have permanently illuminated eyeballs. I didn't fancy such optical novelty so I gave my daughter a handful of silver to give up cookery classes and take up dressmaking instead, thus releasing my digestion from purgatory and ensuring that in the future her mother would be driven crazy every week coping with butchered patterns and corrugated hems. ☐



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