

**GUIDE TO THE
MICROFILM EDITION
OF THE**

**FBI FILE ON
ALGER HISS
AND
WHITTAKER CHAMBERS**

A Microfilm Publication by

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Publisher's Note

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Biographical Essays

Alger Hiss was born on November 11, 1904, in Baltimore, Maryland. After graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Johns Hopkins University in 1926, he attended Harvard Law School, where he made the law review and came under the wing of Felix Frankfurter, later a distinguished Supreme Court justice. Hiss crowned his law school career in 1929 by winning a clerkship to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes on the Supreme Court, considered the most prestigious honor that a law student could achieve. After a year under Holmes's tutelage and after practicing briefly in Boston and New York, Hiss joined the Roosevelt administration in 1933. He worked first for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) and then for the Nye Committee investigating the munitions industry. In 1935, Hiss joined the Solicitor General's Office to help defend the constitutionality of the AAA before the Supreme Court. When Francis B. Sayre, one of his Harvard professors, became an assistant secretary of state in September 1936, Hiss became his assistant. He remained at the State Department until 1947, when he was eased out over growing concerns about his loyalty. Hiss died on November 15, 1996, at the age of 92.

The controversial case of Alger Hiss, a former high government official convicted in 1950 of perjury in connection with charges that he had been a member of a Communist spy ring while serving in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, was a watershed event in developing anti-Communist liberalism in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The case shattered any illusions remaining from the 1930s that, whatever their differences, communism and liberalism were fundamentally on the same side of the political struggle. Hiss's mainstream postwar American liberalism made the transition to anti-Communist internationalism, where it remained until the Vietnam years. Some two weeks after Hiss's conviction, Senator Joseph R. McCarthy made his celebrated charge that 205 Communists were working in the State Department and that the Harry S. Truman administration was tolerating it, thus ushering in what was later called the McCarthy era.

Whittaker Chambers was born Jay Vivian Chambers on April 1, 1901, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was raised in Lynbrook, Long Island, in a troubled, lower middle-class family. His parents' marriage was not a happy one, and his father, a commercial illustrator, temporarily abandoned the family for his homosexual lover. After an unsuccessful one-day matriculation at Williams College, Chambers enrolled at Columbia University in 1920. There his friends included Lionel Trilling, later an important literary critic, and Meyer Schapiro, who became a leading art historian. Though considered brilliant, Chambers was an indifferent student. In 1923 he created a stir when he published a blasphemous play in a student newspaper. Columbia suspended him for a year. Chambers returned for less than a semester before dropping out for good, thus ending his formal education until the last two years of his life, when he studied science and Greek at a Maryland community college.

In 1925, Chambers joined the Communist Party until April 1938 when he defected and went into hiding. The following April he resurfaced, landing a job at *Time* magazine as a book reviewer and eventually being promoted to foreign news editor in 1943. He made his political debut in national politics on August 3, 1948, when he

appeared before the House un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which was investigating the issue of Communists within the federal government. Chambers died on July 9, 1961, in Westminster, Maryland.

More than forty years after his death, Whittaker Chambers remains one of the Cold War's most controversial characters. For Americans who recognize his name, the enduring source of Chambers's notoriety is the role that he played in the unmasking of Alger Hiss, a former State Department official convicted in 1950 of perjury in connection with charges that he had been part of a Communist spy ring operating within the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. Less well known is the important role that Chambers played in the 1950s in attempting to move the American conservative movement more into the political mainstream. Chambers, by then a dedicated anti-Communist, drew upon his experience in the twilight world of American communism in the 1920s and 1930s to impel conservatism to offer America a realistic politics without sacrificing its principles.

Chambers died on July 9, 1961, in Westminster, Maryland.

Sources: See "Alger Hiss: American Official Implicated as a Spy for the Soviet Union," *The Cold War, 1945-1991*. 3 vols. Edited by Benjamin Frankel. Gale Research, 1992. Reproduced in Biography Resource Center, Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005; and "Whittaker Chambers, American Journalist: Witness in the Alger Hiss Spy Case," *The Cold War, 1945-1991*. 3 vols. Edited by Benjamin Frankel. Gale Research, 1992. Reproduced in Biography Resource Center, Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005.

Introduction

When Whittaker Chambers declared that Alger Hiss, then president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, had been among the members in Chambers's Communist spy ring, that statement began one of the Cold War's great controversies, for Hiss promptly denied even knowing Chambers. He later admitted that he had known Chambers under a different name.

The case attracted national headlines, and Chambers was soon testifying before the House un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), a New York grand jury, and attorneys for Hiss, who had sued him for libel. Much of the case's enduring controversy stems from Chambers's incomplete and misleading testimony to those bodies. Chambers apparently regarded Hiss as a former close friend and merely wanted him to admit to having been part of the Communist circle. Consequently, Chambers denied that the group had engaged in espionage.

By late fall of 1948, however, in the face of Hiss's adamant refusal to admit to anything more than knowing Chambers as a journalist named George Crossley, Chambers began supplying evidence that the ring had indeed engaged in spying against the United States. He turned over to authorities copies of State Department documents, including handwritten summaries, which he claimed that he had obtained from Hiss. Those documents had been Chambers's insurance against a possible Communist Party assassination. He confided that he had kept microfilm copies hidden in hollowed pumpkins in a field on his Maryland farm. These documents became known as the "pumpkin papers," and Richard M. Nixon, then head of a subcommittee to investigate Chambers, took possession of the papers to keep them from the Truman administration.

Partisans of Hiss have focused on Chambers's perjury as evidence that his entire case was fabricated. The grand jury, however, chose to believe Chambers. On the basis of the State Department papers, it indicted Hiss on two counts of perjury, the first for lying that he had not turned over documents to Chambers, and the second for lying that he had not seen Chambers after January 1937. The implied charge was treason. On January 27, 1951, after a first trial ended with a hung jury, Hiss was found guilty on both counts.

The Hiss case remains controversial. Hiss consistently asserted his innocence and, as late as 1983, he was trying unsuccessfully to convince the U.S. Supreme Court to grant him a new trial. Much of the controversy focuses on the characters of Hiss and Chambers. Hiss's mannered career seemed an unending series of triumphs through the upper reaches of the State Department bureaucracy, including serving as President Roosevelt's adviser at the Yalta Conference in 1945. By contrast, Chambers was a confessed perjurer who, when he was not admittedly spying on his country, was experiencing one minor and embarrassing setback after another. But in the years after Hiss's conviction, none of the new evidence that has come to light, especially from FBI files, has cast any doubt on Chambers's testimony.

Source: "Whittaker Chambers, American Journalist: Witness in the Alger Hiss Spy Case," *The Cold War, 1945-1991*. 3 vols. Edited by Benjamin Frankel. Gale Research, 1992. Reproduced in Biography Resource Center, Farmington, Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005.

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**FBI FILE ON
ALGER HISS/WHITTAKER CHAMBERS**



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| 25 | | File No.: 65-14920 (<i>contd.</i>) |
| | 0001 | Bulky Exhibits, Part 7 |
| | 0314 | New York Field Office Release |
| | 0716 | New York Field Office "Sees" |
| | | File No.: 65-14920, Bulky Additional Release |
| | 0892 | Part 1 |
| | 1064 | Part 2 |
| | 1133 | Part 3 |
| | 1230 | Part 4 |
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| | 1462 | Volume 1, Serials 1-165 |
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| 0001 | | Volume 2, Serials 166-285 |
| 0026 | | Volume 3, Serials 286-394 |
| 0049 | | Volumes 4 and 5, Serials 395-540 |
| 0072 | | Volume 6, Serials 541-561 |
| 0079 | | Volume 7, Serials 562-654 |
| 0106 | | Volumes 8 and 9, Serials 655-746 |
| 0155 | | Volume 10, Serials 747-836 |
| 0228 | | Volume 11, Serials 837-851 |
| 0249 | | Hiss: See References |
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| | 0001 | Chambers: See References |
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| | 0701 | Chambers: See References |
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| | 0952 | Supplemental Releases |
| | 0982 | File No.: 74-1333, WFO Additional Release |
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| | | File No.: 74-94 |
| | 1188 | Volumes 1-11, Serials 1-1275 |
| 32 | | File No.: 74-94 (<i>contd.</i>) |
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