

New York University, Center for the United States and the Cold War
Alger Hiss and History, Inaugural Conference, April 5, 2007
David Greenberg, (Rutgers University)
“Alger Hiss and Richard Nixon”

Thank you all. As a scholar of Richard Nixon, I feel compelled to remark – that I feel a little bit like George McGovern in 1972, who received the Democratic presidential nomination at three in the morning, which as somebody remarked was primetime -- in Guam. So thank you for bearing with me as the last speaker and you’ve been through a long, but I hope very interesting and rewarding day. I’m going to talk today about Richard Nixon and Alger Hiss who barely knew each other and yet led intertwined and in some ways parallel lives.

Both men were quite unknown to the general public until 1948, when Nixon led the House Un-American Activities Committee’s inquiry into Hiss’s communist past, and that episode as we know led Hiss down a corridor of darkness: exposure of his secret past, charges of espionage, a perjury conviction, prison time, and a lifelong war to salvage his reputation. For Nixon, in contrast, the encounter opened the door to a bright path, to a Senate seat, the vice presidency, and eventually the presidency, but of course, after Watergate, he too lived out his days fighting to rehabilitate his name in the history books.

I want to talk today about three points of intersection between Nixon and Hiss. First, their shared concern with image and reputation. Second, their risky willingness to cover up past deeds at great cost, and finally, the important place that both men continued to play in the American imagination, and I’m going to suggest that these first two common traits, the regard for reputation and the willingness to cover up help account for the third shared quality, their enduring role as symbols in Cold War America.

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First, the question of reputation. Most historians these days agree that Hiss lied about his past in the Communist Party. But it's Nixon's name, not Hiss's, that stands for villainy throughout our political universe. And it's not just because of Watergate. Nixon hatred predated his term as President. Even when he held the then-inconsequential office of vice president -- mere standby equipment -- he had as the journalist Stewart Alsop wrote at the time, “probably more enemies than any other American.” Nixon once said that after 1948, “my name, my reputation, and my career,” became tied up with his aggressive pursuit of Hiss. And he also insisted that the animus towards him, this pervasive Nixon hatred, stemmed from his lead role in the pursuit. But that judgement was actually mistaken, and it reflects Nixon's tendency towards self-pitying, self-justification. In fact, Nixon-hating didn't really emerge as a national phenomenon until his smearing of Helen Gahagan Douglas as “The pink lady” in his 1950 Senate race, or even perhaps until his infamous fund scandal and Checkers Speech of 1952.

As it turns out, during the Hiss Case liberal opinion was very much divided. Many liberals were skeptical of Hiss's claims. Arthur Schlesinger, James Wechsler, Irving Howe, and William Shannon, all prominent liberals, all thought Hiss was guilty. Wechsler actually received a thank-you note from Richard Nixon for a piece he wrote in defense of Whittaker Chambers, and William Shannon in a 1955 profile of Nixon for the then-liberal New York Post wrote, “the prestige of his participation in the unmasking of Alger Hiss is untarnished and not in dispute, but he cannot live on that forever.”

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Even periodicals such as *The Nation* and the *Washington Post* that had originally believed Hiss over Chambers, changed their tune after the disclosure of the Pumpkin Papers. “It is now apparent that this politics-ridden committee has broken one of the most sensational spy cases in American history,” wrote *The Nation*.

Dwight Eisenhower said he chose Nixon as vice president partly because he liked the way Nixon had pursued Hiss. “The thing that impressed me most,” he told Nixon, “was that you not only got Hiss but you got him fairly.” But because Nixon chose to remember himself as “unfairly maligned” during the Hiss Case rather than generally celebrated as in fact he was, this was a case then where Nixon was right and his critics were wrong, unlike Douglas or other episodes, Nixon could tell himself that the liberals’ dislike of him was totally groundless.

Now it is true, of course, that the Hiss Case crystallized the public image of Nixon as a fervent crusader against communists, and once Nixon did materialize as the liberals’ *bête noire* in the 1950’s, his critics then went back and retrospectively traced the leitmotif in his career of dishonest red-baiting. So it wasn’t something they saw in Nixon at the time in 1948. It was only retrospectively that they came back to create this image of him.

In the years that followed, as McCarthy-style anti-communism fell into increasing disrepute, Nixon’s past conduct including in his 1946 congressional race against Jerry Voorhees, the Hiss Case, the Douglas campaign and other episodes of the Red Scare years came to be seen as forming a pattern of shameful behavior. By the end of the 1950’s, Nixon’s reputation for indiscriminately charging rivals with being red or pink had come to plague him. Indeed this

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image of the immature demagogue became the foil for the so-called new Nixon that he saw to create for himself as he planned his presidential run of 1960. For the rest of his career, Nixon would be torn between wanting to project the persona of a dignified statesman and wanting to give into his instinct for the jugular.

Now if Nixon’s reputation evolved partly in response to how society viewed his anti-communism, popular judgements of Hiss vary partly in response to views of Nixon. Hiss it turns out enjoyed his most favorable spells of attention precisely when Nixon’s standing was lowest. For example, after Nixon lost his 1962 race for Governor of California, ABC News interviewed Hiss for its half-hour news special entitled, “The Political Obituary of Richard Nixon,” and on the show Hiss said, quite accurately, that Nixon was “motivated by ambition, by personal self-serving.”

Later during the time of Watergate and the exposure of lawlessness at J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI, Hiss even became something of a hero to a younger left-leaning generation that had come to view the McCarthyite tactics of the 1950’s as synonymous with all anti-communism. As Edward White has written, the scenario of Nixon having conspired with Chambers and the FBI to frame Hiss was, “No more implausible in post-Watergate America than the Nixon White House enlisting the FBI in persecutions of its political opponents.” In short, Hiss was admired for having been victimized. He had chosen to seek vindication in what he himself called, in the title of his memoir, “The Court of Public Opinion,” and he benefited from the evolving views of the Red Scare, of the Cold War, and of Richard Nixon.

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He himself said, “Mr. Nixon is sort of a press agent for me” -- something he said to Tony Hiss. “I now have my chance to state my own position simply because of the fact that Nixon was one of my initial tormenters.”

Now, in addition to Hiss’s and Nixon’s shared concern with reputation, was their common impulse to cover up. The life of a communist spy is inherently a double life, divided between public and private personae. Nixon likewise was always covering up. His feelings, his secret diplomacy, and of course, his illegal political activities. In addition, both men undertook their cover-ups knowing the potential risks. Hiss’s concern with image led him to seek to cover up his communist activities, even to the point of committing perjury. As commentators have noted, this was a tragic mistake. If he had chosen a more truthful strategy of disclosure, he wouldn’t have gone to jail, since the statute of limitations on espionage had expired by the time of Whittaker Chambers’s appearance before HUAC.

It’s fine for all of us to fault the millions of Americans who indulged in the anti-communist mania of the early Cold War years, for not appreciating the difference between being a communist and compromising the nation’s security, but Hiss also played a role in his own verdict. Sending him to jail for perjury was hardly necessary, but his own initiation of the cover-up is what doomed him.

And so as fate would have it, it was from the Hiss Case that Nixon learned the lesson as he himself said so often, “It isn’t the crime, it’s the cover-up.” On his secret White House tapes, those wonderful documents that reveal the gulf between the public and the private Nixons, the

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President can often be heard making this statement and similar ones, such as, “If you cover up, you’re going to get caught,” as he told his aide, John Ehrlichman, just a month after the Watergate cover-up had begun.

Nixon professed to have taken this lesson from the Hiss Case to heart. As the Watergate scandal unraveled, he regularly instructed his aids to go back and read the chapter in his memoirs, “Six Crises,” about the Hiss Case. He reveled in recounting to his aids his own devious leaking of information to the press to force the Truman Justice Department which had initially been inclined not to prosecute Hiss to pursue criminal charges. But during Watergate, Nixon was unable to heed his own advice. As with Hiss, his cover-up turned out to be far more damaging than even the impeachable offenses they were designed to conceal. Did Nixon unconsciously identify with Hiss? In “Six Crises,” Nixon had written of the, “letdown,” and the “shock and sadness” he felt on seeing Alger Hiss exposed.

“I imagined myself in his place. It is not a pleasant picture to see a whole brilliant career destroyed before your eyes. I realized that Hiss stood before us completely unmasked.” Think about applying those words to Nixon after Watergate.

Now finally, to pull these strands together. In their concern with surface or public images and their concealment of personal secrets, Hiss and Nixon embody an anxiety that I consider to be central to American postwar politics. It’s an almost existential worry that politics had changed somehow from representative government to what might be called representational government. Leadership by men who proffered not honest words and ideas to match the needs

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of their constituents, but misleading and flickering images designed to hoodwink their constituents. There were two main reasons for this pervasive anxiety in mid-century America. One was the Cold War. The ideology of an existential struggle against a fearsome ideological enemy bent on global conquest taught Americans to accept and even welcome a degree of official deception as a necessary tool in winning the war for hearts and minds around the world.

The culture celebrated spies -- our spies at least -- and demonized those for the other side. It encouraged a deference to authority, a habit of not asking too many questions of leaders.

The second reason I think for the anxiety over surfaces and secrets was nothing less than the full flowering of mass society, a favorite subject in those years of critics such as David Riesman and William White and Erving Goffman and Daniel Boorstin. Face-to-face interactions seemed to be receding in importance next to impressions gleaned from mass media. This shift induced a worry that traditional values were eroding and that deep, solid, enduring sets of human attributes known as character were yielding to a more superficial, manipulable and evanescent group of traits called personality.

Public relations, television, and sophisticated methods of molding public opinion heightened this concern. In politics it was feared unprincipled operators could use new technologies to misrepresent themselves and deceive voters. Nixon, who was accused of being a practitioner of this craft, also shared the concern. And for Richard Nixon, Alger Hiss embodied this new type of soulless man. In his second memoir, “RN,” he called Hiss, “too clever by half.

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Hiss was,” he said, “too suave, too smooth, and too self-confident to be an entirely trustworthy witness.”

Nixon, of course, had ambivalent feelings towards such suavity. Part of him admired Hiss’s skill in presenting this false facade, and there was a perverse kind of integrity as if among gangsters in Hiss’s willingness not to crack. “The great thing about Hiss,” Nixon said on the tapes, “I’ve got to say this for Hiss, he never ratted on anybody else. Never, never, never. He never ratted.” And yet there was clearly also a deep hatred that Nixon felt for Hiss’s knowing, all-encompassing lies. “If the American people understood the real character of Alger Hiss,” Nixon said to Whittaker Chambers in 1948, “they would boil him in oil.”

Nixon was convinced that Hiss’s dapper, poised exterior concealed a furtive, shameful nature, and as we’ve just heard, he even believed and spread the baseless rumor that Hiss and Chambers had been lovers.

If to Richard Nixon, Alger Hiss was the soulless modern man, to liberals like for example Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., the epitome of this type was none other Richard Nixon. As Schlesinger wrote, “Nixon is in many respects a good example of mid-century man, obsessed with appearances rather than the reality of things, obsessed above all with his own appearance, his own image, seeking reassurance through winning but never knowing why he is so mad to win or what he will do with his victory. Issues for him are secondary and subordinate, to be maneuvered and manipulated. What matters is stance, not substance. What matters is a felt righteousness of motive, a sentence of humility on the lips, a look of dedication on the face.”

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(It's sad we lost Arthur Schlesinger -- who can write like that?) Schlesinger's description of Richard Nixon shouldn't be taken uncritically of course. It reflects as much on the historian's disdain for Nixon's petty strivings as it does on Nixon's character, and it certainly shortchanges certain real commitments that Nixon did hold, such as his belief in diplomacy in pursuit of peace. But it does beautifully capture a lot about Nixon's nature. Most importantly, it identifies the ease with which Richard Nixon's concern with image could slide into political opportunism and then into immorality.

Most Americans, most people, are capable of holding their ground on that slippery slope.

We can understand the obsession with image, with how we're perceived, with what others think of us that moved Nixon and Hiss, even if we don't possess it in quite the same measure that they did. And we recognize the necessity of opportunism in politics, which is the art of the possible, although we're quick to pounce when opportunism seems to shortchange principle. And we become indignant as soon as it bleeds into criminality. And so, Richard Nixon and Alger Hiss are not us. And yet, in a culture that vaunts the elusive quality of authenticity, of being true to oneself, these men's ready assumption of public guises reminds us I think of our own playing of roles, even perhaps of the mild deceptions in which we ritually partake.

The seemingly vast gulfs between the public and private Nixon and the public and private Hiss continue to trouble and fascinate us, I would suggest, not only because they imply that our

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political leaders aren't who they claim, but also because they tap into the nagging, gnawing anxiety that our own public selves aren't exactly the same as our own private selves either.

Thank you.

NASH: Thank you all for three wonderful papers. I let this go on, even though we promised ourselves we were going to discipline each other because I really just couldn't cut these short because they were such good papers, and as a result, I have a prepared comment which I will not be delivering. We'll call this session over and I'm going to ask Anthony Romero -- is Anthony in the room? -- Anthony is going to tell us what this all means, not the nine hours of papers and panels that we heard. Anthony Romero, Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union, is going to sort this all out and give it some meaning.

But before I turn over the podium to Anthony, I just want to say we have a reception at the Tamiment Library at 6:15, and in addition to wine, cheese, and other refreshments, we have an exhibit up on the Communist Party Archive that's gotten much more press than I ever imagined. So come look at the exhibit and enjoy some refreshments. Anthony?