

New York University, Center for the United States and the Cold War  
Alger Hiss and History, Inaugural Conference, April 5, 2007  
David Oshinsky, (University of Texas)

It was good. Thank you very much. It's a really interesting paper. It was about seventy-five pages, extremely informative, and given what John has said as well about the paucity of ALES material, to my mind at least, and I am no expert on this case, for all kinds of reasons those who know a lot more about this than I seem to have bowed out. So I'm the relief pitcher coming in, in the Sixth Inning here, but I do believe that ALES is the weakest link in the Hiss espionage chain. While it's true that Hiss is one of the very few suspects who meets several basic descriptions of ALES and his whereabouts at a certain time in 1945, the rest of what we know about ALES from the text of Cable 1822 is not a perfect match for Hiss, as several students of this case have noted.

The thesis of Kai and Svetlana is intriguing, but I will say it's not entirely new. The main clue, indeed the building block that holds up their thesis, that Hiss had left Mexico City well before the Gorsky cable of March 5<sup>th</sup>, was brought to light two years ago by David Lowenthal, the brother of John Lowenthal, on the History News Network. For another the possibility that Wilder Foote, not Hiss, could be ALES was discussed by historian Eduard Mark four years ago in an article appearing in the "Journal of Intelligence and National Security." At that time, Mark removed Foote as a suspect on the grounds that Foote had been a rural Vermont editor from 1931 until 1941, and therefore did not fit the description of someone who "worked continuously for Soviet intelligence since 1935," which was the cable description of ALES.

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What I'd like to do, just for a moment, is to play devil's advocate because I really think there's a lot of compelling evidence in this paper.

A couple of the bumps you're going to hit on the road are, first, it's clear I think that Gorsky should, and the other handlers, should have known that Hiss was in Washington, but I think it's a stretch to say that they must have known. I think there's a lot more digging to do before we can figure that out. The second thing, is that you talk about the cable of March 5th, and everything that Hiss did on the day of March 5th, and there's an assumption which you mention in your paper, that I think needs to be fleshed out, and is still somewhat tenuous, that the cable must have been sent on the evening of March 5th, not on the morning of March 5th, because if the cable had been sent on the morning of March 5th, then it's a much more plausible case that Hiss was not as visible as we might think.

Just let me talk, please. You'll have room.

You have to realize that Hiss had returned from Mexico to Washington on February 22nd, with a bad case of the flu which kept him on his back for the next few days. When he did get back to the State Department, Hiss was overwhelmed with details regarding invitations to the upcoming San Francisco conference, and I think what a number of people will probably say is that it's possible that Hiss was in Washington but essentially had not come back to his handlers. That he was simply too busy, and that this is what sparked both Gorsky's and the Soviet anxiety about the situation.

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The final point about Wilder Foote is I think the most problematic. I think the two of you do a terrific job in talking about Foote after he came to Washington in 1941. Indeed, from that time forward, Foote appears to fit the description of ALES at least as well as Hiss does, and that is fascinating. I think the larger problem, as Eduard Mark noted, in his earlier piece is the decade from 1931 to 1941. In fact, in the paper, for all your digging, you really do little more than portray Foote in these years as something of a leftwing dilettante who might easily have come into contact with a few of Vermont's reported seventy Communist Party members, and who traveled to places as foreign as New York City.

There's no evidence I can see that talks about Foote continually working in Soviet espionage or even being a Communist, and there's also sort of a revealing thing about ALES and Carl, which I'd like you to talk about at some point. There does appear in that cable to be a link in the 1930's between ALES and "Karl," and "Karl" was pretty much seen to be Whittaker Chambers. So if that is the case, there are going to be a lot of people who'll say that the description in the 1930's fits Alger Hiss a lot better than it does Mr. Foote.

All right, I just do want to make a couple of other points.

Victor was talking about consensus among historians. I'm one of the historians in that consensus. I come here from Texas and I somehow feel that I'm at the Alamo. I'm like Colonel Travis, surrounded here, but there are certain things I really do think should be put on the table for this conference. I don't think you'll agree with many of them, but it's my story and I'm

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sticking to it. The authors, as Kai mentioned, took no stand on the link between Alger Hiss and espionage in the 1930's. The charge is brought by Whittaker Chambers and eventually sent Hiss to jail. The ground is far less contested in the historical community with the vast majority of modern American historians today and particularly those specializing in domestic Cold War accepting Chambers's overall version of events.

From the Pumpkin Papers to the Woodstock typewriter, from the confessions of Soviet spy Noel Field in Hungary to the revelations of radical novelist Josephine Herbst in the United States, from the interrogation of Elizabeth Bentley to the testimony of Hedda Massing, these historians see evidence pointing overwhelmingly to Hiss being guilty as charged.

Most of them, and I include myself, also see the CPUSA, the American Communist Party, as an integral part of the Soviet espionage machine in the 1930's and during World War Two. The evidence to date from Venona and from Soviet archives paints a grim picture here. While it would be unfair and untrue to say that most members of the American Communist Party spied for the Soviet Union, in these years, it would not be unfair or untrue to say that many of those who did spy for the Soviet Union came from the ranks of the American Communist Party.

Does this mean that Richard Nixon and Senator Joe McCarthy and Pat McCarran and the other red hunters of the so-called McCarthy Era were correct in portraying the federal government as a haven for traitors? The answer is no, at least not in their hysterical descriptions.

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And I believe that the person who had the clearest fix on this is a political scientist named Earl Latham, who wrote a remarkable essay forty years ago titled, “The Communist Controversy in Washington,” which uncannily laid down the future terms of engagement. Without the benefit of Venona or Soviet archives, Latham wrote of both a communist problem and a communist issue. The communist problem as he saw it involved significant spy operations of the Soviet Union inside the federal government of the 1930’s and early 1940’s. We know much more today about the impressive size and scope of that spy operation as well as the key role of the CPUSA in providing many of the recruits. With virtually no federal security system in place, communists found it relatively simple to form cells in some of the federal government’s most sensitive places, the State Department, the Treasury Department, and the Manhattan Atomic Project in particular.

But Latham insisted with uncanny accuracy that the communist problem, meaning penetration of the federal government, including espionage, largely ended with the coming of the early Cold War and the collapse of the American Communist Party. As the crimes of Stalin became undeniable and the federal government began a major crackdown on the Communist Party and its leadership, a mass defection occurred within the ranks, denying the Soviets the loyalists they needed to support their once-thriving espionage cells.

The heyday of American communism was over, and in its wake came what Latham called the communist issue, the shrill, partisan, anti-New Deal, rightwing, largely Republican

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charges, that the Democratic administrations of FDR and Harry Truman were soft on communism and filled with traitors who worked overtime to help the Russians dominate the world.

The real enemy wasn't in Moscow, these zealots charged. The real enemy was in Washington, DC. As Latham noted, the allegations of the McCarthyites contained little of merit but lots of political dynamite. It's no coincidence that the two spectacular espionage trials of the early Cold War years involved spying that occurred in the 1930's, with Hiss, in the early 1940's with Julius Rosenberg. Indeed, by 1950 when McCarthy made his first charge about hundreds of communists and subversives currently shaping the policy of the State Department, the communist spy threat in the United States was all but over.

Today as we survey the human wreckage of the McCarthy years, we can well comprehend the damage done by two radical ideologies, one from the Far Right, the other from the Far Left. It would be shameful to excuse the evils of McCarthyism as a natural but exaggerated response to the dangers of domestic subversion, and it would be equally shameful to remove all blame for the Red Scare from the American Communist Party or to sanitize its willing role as an appendage to Stalinism, a role that included spying as a matter of duty and of pride. To do otherwise in either case is to cheat history, a sad and ultimately futile pursuit.

I was wondering Kai if you could respond to a couple of the points that were raised, and John as well. The points I raised about your paper.

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BIRD: Well, David, I think you've --

BIRD: I don't disagree in large measure with anything that you've said, and I think you have identified the areas in our paper which need further research. The Vermont tenure hiatus is curious. How could you do much spying from rural Vermont? But again my response would be, Well, we really don't know what ALES was doing for the Soviets. He may have -- this is just pure speculation -- he could have been -- a) ALES could have been not what we think of as an agent. He could have been a slightly-knowing or slightly-blind agent. He could have passed a little -- been a source and Gorsky could have claimed him, exaggerated his credentials. He could have been a part-time, sometime agent. He could have in 1927, 1928, when he went for a year, wanderjahr in Europe, the FBI documents -- actually the testimony that he makes in 1953 at his Civil Service Commission Loyalty Board hearing -- he admits that he was in Vienna with Joseph Barnes who was a leftwing classmate of his, a fellow editor at "The Harvard Crimson," and he says he and Barnes were in Vienna, but he made a point of saying that he was associating with Social Democrats, who were anti-communist.

Vienna and London in the late 1920's were venues where the Comintern and its agents were active. Perhaps, he made a contact with a romantic young left-winger at the time and maintained this off and on relationship in the 1930's.

He clearly was a political animal. He was very smart. He was an internationalist. I think you should read his personal correspondence from the late 1940's and early 1950's. He turns out

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to have been a good friend of Alger Hiss's, and he believed in him staunchly, publicly -- and vocally said in public that he believed in Hiss's innocence. He was an internationalist who strongly believed in the mission of the United Nations. He thought of himself as an international civil servant. He's a very complex character.

OSHINSKY: Kai, we know about the charge -- we know how the Hiss family feels about the charges against Alger Hiss. How does the Foote family feel about what you're doing with Mr. Foote?

BIRD: Very good question. I contacted the Foote family. There's a grandson and the son is still living, he's in his seventies.

The son had a promising career initially in the Air Force, but he tells me that at one point in the early 1950's, his superior officer in the Air Force took him aside and said, "Your career is not going anywhere." And when asked why, he said, "Well, it's your father." And so he quit the Air Force and that avenue was blocked. The family is clearly pained by this. When I finally disclosed the results of our basically eighteen-month investigation in which they had been forthcoming in e-mails and agreed to answer specific questions and they also very graciously copied some of the papers of their grandfather from their attic, and I informed them of the details of our conclusions, and the son e-mailed me, "I am confident that the actions of my father will ultimately be proven to be above reproach."

PRADOS: Let me just make a couple of points here.

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BIRD: Yes.

PRADOS: One thing, just to add to your analysis about the communist problem and the communist threat, I wonder about dating it, though, you know? It seems to me that a lot of momentum went out of CPUSA with the Hitler-Stalin Pact. So maybe the disintegrative process started a lot sooner. The other comment I want to make is about this Wilder business. I also remember that Eduard Mark's paper of a few years ago, and the thing that struck me then was, well, you know, why is it so understandable? In trade craft and Soviet espionage trade craft in particular, it's very common to recruit someone, a so-called sleeper, and let them sleep for a long time until they come to a position of influence or access.

BIRD: And particularly a newspaperman.

PRADOS: And here was the other one. You know, wait a second. I mean "agent of influence?" I mean that was supposed to be one of the big things that they were really into, a person in the press who could be a so-called "agent of influence?" Prime target for recruitment, and here on the one hand people are saying -- this is the analysts now -- on the one hand Soviets recruit these agents of influence all the time, agency of influence is a big Soviet threat. On the other hand, this analyst is saying, "Oh, well, this person couldn't be a Russian spy because he was only a journalist and not working for the U.S. government."

BIRD: Right.

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PRADOS: There was a total disconnect in that argument which was what turned me off about that paper.

OSHINSKY: Thank you. I guess we can go to questions. Does anyone want to come up and ask a question? We're running -- I think we ran out of time ten minutes ago, actually, but I guess we're all willing to stay for a couple of questions?

BIRD: Absolutely.

OSHINSKY: Yes, sure.