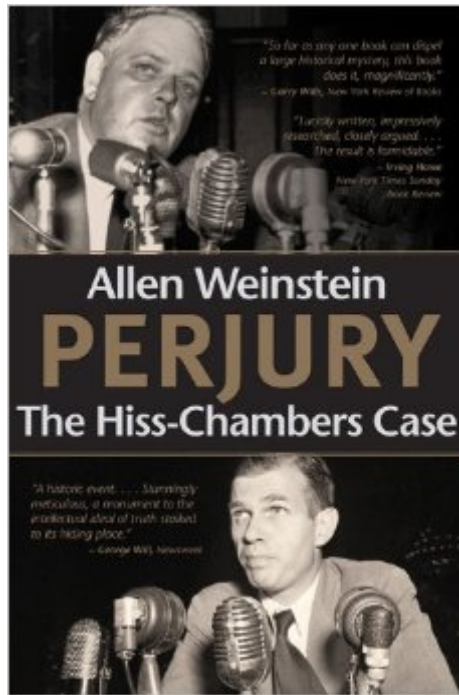


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Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case



Synopsis

When the Hiss-Chambers case first burst on the scene in 1948, its main characters and events seemed more appropriate to spy fiction than to American reality. The major historical authority on the case, *Perjury* was first published in 1978. Now, in its latest edition, *Perjury* links together the old and new evidence, much of it previously undiscovered or unavailable, bringing the Hiss-Chambers's amazing story up to the present.

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Customer Reviews

Perjury: The Hiss-Chambers Case by Allen Weinstein When this book came out in 1978 it was declared to be the definitive work on the mystery of the Hiss-Chambers case. Weinstein had started out with the belief that Hiss had been wrongfully convicted, and, with his aim of showing that Hiss was innocent, Weinstein was given access to Hiss and Hiss's supporters and to their internal and confidential documents. A consideration of all the evidence turned Weinstein from a Hiss defender to a historian who was convinced that Hiss had done what he was accused of doing. Weinstein's conclusions were buttressed and, in fact, confirmed by subsequent

disclosures, such as documents from the post-Soviet intelligence world, the CIA's release of intercepted Soviet communications, information obtained from the FBI through FOIA requests, and the intervention of the ACLU, and, perhaps, by the willingness of witnesses to share information in the 1970s that they were reluctant to share in the 1940s. Coming at this book after reading Whittaker Chambers's *Witness* and Alistair Cooke's *A Generation on Trial* is illuminating. Weinstein provides a damning backstory to the public face of the Hiss trial that corroborates Chambers's account. (Both Chambers and Cooke were limited in their source of information. They could only share what they knew and they only knew either, in Chambers's case, his backstory, and in Cooke's case, only the public version shared in trial.) For example, we learn from Weinstein that foreman in the first trial was suspected by Prosecutor Murphy of being biased for Hiss based on what seemed like colorable reports about the foreman's bias, albeit based on things said by the foreman's wife that "if it was up to him, Hiss will get away with it." (p. 445.) The request was refused.

Summary: The author researched deep and wide to write this account of the Hiss-Chambers case. The book begins with a detailed description of the first House Un-American Activities Committee hearings regarding this case. Hiss's testimony at these hearings was prompted by Chambers's testimony to the Committee that he had known Hiss when they were both members of the underground Communist movement in the United States in the 1930s. Many on that committee, and the majority of the public, considered Hiss innocent of Chambers's allegations. Hiss was credentialed from prestigious schools, had held high positions in government, and had recommendations from distinguished people. Chambers was an admitted defector from the Communist party, a Columbia University drop-out, overweight, and unhandsome. However, public and Committee opinion quickly turned against Hiss as his story unraveled in the face of evidence. Though Hiss and Chambers differed in many obvious aspects, the book illustrates the similarities in their childhoods. Both came from broken homes. Both experienced grief at an early age. And both battled an insecurity with themselves and society that drove them to Communism. In his youth Chambers was wild and dramatic. He roamed the country taking odd jobs, left Columbia University after getting into trouble with authorities over his unorthodox publications, and engaged in furtive homosexual encounters even while married with children. As a beginner underground agent for the Communist Party, Chambers was not good at keeping his position a secret; rather, he reveled in his position and purposefully others aware of it. Hiss, on the other hand, was ambitious to succeed in conventional society, and he did so succeed. The book debunks many of Hiss's refutations of

Chambers's claims.

I previously reviewed this book, but the second edition. I said: In 1948, lawyer Alger Hiss made what was arguably the biggest mistake of his life: he sued Whittaker Chambers. Chambers had publicly accused Hiss of having been a Communist Party member, Soviet spy, and agent of influence. Unfortunately for Hiss, Chambers had saved some of the material Hiss passed him for transmission to Soviet Military Intelligence. Alger Hiss ended up in prison, was disbarred, and spent the rest of his life trying to convince people a fantastic conspiracy had framed him. In 1971, Hiss made a mistake almost as large: he let an honest man look at his defense files. Historian Allen Weinstein had previously believed that Hiss was innocent. But when he read what Hiss's lawyers said in private, and what FBI agents had written J. Edgar Hoover, he found there was no reasonable doubt possible anymore. Hiss had spied for the Soviets, and Chambers had usually told the truth to the best of his ability. Chambers had sometimes lied, but only when he attempted to minimize Hiss's guilt -- and his own, for Chambers had secrets about himself to protect, and a well founded fear of being the messenger killed for bearing bad news. *PERJURY* is a fascinating account of two complex men, best friends who became mortal enemies when one split with Stalinism, and the other remained faithful. The lives of Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers would have been interesting even if they had never met or publicly clashed. Their long duel caught them in "A tragedy of History," as Chambers put it. *PERJURY* tells that story better than anyone before or since. It's a masterpiece of historical detective work. When it was published originally, all but the die hard apologists for Stalinism conceded Hiss's guilt.

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