

# The Heritage Lectures

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## A Tribute to Whittaker Chambers

Anthony Dolan • Jeffrey Hart  
Ralph de Toledano • Frank Shakespeare



The Heritage Foundation

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# **A Tribute to Whittaker Chambers**

**Anthony Dolan • Jeffrey Hart  
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The Louis Lehrman Auditorium  
The Heritage Foundation**



WHITTAKER CHAMBERS  
1901-1961

Whittaker Chambers posthumously was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom at a White House ceremony on March 26, 1984. President Ronald Reagan, in making the award, said:

“At a critical moment in our Nation’s history, Whittaker Chambers stood alone against the brooding terrors of our age. Consummate intellectual, writer of moving, majestic prose, and witness to the truth, he became the focus of a momentous controversy in American history that symbolized our century’s epic struggle between freedom and totalitarianism, a controversy in which the solitary figure of Whittaker Chambers personified the mystery of human redemption in the face of evil and suffering. As long as humanity speaks of virtue and dreams of freedom, the life and writings of Whittaker Chambers will ennoble and inspire. The words of Arthur Koestler are his epitaph: ‘The witness is gone; the testimony will stand.’”

The Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor, is awarded to persons who have made especially meritorious contributions to the security or national interests of the United States, or world peace, or cultural or other significant public or private endeavors. The award was originally initiated by President Truman in 1945 and was later amended by President Kennedy in 1963.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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## Introduction

Thirty-six years have passed since Whittaker Chambers, then a 47-year-old editor of *Time* magazine, changed the course of history. It was August 3, 1948, when Chambers lumbered into the hearing room of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and U.S. congressmen sat stunned as they listened to this man's startling confession. Chambers testified that, ten years earlier, he had been a communist agent, part of an "elite cell," dedicated to infiltrating America's ruling establishment. He told the committee members that he had given secret documents to a Soviet spy chief in New York. Alger Hiss, Chambers said, had been his accomplice.

This was the beginning of what would later become a national spectacle: Whittaker Chambers vs. Alger Hiss. It reflected a war between two faiths—Christianity and Marxism—and a war between two nations—the United States and Stalinist Russia. The future of the West, it seemed, was on trial. The event bitterly divided the country. Like the trials of Sacco and Vanzetti, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, charges of redbaiting were countered with accusations of treason in op-ed pages across the nation. It became a partisan issue, and boosted the career of a freshman congressman named Richard Nixon.

Chambers would later publish *Witness*, his bestselling memoir, which Ronald Reagan would read in 1952. Chambers's moving account of his conversion from communism had a profound effect on the future president's thinking. André Malraux, former communist and novelist, wrote to Chambers in a letter, "you have not come back from hell with empty hands."

*Darkness at Noon*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Captive Mind*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The God That Failed* were all books testifying to the terror of an expanding Soviet empire that had consolidated power in the postwar period and had locked Eastern Europe behind the iron curtain. But *Witness* was the first American testimony against the communist threat. To most Americans, Stalin seemed far away. He was overseas and not really our problem. Chambers, however, said Stalin's spy network extended into the State Department and the highest levels of government. In this sense, Chambers was the first American "witness" against communist totalitarianism. He had seen it first hand, and what he saw rocked the nation.

Chambers was pudgy and homely; but, inside, he was complex and enigmatic. Fluent in twelve languages, communist spy, American patriot, brilliant writer, diligent farmer, devout Christian, militant atheist, dedi-

cated family man, accused homosexual—Chambers had been all of these.

He was born on April Fools Day, 1901, and raised a Republican atheist on Long Island. His mother was a commercial artist and former actress. Originally Jay Vivian Chambers, he changed his name to Whittaker after his parents separated.

Chambers entered Columbia University in 1920, where he began editing a literary magazine. His friends included Langston Hughes, Lionel Trilling, and Clifton Fadiman. Chambers proved to be a promising writer, but had to leave Columbia after publishing an irreverent play about Christ's crucifixion, titled "A Play for Puppets." Administrators called it "blasphemous." Chambers later was readmitted, but dropped out in 1925 to join the American Communist Party and become editor of *The Daily Worker*. When a Stalinist faction took over, he dropped out of the party temporarily, but rejoined in 1931. He rose through the ranks quickly, traveled to Russia, and received training from the Soviet military intelligence.

By 1937, Chambers grew disillusioned with the Stalinist system—the purges, the mass executions—and became terrified that Stalin's spies might consider him a liability. Chambers provided a list of half a dozen incidents in which people were thrown down stairwells or pushed out of windows. His list began with Marvin Smith, a Justice Department lawyer, and friend of Alger Hiss. There were Harry Dexter White, a main figure in the Hiss case, and Laurence Duggan, of the State Department, also a friend of Hiss; Herbert Norman, the Canadian diplomat, and Harvard Professor F.O. Matthiessen, all sympathetic toward communists. All died under mysterious circumstances. Chambers feared for his life, and lived for a year in hiding. He slept with a loaded pistol, frightened that he, too, would be assassinated for his knowledge of the Soviet spy network.

He became a friend of Henry Luce, who gave him a job as a writer for *Time*. He advanced from book reviewer to foreign editor, and finally to senior editor during the postwar period.

In 1939, Chambers went to Franklin Roosevelt's national security chief, Adolf Berle, and gave him general information about a Soviet spy network operating in Washington. Chambers was not specific, and for a while, nothing came of it. But in 1948, he was subpoenaed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which had begun investigating the issue. There he made his confession and pointed an accusing finger at Alger Hiss.

An indignant Hiss called Chambers a "self-confessed liar, spy, and traitor." Hiss sued Chambers for slander.

There could not have been a more unlikely traitor than Alger Hiss.



Suave, good-looking, articulate, a graduate of Harvard Law School, a clerk for Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Hiss accompanied Franklin Roosevelt to Yalta, organized the conference that created the United Nations, and went on to become President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Hiss's record and list of endorsements were so impressive, almost no one doubted he was telling the truth.

Hiss's defense, with help from the national media, tried to portray Chambers as mentally unstable, and possibly, a homosexual. But then Chambers dropped the bombshell. He testified that Alger Hiss was guilty of treason and that he had the documents to prove it.

On December 2, 1948, Chambers and two HUAC investigators tromped into a garden plot at a Brooklyn residence and found in a hollowed-out pumpkin five rolls of film, which became known as the "pumpkin papers." Thereafter, Hiss was finished, and his slander suit against Chambers was dropped. The statute of limitations having run out, Hiss was convicted of perjury and sentenced to five years in prison.

Chambers, physically and emotionally drained from the ordeal, retreated to his home in Westminster, Maryland, where his wife Esther still lives. There, he wrote *Witness*, the account of his conversion to Christianity and repudiation of communism. A one-time atheist and traitor, Chambers had become patriotic and deeply religious. It would certainly astonish Chambers to know that his book would stir a young actor to becoming a fierce anti-communist, and that this actor would one day hold the highest office of the United States. On March 26, 1984, President Ronald Wilson Reagan would award Whittaker Chambers, 23 years after his death, the highest civilian honor, the Medal of Freedom.

"I repudiated Marx's doctrines and Lenin's tactics," Chambers told HUAC. "Experience and the record convinced me that communism is a form of totalitarianism, and that its triumph means slavery to men wherever they fall under its sway and spiritual night to the human mind and soul."

Benjamin Hart  
Coordinator of Studies  
The Heritage Foundation

## A Tribute to Whittaker Chambers

**FRANK SHAKESPEARE:** Jim Billington, the superb director of the Wilson Center for International Scholars in Washington, formerly a distinguished U.S. historian/professor at Princeton University, recently made the observation that the United States social scientists had missed four major world movements in recent times. They were the rise of the New Right in the United States, the peace movement (as such), Solidarity in Poland, and the Islamic fundamentalist revolution in Iran. He speculated that the fact that those four movements had one common attribute, that they all tended to have certain roots in religion, might be a contributing factor to their being overlooked because in the last decades human motivation by fundamental spiritual or religious values has become, in social scientist's terms, "déclassé."

One thinks of Whittaker Chambers. In our lifetimes, the lifetimes of most of us in this room, Whittaker Chambers stands as a fork in the road. Nothing was ever the same in the West in terms of its perception of the rise of communism and the meaning of communism after Whittaker Chambers. Whittaker Chambers said of himself, "it has been my fate to be a living witness to two great faiths—Christianity and communism." And then he went on to talk about the enormous struggle of those two great faiths, which he believes will be epical in terms of the future of mankind.

Three people will speak to us today about Whittaker Chambers. Each has very special reasons to be knowledgeable about him. You know, of course, that the larger catalyst for this meeting is that the President of the United States will be giving the Medal of Freedom to Whittaker Chambers posthumously next week.

The first of our speakers is Anthony Dolan. Tony is, I believe, the youngest person in the United States to have won the Pulitzer Prize. He is also one of the youngest, if not the youngest, people ever to be the chief speechwriter for a President of the United States. It is an honor to present to you Tony Dolan.

**ANTHONY DOLAN:** Thank you Frank. After Whittaker Chambers is awarded on Monday [March 26, 1984] a posthumous Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award, the press will try again. Hero of the conservative movement, anti-communist writer, admitted perjurer/traitor were some of the labored incomplete descriptions of a month ago when the President made his surprising announcement.

To those familiar not with just the historical details of the Hiss-Chambers case, but with Chambers's literary works, in particular, of course, his cathartic autobiography *Witness*, the descriptions were ironic.

It was odd enough to see Chambers categorized as a perjurer and traitor. One might just as well call Solzhenitsyn a "former" communist or Augustine a "sinner," but the supreme illusion was found in those descriptions not at all calculated to offend. I mean the portrayal of Chambers as some sort of a precinct captain in the ideological wars of the 1950s, the brooding spy who put the spark to Richard Nixon's career and wrote anti-communist tracts that were designed or rather disguised as exposés.

It is hardly necessary to subscribe to what has really become the Chambers legend to see the damage that is done history here. A *New Masses* and *Time* magazine editor, Chambers's gift for language (his own and foreign) made him a translator and essayist of note; one in fact who commanded the attention, indeed the admiration, of heavyweights of his own time. Arthur Koestler would read *Witness* and refer afterward to its enduring greatness. André Malraux, that chronicler of all the really festering upheavals of this century, said to Chambers about the book, "You did not return from hell with empty hands."

Even a quarter of a century later, as ritzy a stylist as John Leonard would say in his *New York Times* column about Chambers that "he was the epitome of the existential hero." Now the melodrama inherent in any espionage case and the Dreyfus-like attention given to this trial, although there, as Allen Weinstein's book establishing his guilt demonstrates, the analogy with the innocent Dreyfus ends—these things did make *Witness* a sensation in the 1950s. Parts were excerpted in the *Saturday Evening Post* and became the magazine's all-time serial highlight. Yet even through the din aroused by the passions surrounding the case, something lasting was perceived about Chambers and his book of epic length. One of the most significant autobiographies of the 20th century was *The New York Times's* summation even then.

One reason for *Witness's* hold on its public then and now may be its altitude. It turns out not to be about politics at all really, but instead, like Mr. Bojangles, talks of life. There is, for instance, Chambers's evocation of childhood cruelty toward the schoolyard scapegoat picked on for reasons of ugliness or physical infirmity. Her name was "Stewguts." Her family was extremely poor, Chambers remembered. "I had heard that her father was a drunkard. I thought that she was dreadful to look at. Her head was rather large, her face red-skinned, boney and hard. And there was an expression on it that I did not understand but which I now realize was hunted and knowing. The other children called the unhappy girl 'Stewguts.' As she walked home from school they would form a pack around her yelping 'Stewguts.'" During one afternoon recess, as Cham-

bers, the schoolboy, watched secretly, Stewguts took her sister into an empty classroom and taught her the word game used by the teachers there to single out students at the school. Back and forth to the blackboard, patiently she drilled the younger girl. And just as the exercise was mastered, there were voices in the hallway and Stewguts moved quickly to leave, erasing the board, kissing her sister tenderly, and closing silently the door behind her. He had witnessed something wonderful and terrible, Chambers would write: a parable. He had seen ugliness transformed. The point at which from corruption issues incorruption—the starting place for the religious impulse.

There was also a Chambers description of a job line here in Washington. Very young, without money, desperate for work, Chambers was rejected after the foreman saw his soft hands. He walked back down the line of poor and anxious men waiting for their jobs on the railway construction. They were men who saw his despair and understood. They grabbed him, mussing his hair and his clothes, and slapping muck from the gutter on his hands, sneaking him past another boss and onto the workwagon. “The proletariat and I had met,” he wrote. “The wretched of the earth had stretched out their hands and claimed me for their own because they understood my need.” They taught him there was a level of humanity where compassion is a reflex of distress and in this sense “they humanized my soul for the rest of my life.”

And then finally there is Hiss’s tears. Chambers had gone to see Alger and Priscilla Hiss, his close friends and co-conspirators, shortly after he had made his break with the Party and Soviet military intelligence. In the narrow house on Olive Street in Georgetown, there was an exhausting, bitter angry session as Chambers unsuccessfully pleaded with Hiss to join him in his renunciation. As Chambers turned to leave, Hiss stopped him. It was Christmas, so he went into a room and he walked back out with a gift for “Puggy.” (It was the nickname of Chambers’ daughter.) Knowing history had left the men no role but that of enemies, Hiss’s eyes filled with tears. “I felt hushed,” Chambers wrote. Hiss would later deny and ridicule the story and Chambers would write he could understand the denial but surely not the harshness of its tone. “He should not regret those few tears,” Chambers would say of the friend he first tried to protect, but at whom in agony he would later point an accusing finger, “for as long as men are human and remember our story, they will plead for his humanity.”

Stewguts, the job line, Hiss’s tears—to call Chambers an activist or merely a witness to a political event is to say Dostoevski is a criminologist and *Crime and Punishment* a morality tract. In transcending the mun-

dane, especially the political, Chambers was making his final denial of the faith that had made traitors of himself and Alger Hiss and so many idealists and intellectuals in our century, a faith distinguished by one special aspect—one that Chambers rejected. He rejected the power of the state, the only machinery the ideologue knows to achieve the salvation of mankind and usher in the new millenium. But beyond this rejection really, was Chambers's larger assertion. In writing of the beauty found in the ugly, generosity in the impoverished, humanity in the evildoer, truth had come to Whittaker Chambers in its purest form—that of paradox. The knowable begetting the unknowable, the finite leading to the infinite, revealing the power of those paradoxes, those mysteries. To transform and unify the ordering and the expression of impulses that exist in the human soul, impulses that otherwise are contending forces but when harmonized breed the strangest of all phenomena—the religious affirmation and the faith that win hearts and save civilizations. It was Whittaker Chambers's belief that such faith was lacking in the West; that he had left the winning for the losing side. It is interesting, because in saying this, the romantic turned calculating. And as is usual in such cases, the equations were off, the data base in error.

For what Chambers could never take into account was the power of his own testimony. He could not see himself as that most unlikely figure, like Zola, Thomas More, or Socrates, the intellectual as hero. And he could not have calculated that *Witness*, a book written precisely to reject politics, at least in its eschatological form, would have such enormous political impact. And he certainly would have been downright disbelieving if told that among the millions his book would stir was an actor who one day, years later, and early in his first term as President of the United States, would step off his tiny elevator on the second floor of the White House residence, sit down near the rose window, and begin reciting for a self-important aide who had mentioned Chambers's name exact accounts of passages in *Witness* leaving the aide, by the way, wondering how many American intellectuals were capable of this and remembering stories of self-important types who said that Lincoln told too many anecdotes.

Chambers could not have predicted a President who would terrify his old adversaries and be bold enough to call communism an evil tree and preach the sustaining faith of our Judeo-Christian past. Just as, if you will forgive me, he could never have imagined a college freshman I thought of recently—a freshman who one spring seventeen years ago, remembered a recommendation by his mother, pulled down *Witness* from the stacks, wept alone in a library stall as he read "Letter to My Children." It is *Witness*'s introduction, where Chambers says that, just as he used to give

his children his hands in the deep pine woods of Pike Creek Farm in Maryland where they lived, in this book, I am again giving you my hands. A book where he would tell eternal truths about the mystery of human existence to his children and to us. The last paragraph reads:

Before you understand I may not be there my hands may have slipped from yours. It will not matter. For when you understand what you see you will no longer be children. You will know life is pain and that each of us hangs always upon the cross of himself. And when you know that this is true of every man, woman and child on earth, you will be wise. Your father.

**FRANK SHAKESPEARE:** Tony mentioned to you Chambers's "Letter to My Children." I urge you—I entreat you—not because of Whittaker Chambers, but simply because of the way life is today in 1984 and the situations in which we are involved, mankind, our country, get a copy of *Witness*: It is a great big thick book and you may not have time to read it all again, but read "Letter to My Children," the first eight or nine pages—just that part of it. And I think you will thank Tony Dolan for having brought it to your attention. Chambers is a man, as Tony so brilliantly pointed out, who made such a difference. One would think of one other legendary figure, Solzhenitsyn, who, by the *Gulag Archipelago*, probably almost single-handedly turned around the young in Paris from pro-Marxist to anti-Marxist.

Our second speaker is a professor of English at Dartmouth, a senior editor of *National Review*, a syndicated columnist carried in over 200 papers in the United States, Jeffrey Hart.

**JEFFREY HART:** I am very happy to be here and to take note of, if not repay, my own intellectual and political debt to Whittaker Chambers. I have never, for some reason, had occasion to write about Chambers or talk about him. And, therefore, I especially value this opportunity.

I would like to begin by trying to imagine way back in those postwar years, in the midst of which *Witness* made such a tremendous impact on the country and, indeed, on me. I use my own experience not out of any autobiographical pride, but because in many ways it is representative. I had grown up in what I like to think of as a middle-American background on Long Island. And I remember one day when I was teaching at Columbia, where Chambers had gone to school and where Lionel Trilling had known him. Trilling, by the way, wrote a very interesting novel about Chambers—*The Middle of the Journey*. Trilling one day remarked to me that "Come on. Everybody was a communist during the 1930s." I was rather taken aback by that. The people I grew up among had been lawyers and businessmen, physicians and architects. And certainly not everyone

had been a communist during the 1930s—golfers maybe but not communists. As I say, that remark struck me.

As a child of World War II, I had some distant awareness of communism. I had rooted for the Finns; I had been repelled by the architecture of the Soviet pavilion of the New York World's Fair without really understanding the impulses behind that architectural style, but I did not know much about communism.

When *Witness* appeared in 1952, I was 22 years old. It was in the midst of, and in some ways the culmination of, a whole series of books and against a background of apocalyptic international events. Arthur Koestler's *Darkness At Noon* had played on Broadway. *1984* had appeared in 1949. A book called *The God That Failed* came out describing the break with communism by people like Ignazio Silone, Koestler, and other writers. Czeslaw Milosz, later a Nobel Prize winner, published *The Captive Mind* about the communization of Poland in 1951. Hannah Arendt in 1951 published her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, a very influential book. She argued that, when totalitarianism comes to power, it is a novel form of government—not something with which we are familiar historically. It develops entirely new political institutions, and it destroys all legal and political traditions in the country where it takes root. She said that present totalitarian governments have developed from one-party systems. Whenever these became truly totalitarian, they started to operate according to a system of values so radically different from all others that none of our traditional, legal, moral, or common sense utilitarian categories could any longer help us come to terms with or judge or predict their course of action.

In a way Arendt's book was a systematization of the insights of people like Koestler and Orwell and the others who had come before. It is against that background that *Witness* appeared in 1952. And I take its title *Witness* really to be paradigmatic. All these people were "witnesses" against the novel truth about totalitarianism that Arendt had discussed and Chambers, himself, endured so much vilification and scorn to bear witness to.

Solzhenitsyn is the latest, perhaps culminating, of these witnesses against communism who have indeed destroyed the moral credit of communism to a degree that perhaps Chambers himself could not envision when he thought of the conflict as a great one between two rival faiths.

As I say, all of these books in the postwar period appeared against an international backdrop that was enormously threatening. I think today we are used to living with the presence of communism on the globe. But at

that time it was a series of shocks. Eastern Europe had fallen to the Red Army. Totalitarian puppet regimes spread across what used to be known as Central Europe, but then became known as "Eastern Europe" in a sinister semantic shift. On the 5th of March in 1946, speaking in Fulton, Missouri, Winston Churchill declared that an "iron curtain" had descended across the continent with the Soviets establishing what he called "police" governments and using communist parties and Fifth Columns to extend their domination.

On February 25, 1948, the Soviets staged a coup in Prague, Czechoslovakia, murdered the democratic statesman Jan Masaryk by throwing him from a window, and Czechoslovakia went behind the curtain. The next year, 1949, saw the fall of China to Mao's communist armies and the flight of the Nationalists to what was then called "Formosa." In June 1950 the North Koreans attacked across the 38th parallel, and the South Korean army reeled backwards. Alger Hiss was sentenced for perjury—the trial had really been about espionage. And Klaus Fuchs was convicted as an atom spy in England. Fuchs' American friend and confederate Harry Gold got 30 years in prison. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted and sentenced to the electric chair. Morton Sobel got a 30-year sentence. These were the daily breaking events that lay behind the mood. In addition, though, there was a murky area that has largely been forgotten today—a kind of penumbra around all of this. People familiar with the communist phenomenon knew very well that murder was simply another political technique, that Trotsky had been killed by an ax-wielding agent of Stalin, the anarchist Carlo Tresca had been murdered by being pushed in front of a New York subway, the propaganda genius Willi Muenzenberg had been murdered at Stalin's orders for murky reasons. But in and around the Hiss and other cases, some very strange events occurred. Hiss had turned over a Ford car to a motor company without payment. The man who notarized Hiss's signature on the transfer of title, one W. Marvin Smith, a Justice Department lawyer and long time friend of Hiss, either fell, jumped, or was pushed to his death down an office stairwell. Harry Dexter White, a former Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, a principal figure in the Hiss case, died suddenly during the Hiss investigation. Laurence Duggan, a former State Department official and friend of Hiss jumped, fell, or was pushed from the 16th floor of a Manhattan office building. Duggan, oddly enough, hit the pavement wearing one galosh—the other one was on the floor of his office, indicating a quick exit.

Other things of this kind happened, contributing, as I say, to the mood of the period. The Canadian diplomat Herbert Norman, then ambassador



to Egypt, discovered to be a communist and about to be exposed, "fell to his death" from a window in Cairo. Harvard Professor F. O. Matthiessen, a major literary critic and prominent teacher of American literature died under peculiar circumstances. He was a communist sympathizer and recently returned from Czechoslovakia. He was due to be questioned under oath. On April 1, 1950, he rented a hotel room near Boston's North Station and plunged to his death from the window of his room.

I think there are styles in political assassination, and the period style around 1950 was called "defenestration." And it is almost like the Wall Street crash of 1929 when people were going out windows all the time.

*Witness* in 1952 literally hit home—hit the United States. Communism was not something that went on in Prague or some such place. It was something that went on in New York and Washington. And it was something we lived with on a daily basis. The atmosphere of conspiracy and violence became palpable in this country.

His witness in the courtroom, at the hearings, and finally in this book strikes me as extraordinary and makes Chambers far more important and powerful than Koestler or Milosz or the others I have mentioned.

Chambers underwent an ordeal by emotional fire in this country to make his case. And it is one of the most impressive things of our time. I say that Chambers was one of those who contributed principally to the destruction of the once potent faith in Soviet communism, which was alive and well in this country but I think now has no currency whatsoever. There are very few people now who defend that doctrine or that system. Chambers felt that we were on the losing side. If we no longer are, and I do not think we are, Chambers made a major contribution to that transformation.

There is one question raised by Chambers's book and by his own set of beliefs that I would like to raise—perhaps for a later discussion—because I have not settled the answer for myself. The question can be put this way. Chambers profoundly believed that we must oppose the communist faith, the communist eschatology, with one of our own. In other words, without the faith to counteract, to countervail, the communist faith, we would be lost. And in that great letter to his children, Chambers said this, referring to the whole agony with Alger Hiss, for it was more than a human tragedy. Much more than Alger Hiss or Whittaker Chambers was on trial. "Two faiths were on trial. Human societies, like human beings, live by faith and die when faith dies." At issue in the Hiss case was the question whether this sick society, which we call "Western civilization," could in its extremity still cast up a man whose faith in it was so great that he would voluntarily abandon those things which men hold good, including life, to

defend it. At issue was the question whether this man's faith could prevail against a man whose equal faith it was that this society is sick beyond saving and that mercy itself pleads for its swift extinction and replacement by another. At issue was the question whether in the desperately divided society there still remained the will to recognize the issues in time to offset the immense rally of public opinion to distort and pervert the facts: faith against faith.

Maybe it is true. Maybe without a sustaining spiritual basis people will not over the long term make the necessary sacrifices—not only to prevail, but to survive. But I raise that question whether it really is necessary for anti-communism to be rooted in such a faith. I am a Christian, but when I oppose communism, I am not, I think, after some introspection, drawing on some reservoir of faith. And I think I would like to cite, in conclusion here, an anecdote involving Jonathan Swift, the 18th Century British writer very active in politics.

In 1726, out of power, the Tories defeated Walpole's Whigs in control of London, Swift was hunting in Ireland—hunting birds with a servant, and Swift shot a crow. The thing fell to the ground. Swift turned to his servant and said "I just assumed that crow had been Walpole." I just assume that "crow," metaphorically be any communist operative. It does not strike me that it would take me any more faith to do in a communist operative than it would to squash a poisonous insect. I think my own faith lives in another level, and the object is merely to get the job done where communists are concerned. But as I say, I have not made up my mind on this historical question, and perhaps Chambers was correct.

**FRANK SHAKESPEARE:** Tony Dolan gave us insight into the depth of Whittaker Chambers's mind and his special brilliance as a writer which enabled him to use those talents at a specific moment to affect mankind. Jeff Hart sketched very vividly the climate of those times and the meaning that Hiss has for us.

In this trilogy of presentations, the third will go to a more personal aspect. Chambers will live in history because of the caliber and character of his writing. And he will be judged on that alone: what did he say, how did he say it, and what did history say about the truth of what he witnessed? But he was a man, he was a person, he was a father, he was a friend, he was a human being. Someone who knew him from 1949 to the day he died was Ralph de Toledano. Ralph is, as most of you know, an author, a lecturer, a writer. He has been on the American intellectual scene for some 20 to 30 years. But he speaks to you now as a friend of Whittaker Chambers.

**RALPH de TOLEDANO:** At the height of the Hiss case when you could not pick up a newspaper without reading, "Who is lying, Hiss or Chambers?" I received a phone call from Sidney Hook, the philosopher, who said, "Ralph, you know I know Chambers is telling the truth. I know Hiss is lying. I know everything Chambers has told committees in testimony and so on is absolutely true. But why does he have to drag God into it?" And I said, "Sidney, that's what it's all about." That is the importance of Whittaker Chambers. What those of us who had fought the communists over the years in our writings and organizations and so on had never quite summed up in our minds, that this struggle was not one of police files and espionage. It was a struggle, as Whittaker Chambers said, between God and man.

I knew Chambers very, very closely. I met him right after the indictment of Hiss when I was working on my book on the Hiss case, *Seeds of Treason*. He did not want to talk to reporters. He did not want to talk to people who were writing books. And it was only through the intervention of dear friends of mine who vouched for me that he came to my house in New York. He came for dinner just to talk to me so that I could ask him questions and get to know him a little bit. He arrived at 7 in the evening and left at 3 in the morning. And when he left my whole life had changed.

Ten years after he died, I wrote a piece that Bill Buckley asked me to write for *National Review*, in which I said that Whittaker Chambers had been my father, my son, my brother, and I should have added, my teacher. Because as Bill Buckley once wrote, "there was no experience like knowing Whittaker Chambers." He was a man who had history in his bones. He had life in his bones; he had faith in his bones. He knew what the struggle was about. I still remember I was down at the farm visiting him as I had done many times, when he was writing *Witness*. He drove me to Baltimore and we stood waiting for the train, and as the train pulled in and I was getting on it, he gave me a big manila envelope saying, "These are the first chapters of my book. Would you take them up to New York and give them to my agent. You can read them if you want to." And I got on the train, this envelope on my lap, and looked at it and looked at it, and though I had love and admiration for Whittaker, I thought, "Supposing it's not good?" And finally I opened the envelope and I read "The Letter to My Children," and I cried. But I was proud because I had contributed one thing to that tremendously evocative introduction, in effect, to the struggle of the Western world. I had contributed one phrase. We had spent hours and hours and hours discussing communism and the state of the world and so on, and one day I was talking about my father. I said,

“You know my father always said ‘la vida es pena’—life is pain.” And I said, “My mother’s answer always was ‘maldita sea la pena’—damn the pain!” And there was that phrase, “life is pain.” Well I delivered those chapters to Bernice Baumgarten, his agent, and a few days later, I got a letter from Whittaker in which he said “I gave you those chapters and I told you you could read them. And after you got on the train, and driving back to the farm, I kept thinking ‘supposing Ralph doesn’t like them.’”

There are so many incidents and anecdotes I could tell. There was the essential goodness in the man. In the first conversations I had with him, when I wanted names and dates and places, he would get to one particular person and say, “Well I’m going to fuss this up a little bit because I don’t want to hurt him and I’m not giving you his name.” And it was rather interesting. At *Newsweek*, I was their man on what they would call “the subversive beat.” And over the years I had spent time tracking down communist espionage, communist subversion, and so I knew a good deal about it. “Well, there was this man who worked with me and did this,” he would say. “He was a literary agent, but I’m not going to tell you his name.” And I said, “Oh yes, Maxim Lieber,” and Chambers looked at me. And then he said, “There was this place down in the Village—this house where we processed the microfilm,” and I gave him the address. And he looked at me. After I had known him for awhile, he said, “When did you get out of the underground?” And I said I was never in the underground. He said, “When were you in the Party?” I said I was never in the Party.

I went down to the farm. I watched him bringing in the hay, in bails, and watched his wonderful wife, Esther. I sat with him on the back porch of the farm watching the kingfishers fly about and talking to him and looking at the wonderful light and enjoying the humor and those prescient blue eyes of his. I got to know him. I became a disciple in a way. He was perhaps the only man I ever knew who understood what the struggle was about. He used to say, “I am not a conservative. I am a man of the right.” And it was a valid distinction. He was a man of the right.

I remember when he spoke about the struggle and he was talking in terms of communism, God and faith, and freedom on the opposite side. But he said, “The key man of this century is the Bolshevik and he will be brought down by the anti-Bolshevik who by the dialectics of the situation will also be a Bolshevik.” He understood. He put his life on the line at a time when the press was full of vituperative attacks—attacks on his wife, on his children—and only once did he falter.

Now I will say this, he never once said a bad word about Alger Hiss. He saw Hiss as the embodiment of the Bolshevik, of the man who had

rejected God. He had rejected the traditions and the faith of the Western world and was ready, as Karl Marx had said, to change the world. There were times when I got very angry at Chambers and said, "Look! Look what this man has done to you." In the Baltimore depositions, Hiss had struck directly at Esther Chambers. I said, "He has spread rumors all over New York about you—vile rumors. How can you support this son of a bitch? How can you speak well of him?" And Chambers just smiled. I think he really admired Hiss as the embodiment of the Bolshevik. I sat with him evenings during the trial when he was on the stand being attacked, and in the evening he always came to my house and we sat there and I let him talk. As I said, I knew of no man, and I have known no man, who understood so well the peril faced by those of us who believe in the traditions of the West and the Christian traditions, in freedom, and the sin that is inherent in us that we must fight. There was no man who really understood this as well as Whittaker Chambers. And yet I could go down to his farm and watch him working. I could talk to his neighbors: simple people, farmers, who instinctively understood what was in this man.

Whittaker Chambers loved music and at one point he wrote to me and said, "I need a stereo." Stereo was just coming in. And I bought the speakers and the turntable and all the parts for him and sent it down to him. He was very happy, but he said, "Well I don't have records." At that time I was reviewing records for *American Mercury*. I would send him packages of records, and he would write and thank me. I still remember a letter I got from him in which he said, "You sent me two requiem masses. One would have done me."

I have turned over those letters to somebody who is working on a biography of Whittaker Chambers and a collection of his letters. And I wish they could have been published separately because they show another side. Bill Buckley published his letters and they are letters which deal with political matters and what was going on. Those letters of mine, which I hope some day will be published, show the great heart of the man. To this day I have a recording of Whittaker Chambers reading "The Letter to My Children." At the time the book came out, NBC put him on the air. It was a half-hour radio broadcast. We should all read and re-read "The Letter to My Children," but we should listen to Chambers reading it himself in that flat unemotional public voice of his. And when he gets to the part where he talks about holding the hands of his children, he begins to cry. From time to time, I play that recording—not too often, but I play it. And I would like every American to hear it because there is Whittaker Chambers.

He was very amused when Richard Nixon said to him, and I think he

quotes this in *Witness*, "If the American people really knew Alger Hiss the way I do, they would boil him in oil." But I do not think that Richard Nixon ever understood Chambers, although he respected and admired him. And of course Nixon was always a little afraid that, if he showed that he was a little too close to Chambers, it might hurt him politically. This did not concern President Reagan. In fact, one of the great acts of the Reagan Administration was awarding the Medal of Freedom posthumously to Whittaker Chambers.

I do not know what else I can say. There are other anecdotes, but all I can say was that this was a great man—a man of tremendous intellectual stature, of tremendous courage, of tremendous humanity. And let me tell you a little secret. When he said that he was on the losing side, I do not think he really believed it.

**FRANK SHAKESPEARE:** Many thanks to our three speakers.

## Warm Friday

by Oliver Bath\*

A remarkable symposium took place at the Heritage Foundation in Washington on Friday, March 23, a few days before President Reagan awarded the Medal of Freedom posthumously to Whittaker Chambers.

Actually, symposium is a formal word for what seemed a family gathering. Frank Shakespeare was the moderator that afternoon, and there were three main speakers: Anthony Dolan, the President's chief speechwriter; Jeffrey Hart, a professor of English at Dartmouth and a senior editor of *NR*; and Ralph de Toledano, author, critic, *NR* contributor, and close friend of Whittaker Chambers.

The Heritage Foundation's auditorium was not lacking in fellow-travelers and co-religionists: former congressman Walter Judd; Charles Lichenstein, recently of the U.S. delegation to the UN; Brent and Patricia Bozell; Gene Meyer; and many others for whom Whittaker Chambers is more than an historical figure, the ex-Soviet agent whose evidence against his former colleague, Alger Hiss, set in motion a series of events that changed the course of postwar history. The *Washington Post* story the day before the award would say "bent the course of history." Why quibble? On May 29, 1919, astronomers confirmed Einstein's theory of relativity by observing the bending of light during a solar eclipse.

Frank Shakespeare is as graceful, eloquent, and penetrating at moderating a set of speeches as he was at running the United States Information Agency and, now, his current agency, the Board for International Broadcasting, which oversees Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. He is a rare post-Elizabethan on whom the name Shakespeare does not seem presumptuous.

"One thinks of Whittaker Chambers," he said in the gentle tone that was to remain throughout the afternoon. "In our lifetimes, he stands as a fork in the road. Nothing was ever the same in the West in terms of its perception of the rise of Communism and the meaning of Communism after Whittaker Chambers."

He introduced Tony Dolan, the youngest person to win the Pulitzer Prize (for investigative reporting), and one of the youngest to serve as chief speechwriter at the White House.

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\* *National Review*, May 4, 1984. Reprinted with permission.

Dolan began by saying that after the President's awarding of the Medal of Freedom, "the press will try again." In the press's reaction to the announcement of the award, he found a bewildering—and bemusing—lack of altitude.

"It was odd enough," he said, "to see Chambers categorized as a perjurer and traitor; one might just as well call Solzhenitsyn 'a former Communist' or Augustine 'a sinner.' But the supreme elision was found in those descriptions not at all calculated to offend: the portrayal of Chambers as a sort of precinct captain in the ideological wars of the 1950s—the brooding spy who put the spark to Richard Nixon's career and wrote anti-Communist tracts disguised as exposés." Chambers was more than that, said Dolan; else why would he have earned the supreme compliment from André Malraux ("You are one of those who did not return from hell with empty hands")?

Dolan spoke of pulling Chambers's autobiography off a library shelf as a college freshman and of weeping alone in a study carrel as he read "Letter to My Children," the prologue to *Witness*.

"What Chambers could never take into account," said Dolan, "was the power of his own testimony. He could not see himself as that most unlikely figure: like Zola, Thomas More, or Socrates, the intellectual as hero. And he could not have calculated that *Witness*, a book written precisely to reject politics, at least in its eschatological form, would have such enormous political impact. He certainly would have been downright disbelieving if told that among the millions his book would stir would be an actor who one day, years later, in his [smile] first term as President of the United States"—the smile was returned by the auditorium—"would step off his tiny elevator on the second floor of the White House residence, sit down near the rose window, and begin reciting to a self-important aide who had mentioned Chambers's name exact accounts of passages in *Witness*, leaving the aide remembering stories of self-important types who said that Lincoln told too many anecdotes."

Shakespeare urged everyone to re-read "Letter to My Children," remarking that "you will thank Tony for having brought it to your attention as a catalyst . . . One would think of another legendary figure. Solzhenitsyn, who, by virtue of *The Gulag Archipelago*, probably almost single-handedly turned the young in Paris from pro- to anti-Marxism."

Professor Hart (*né* Hart) spoke as an historian of the America of Chambers's time, and of being told by Lionel Trilling one day, "Come on. Everybody was a Communist during the 1930s." (Including, one might add, many of the editors of *National Review*.) "I was rather taken aback by that," said Professor Hart. "The people I grew up among had been



lawyers and businessmen, physicians and architects. And certainly not everyone had been a Communist during the 1930s. Golfers, maybe, but not Communists.”

*Darkness at Noon*, 1984, *The God That Failed*, Czeslaw Milosz's *The Captive Mind*, Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* were all works of testimony against the empire that was then consolidating its postwar hold on what used to be called Central Europe and was becoming Eastern Europe. “I take the title *Witness* to be really paradigmatic,” said Hart. “All these people were *witnesses* against totalitarianism.”

He went on to describe a half-dozen incidents in which people “either fell, jumped, or [were] pushed” down office stairwells or out windows, beginning with Marvin Smith, a Justice Department lawyer and close friend of Alger Hiss. This remarkably long list included Laurence Duggan of the State Department, also a friend of Hiss; Harry Dexter White, a principal figure in the Hiss case; the Canadian diplomat Herbert Norman; and Harvard Professor F. O. Matthiessen. The common factor in all of them, of course, was direct affiliation or sympathy with the Communists. Many of them were about to be exposed when they met with their accidents. “I think,” said Hart, “there are styles in political assassination, and the period style around 1950 was defenestration.”

He went on to talk about the “once-potent faith” in Soviet Communism that existed in this country, and reflected on Chambers's famous comment to his wife, Esther, on renouncing the Soviets in 1938: “We are leaving the winning side for the losing side.”

“If we no longer are [on the losing side],” said Professor Hart, “and I don't think we are, Chambers made a major contribution to that transformation.”

He then raised a question: whether spiritual faith is the necessary antithesis of Communist ideology. Can one be an atheist and understand Chambers? Is belief in God the antidote itself, or merely an aspect of the renunciation? “‘Two faiths were on trial,’” Hart quoted Chambers. “‘Human societies, like human beings, live by faith and die when faith dies. At issue in the Hiss case was the question whether this sick society, which we call Western civilization, could in its extremity still cast up a man whose faith in it was so great that he would voluntarily abandon those things which men hold good, including life, to defend it. At issue was the question whether this man's faith could prevail against a man whose equal faith it was that this society is sick beyond saving and that mercy itself pleads for its swift extinction and replacement by another. At issue was the question whether in the desperately divided society there still remained the will to recognize the issues in time to offset the immense rally

of public power to distort and pervert the facts.' Faith against faith." While spirituality empowers the anti-Communist to make the sacrifices over the long run and to prevail, Hart said, it was not his conviction that religious faith is a necessary element in the struggle against totalitarianism.

Of course no scholar of Professor Hart's standing would fail to answer his own question, and no Tory of his standing would answer it without allusion to the England of 1726. His closing anecdote and metaphor involved Jonathan Swift, Walpole, and a dead crow.

Ralph de Toledano was the main event by virtue of his having been one of Whittaker Chambers's closest friends. Here was a man who had been witness to the Witness. As he rose to speak, I had a sense of—call it awe, the feeling I used to get as a child upon finding out that history was something other than what went on in books.

"At the height of the Hiss case," Toledano began, "when you couldn't pick up a newspaper without reading, 'Who is lying, Hiss or Chambers?' I got a phone call from Sidney Hook, the philosopher. And he said, 'Ralph, you know that I know Chambers is telling the truth. I know Hiss is lying. I know everything Chambers has told committees in testimony is absolutely true. But why does he have to drag God into it?'"

"And I said, 'Sidney, that's what it's all about.'"

"What those of us who had fought the Communists over the years in our writings and organizationally and so on had never quite summed up in our minds was that this struggle was not one of police files and espionage. It was a struggle, as Whittaker Chambers said, between God and man. This was the importance of Whittaker Chambers."

As he began to talk about Chambers, his eyes filled with tears that did not dissipate until he sat down ten spellbinding minutes later.

In 1949, Toledano had been working on his (classic) book on the Hiss case, *Seeds of Treason*. Mutual friends arranged a meeting between him and Chambers, who was not talking to reporters or to people who were writing books. "He came to dinner at my house in New York, just to talk to me so that I could ask him questions and get to know him a little bit. He arrived at seven in the evening and left at three in the morning. And when he left, my whole life had changed."

He recalled Chambers once driving him to the Baltimore train station and giving him an envelope to deliver to his literary agent in New York. It was the manuscript of the first chapters of the book that the *New York Times* review would call "one of the most significant autobiographies of the twentieth century." Chambers told him that he could read them if he wanted to. "And I got on the train," Toledano said, "this envelope on my

lap, and looked at it. And though I had this love and admiration for Whittaker, I said to myself, 'Supposing it's no good?'

Broad grins in the audience.

"Finally I opened the envelope and I read the 'Letter to My Children,' and I cried.

"Well, I delivered those chapters to Bernice Baumgarten, his agent. And a few days later, I got a letter from Whittaker in which he said, 'I gave you those chapters and I told you you could read them. And after you got on the train, and driving back to the farm, I kept thinking, 'Suppose Ralph doesn't like them?'

Toledano talked easily, as if to a friend by firelight, and not to an auditorium full of people. It was very quiet. He spoke about the farm in Westminster, Maryland, to which Chambers retired shortly after the case.

"I watched him bringing in the hay, the hay bales, with his wonderful wife, Esther. Sat with him on the back porch, watching the kingfishers fly about and talking to him and watching the wonderful light and the humor in those prescient blue eyes of his. I got to know him. I became his disciple, in a way. He was perhaps the only man I ever knew who understood what the struggle was about. He used to say, 'I am not a conservative. I am a man of the Right.' It was a very valid distinction. He was a man of the Right." (Later, during the question period, Toledano was asked to amplify that remark of Chambers's. "I don't think he had very much patience with the conservative view that all of our troubles would end if we got rid of the government. I think also he said this because he had lost a little patience with many of the conservatives he dealt with.")

Toledano continued. "I remember when he spoke about the struggle, and he was talking in terms of Communism, God and faith and freedom. But then he said, 'The key man of this century is the Bolshevik. And he will be brought down by the anti-Bolshevik.' He understood.

"He never once said a bad word about Alger Hiss. He saw Hiss as the embodiment of the Bolshevik, of the man who had rejected God, and had rejected the traditions and the faith of the Western world—who was ready, as Karl Marx had said, to change the world.

"And there were times when I got very angry with him. And I said, 'Look! Look what this man has done to you.' In the Baltimore depositions, Hiss had struck directly at Esther Chambers. I said, 'He has spread rumors all over New York about you—vile rumors. How can you support this son of a bitch? How can you speak well of him?' And Chambers just smiled. I think he really admired Hiss as the embodiment.

“He was amused when Richard Nixon said to him, ‘If the American people really knew Alger Hiss the way I do, they would boil him in oil.’ But I don’t think that Richard Nixon ever understood Chambers, although he respected him and admired him. Nixon was always a little afraid that if he showed that he was a little too close to Chambers it might hurt him politically, which President Reagan was not concerned over. In fact, I think one of the great acts of the Reagan Administration was awarding the Medal of Freedom posthumously to Chambers.”

Ralph de Toledano closed his reminiscence of his friend by saying, his eyes flashing through the moisture, “Let me tell you a little secret. When he said that he was on the losing side, I don’t think he really believed it.”

The applause began. I was glad to have heard him make that last comment. In spite of Afghanistan, Central America, Poland, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Syria, and all those other places, it was possible to believe what he had said. Chambers would surely have been astonished to be told, as the clouds closed round him, that the day would come when an American President would bestow on him the nation’s highest civilian honor. Something Toledano had said a few moments earlier made me think he would have been amused, rather than surprised.

Whittaker Chambers loved music, and once wrote Toledano to say he needed a stereo. Toledano brought one out to the farm. Chambers was happy to have it, but had no records. Toledano, who was reviewing records for the *American Mercury*, started sending him packages of records. Chambers would write, as always, to thank him.

“And I still remember a letter I got from him in which he said, ‘You sent me two Requiem Masses. One would have done me.’”

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# The Heritage Lectures

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Whittaker Chambers posthumously was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom at a White House ceremony on March 26, 1984. President Ronald Reagan, in making the award, said:

“At a critical moment in our Nation’s history, Whittaker Chambers stood alone against the brooding terrors of our age. Consummate intellectual, writer of moving, majestic prose, and witness to the truth, he became the focus of a momentous controversy in American history that symbolized our century’s epic struggle between freedom and totalitarianism, a controversy in which the solitary figure of Whittaker Chambers personified the mystery of human redemption in the face of evil and suffering. As long as humanity speaks of virtue and dreams of freedom, the life and writings of Whittaker Chambers will ennoble and inspire. The words of Arthur Koestler are his epitaph: ‘The witness is gone; the testimony will stand.’”

  
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