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WHITTAKER CHAMBERS: MAN OF COURAGE AND FAITH

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The wave of publicity about Robert Hanssen, a veteran FBI agent who became a master spy for the Russians, brings to mind a far different man—Whittaker Chambers, a veteran Soviet spy who became, in William F. Buckley Jr.'s words, “the most important American defector from Communism.” This April marks the 100th anniversary of Chambers’ birth.

In August 1948, Chambers, an editor at *Time*, identified Alger Hiss, a golden boy of the liberal establishment, as a fellow member of his underground Communist cell in the 1930s. Hiss, a former assistant to the Secretary of State and former General Secretary of the United Nations founding conference at San Francisco, and then president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, immediately denied Chambers’ allegation.

A great deal more than the reputations of the two men was at stake. If Hiss was innocent, anti-Communism—and the careers of those closely associated with it, like Richard Nixon, a prominent member of the congressional investigating committee—would be dealt a deadly blow. If Hiss was guilty, anti-Communism would become a permanent part of the political landscape, and its spokesmen would become national leaders.

It took two protracted trials (Hiss reluctantly sued Chambers for slander), but Hiss was finally convicted of perjury for denying his espionage activities and sentenced to five years in jail. Hiss went to his grave more than 40 years later still

protesting his innocence—and still lauded by many on the Left. But the Venona transcripts of secret KGB and GRU messages during World War II (released in the mid-1990s) confirmed that Alger Hiss had been a Soviet spy not only in the 1930s, but at least until 1945.

In 1952, Chambers published his magisterial, best-selling autobiography, *Witness*. The work argued that America faced a transcendent, not a transitory, crisis; the crisis was one not of politics or economics but of faith; and secular liberalism, the dominant “ism” of the day, was a watered-down version of Communist ideology. The New Deal, Chambers insisted, was not liberal democratic but “revolutionary” in its nature and intentions. All these themes, especially that the crisis of the 20th century was one of faith, resonated deeply with conservatives.

Among those who agreed with and often quoted Chambers’ uncompromising assessment was a future California governor and U.S. President—Ronald Reagan. Indeed, *Witness* may have enlisted more American anti-Communists than almost any

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other book of the Cold War. They included, in addition to our 40th President, William A. Rusher, longtime publisher of *National Review*; veteran journalist John Chamberlain, who worked with Chambers at *Time*; and columnist-commentator Robert Novak.

The work continues to have a telling impact. At a Washington dinner last November, retiring Senator Bob Kerrey admitted that reading *Witness* had enabled him, for the first time in his life, to understand what Communism was all about.

The book is not easy reading but is permeated with what Bill Buckley called “Spenglerian gloom.” Exhausted by the demands of the two Hiss trials and in poor health (he had suffered several heart attacks), Chambers believed that he was probably leaving the winning side but found reason to keep fighting against Communism for his children. As he recounts in *Witness*, he once surveyed, on a dark cold night at his Maryland farm, the formidable forces arrayed against him—the powerful establishment, the hostile press, the skeptical public, the calumnies of the Hiss partisans—and seriously considered suicide. But when his young son John came looking for him crying, “Papa! Papa! Don’t ever go away,” he replied, “No, no, I won’t ever go away.”

Chambers continued to make significant contributions to the conservative movement until his death in July 1961. Publisher Henry Regnery recalled that he sent page proofs of Russell Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind* to Chambers, who immediately urged the editor of *Time* to devote the entire book section to a review of “one of the most important” books he had read “in some time.”

Regnery never forgot his “sense of exultation” when the long, laudatory *Time* review arrived.

Chambers was a close friend and mentor of Bill Buckley. Invited to join *National Review*’s masthead, he at first demurred, pessimistic about its chances of success. But he was persuaded to come aboard by Buckley’s argument that “the culture of liberty deserves to survive” and to have its own journal. One of Chambers’ more memorable contributions to the magazine was his evisceration of Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*. He called its plot “preposterous,” its characterization “primitive,” and much of its effect “sophomoric.” In a lifetime of reading, he concluded, “I can recall no other book in which a tone of overriding arrogance was so implacably sustained.” His review, “Big Sister Is Watching You,” helped bar conservatism’s door to Rand’s godless technocratic ideas.

Chambers was also a private critic of Senator Joseph McCarthy. He told Buckley that McCarthy was “a slugger and a rabble-rouser” who “simply knows that somebody threw a tomato and the general direction from which it came.”

Chambers was “one of the great men of our time,” wrote Henry Regnery, who had known many great men during his decades-long publishing career. As a witness to God’s grace and the fortifying power of faith, Chambers “put all of us immeasurably in his debt.” For countless conservatives, Whittaker Chambers has never gone away.

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NOTABLE QUOTES FROM WHITTAKER CHAMBERS

I know that I am leaving the winning side for the losing side, but it is better to die on the losing side than to live under Communism.

—*Statement before the House Un-American Activities Committee, August 3, 1948*

A man is not primarily a witness *against* something. That is only incidental to the fact that he is a witness *for* something.

—*“Foreword in the Form of a Letter to my Children,” Witness, 1952*

Religion and freedom are indivisible. Without freedom the soul dies. Without the soul there is no justification for freedom.

—*Ibid.*

The Communist vision is the vision of Man without God.

—*Ibid.*

Economics is not the central problem of this century. It is a relative problem which can be solved in relative ways. Faith is the central problem of this age.

—*Ibid.*

The crisis of the Western world exists to the degree in which it is indifferent to God.

—*Ibid.*

Communism is the central experience of the first half of the 20th century, and may be its final experience—will be, unless the free world, in the agony of its struggle with Communism, overcomes its crisis by discovering, in suffering and pain, a power of faith which will provide man’s mind, at the same intensity, with the same two certainties: a reason to live and a reason to die.

—*Ibid.*